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Sermon: “Wisdom from God” (I Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14)

August 16, 2009

Today I’m preaching about wisdom. We all need wisdom, the discernment to make the right decision in a given situation. We need wisdom for our personal lives, wisdom for our relationships, wisdom to make good financial decisions, wisdom for our marriages, wisdom for rearing our kids, wisdoms for our jobs, etc. People spend a lot of money for the services of professional counselors or life coaches or spend a lot of time reading self-help books or attending self-help seminars. Some people think all that is a waste of time, that as Oprah Winfrey says, “Follow your instincts. That’s where true wisdom manifests itself.”

As a priest I am often asked for advice or wisdom by people who are struggling in various ways. There have been many times in my life when I have needed and sought the wisdom of others, and I too have read plenty of books trying to gain more wisdom for life.

Some write Dear Abby letters asking for wisdom, letters that are published in newspapers all over the country. Here are a few of my favorite Dear Abby letters:

DEAR ABBY: My husband hates to spend money! I cut my own hair and make my own clothes, and I have to account for every nickel I spend. Meanwhile he has a stock of savings bonds put away that would choke a cow. How do I get some money out of him before we are both called to our final judgment? He says he's saving for a rainy day. Signed, Forty Years Hitched

Abby’s Response: Dear Hitched: Tell him it's raining!

Dear Abby: My boyfriend is going to be twenty years old next month. I'd like to give him something nice for his birthday. What do you think he'd like? Signed, Carol

Abby’s Response: Dear Carol: Never mind what he'd like. Give him a tie.

DEAR ABBY: I am forty-four years old and I would like to meet a man my age with no bad habits. Signed, Rose

Abby’s Response: Dear Rose: So would I.

We all find ourselves in situations where we need wisdom. In today’s Old Testament lesson we see a young man named Solomon who is about twenty years old and in way over his head as the new king of Israel. The first thing he does is go to Gibeon, a town about five miles northeast of

Jerusalem and “the principal high place” where sacrifices were made to God, and offers a thousand burnt offerings (see II Chronicles 1:1-6) to God, asking God’s blessing on his reign.

While still at Gibeon God appears to Solomon in a dream and says to him, “Ask what I should give you.” Could you imagine God asking you that question? What would you ask for? To win the lottery? For a long and healthy life? To have certain people in your neighborhood move to Alaska?

Solomon’s response is amazing. First he acknowledges that God had been gracious to his father, King David, and then gracious in establishing him (Solomon) as his successor. Then he says, “I am only a little child... Your servant is in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a great people, so numerous they cannot be numbered... give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil.” Solomon acknowledges that he is in way over his head, and humbly asks God for wisdom.

Listen to God’s response: “Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches or for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right... I give you a wise and discerning mind... I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honor all your life; no other king shall compare with you.”

And God indeed blessed Solomon with wisdom, riches, and honor. During his reign Solomon spent seven years overseeing the construction of the temple in Jerusalem and wrote the majority of three books of the Old Testament: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon. But it was for his wisdom that Solomon was best known.

The writer of I Kings describes Solomon’s wisdom this way:

“God gave Solomon very great wisdom, discernment, and breadth of understanding as vast as the sand on the seashore, so that Solomon’s wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east, and all the wisdom of Egypt... People came from all the nations to hear the wisdom of Solomon; they came from all the kings of the earth who had heard of his wisdom” (I Kings 4:29-30, 34).

And yet Solomon’s wisdom, as great as it was, was ultimately not enough to keep him out of trouble. Like many of us, Solomon was self-centered and narcissistic. After he spent seven years overseeing the construction of the temple in Jerusalem, he spent *thirteen* years overseeing the construction of his palace. In fact, after these twenty years, Solomon, now middle aged and settled, experiences God’s appearing to him a second time in a dream. This time God reminds Solomon of how much He has been blessed and warns Solomon not to turn away from Him:

“I have heard your prayer and your plea, which you made before me; I have consecrated this house that you have built, and put my name there forever; my eyes and my heart will

be there for all time... If you turn aside from following me, you or your children, and do not keep my commandments and my statutes that I have set before you, but go and serve other gods and worship them, then I will cut Israel off from the land that I have given them; and the house that I have consecrated for my name I will cast out of my sight” (I Kings 9:3, 6-7a).

Unfortunately even God’s appearing to Solomon in a dream a second time did not prevent Solomon from turning away from God, because in addition to his narcissism he had an insatiable thirst for women. He had 700 wives and 300 concubines, most of whom were not Israelites and thus worshipped pagan gods and goddesses. Scripture tells us “his wives turned away his heart” (I Kings 11:3).

