

## “Putting Wisdom Into Practice”

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1 Kings 2:10-13, 3:3-14

Ephesians 5:15-20

Some of you have asked me what my practice is in writing sermons. Each month, I usually look at the scriptures of the month ahead and decide which texts from the lectionary I will choose for preaching. Then, a week before the text comes up, I read the scriptures again, and usually a few commentaries on it. And then I let the text linger in my mind while I go about the events of the week. The bible text becomes the lens through which I see things, whether current events, or something I have been reading, or things that just happen in my life. I pray over the texts. If I am lucky, there will be some great connections between these things and the readings. When I sit down to write again, I go back to the biblical texts and often look at the original languages and theological writings. And then with the help of coffee and my dog who keeps me company until I am finished, I write it all out.

During that time of creative brainstorming, my mind goes a lot of places. Sometimes I lie in bed and if a good idea has taken root in me for a sermon illustration, I piece the sermon together in my head. As I imagine preaching the sermon, I tell you, my imagined congregation nods their heads in agreement. Someone stands and shouts an “Amen!” “Hallelujah!” There may even be a few Presbyterian tears shed as people realize how much my words might change their lives.

Ha! If only it were true! Even when I do get one of those wonderful sermon ideas as I drift off to sleep, when I sit down to write it the next day, my

words by no means capture the glory of my imagined sermon. Too bad. If only our lives could be as beautiful as our dreams.

Today's text from 1 Kings shows Solomon, the son of David who followed him to the throne, having a dream. God appeared before Solomon in a dream and said, "Ask what I shall give you."

Solomon replied— in the dream— "Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people?"

It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. And so, God gave Solomon a wise mind and not only that, because Solomon was humble in his request, God rewarded him by also throwing in enormous wealth and honor, and told Solomon, " if you walk in my ways— I will throw in a long life for you."

It is funny to me that the Bible tells of this dream, right after it tells us in the earlier verses of this chapter that Solomon had married an Egyptian girl and was sacrificing in the high places, which the Bible implies were shrines to other gods. Indeed, the Bible reports that Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines. He taxed his small nation 666 talents a year, which is almost 40,000 pounds of gold. Solomon dreamed of wanting to be guided by wisdom, but in reality it was excess that guided his rule.

Was King Solomon's dream really from God? Was it a delusional vision of grandeur? Was Solomon's dream the manifestation of the best of his intentions for integrity in leadership? We know a little of Solomon's wisdom. There *is* the story of his intervention when two women are fighting over a baby after one of the women's baby died. The birth mother claimed the baby was hers, but the grieving mother also claimed the baby was hers. Solomon's "wise" answer was to cut the baby in two and give half to each mother. As the story goes, the woman who was willing to walk away rather

than split the baby proved to be the true mother. I remember the story a few weeks ago of the Orca Whale on her tour of grief, after her newborn calf died. She carried the calf across 1000 miles of ocean, for at least 17 days, before returning to her pod of whales. So while the Bible remembers Solomon as wise, I wouldn't seek his wisdom if I were grieving.

But I admire the man's intentions in asking God for wisdom. And don't we all find ourselves in