Solomon’s heart became so turned away from God that in the same way he had overseen the construction of the temple in Jerusalem for the worship of God, he oversaw the construction of high places for his wives to make sacrifices to pagan deities. These pagan deities included Chemosh, chief god of the Moabites, and Molech, chief god of the Ammonites, and the worship of both of these gods involved human sacrifice. Indeed, two of the future kings of Israel, Ahaz (II Chronicles 28:3) and Manasseh (II Kings 21:6), sacrificed children to these gods.

For Solomon, wisdom was not enough. Wisdom is not enough for us either. Yes, we can gain wisdom from reading books, great teachers, etc. We can even gain wisdom from our failings, as Theodore Levitt, a former longtime economist and professor at Harvard Business School, put it, “Experience comes from what we have done. Wisdom comes from what we have done badly.”

True, but even that’s not enough, because in the same way Solomon, in spite of all his wisdom, turned away from God, we too—in spite of all the wisdom we may have, all the degrees we may have earned, all the books we may have read, all the wise people we may have gotten to know—like Solomon we too have turned away from God. Like Solomon, we too are marked by narcissism and various insatiable thirsts. The Old Testament prophet, Isaiah, sums it up, “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our way” (53:6a).

Even philosophy, the “love of wisdom,” is not enough. Perhaps you remember the scene from the classic 1987 film, *The Princess Bride*, when Vizzini and the Man in Black are in the midst of an argument:

Vizzini: I can't compete with you physically, and you're no match for my brains.

Man in Black: You're that smart?

Vizzini: Let me put it this way. Have you ever heard of Plato, Aristotle, Socrates?

Man in Black: Yes.

Vizzini: Morons.

Obviously, Plato, Aristotle, and Socrates were not morons, but even their wisdom is not enough to help us when it comes to dealing with the fact that we all, like Solomon, have turned away from God.

When things get really challenging or hard in our lives, wisdom is simply not enough. Following our instincts isn't enough. Self-help books and seminars are not enough. Professional counselors and life coaches are not enough. Dear Abby letters are not enough. Learning from our failures is not enough.—as one of my favorite songwriters, Bill Mallonee of *The Vigilantes of Love*, wrote, “Words of wisdom, quotable quotes, Reader’s Digest words for those losing hope. Why do I feel so mocked by the hands of the clock? Anchor me down to the Solid Rock.”

“Anchor me down to the Solid Rock...” ultimately when it comes to the fact that because we all, like Solomon, have turned away from God, we need to be anchored to the Solid Rock, Jesus Christ. We need the wisdom of God that is found only in Jesus Christ.

In Matthew 12, when Jesus was teaching His disciples about the danger of unbelief, listen to what He said about Solomon, “The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because she came from the ends of the earth to listen to the wisdom of Solomon, and see, something greater than Solomon is here!” (12:42). The “something greater than Solomon” is the wisdom God has revealed in Jesus Christ.

In his First Letter to the Corinthians the Apostle Paul powerfully wrote,

“For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power... For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God... For since... the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe... we proclaim Christ crucified... Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God... God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise... He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption” (I Corinthians 1:17-18, 21, 23-24, 27a, and 30).

The wisdom God gives us in Jesus Christ and His death on the cross trumps all the wisdom of the world, including the wisdom of Solomon, because in this wisdom God deals with the consequences of our turning away from Him. In this wisdom we find forgiveness, mercy, and hope. In the same way Solomon went to Gibeon and offered a thousand sacrifices to God at “the principal high place” to ask for God’s blessing on his reign, Jesus Christ went to a hill outside Jerusalem and offered Himself for the sins of the whole world, for the cross is “the principal place” where we find the ultimate expression of God’s grace and blessing.

And in the same way God freely gave Solomon riches, long life, and the destruction of his enemies in addition to the wisdom he requested, in addition to the wisdom in Jesus Christ God gives us the hope of eternal life, the incomparable riches of His grace, and the destruction of our greatest enemies, sin and death.

In his Letter to the Romans the Apostle Paul praises God for His wisdom given us in Jesus Christ and His death on the cross:

“For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all. O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways” (Romans 11:31-33).

Finally, in the Book of Revelation we see that in heaven God is praised for the wisdom given in Jesus Christ: “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever!” (Revelation 7:12).

But we don’t have to wait until we’re in heaven to receive God’s gift of wisdom in Jesus Christ, as we read in the Letter of James, “If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you” (1:5).

So today if you, like Solomon, are in a situation in your life in which you are way over your head or you have turned away from God or you are struggling with narcissism and various insatiable thirsts or you need some wisdom for your life—in short, if you need to be anchored to the Solid Rock, be encouraged, because God gives us His wisdom in the grace of Jesus Christ.

Let’s close with this prayer from Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians, “I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him” (1:17). Amen.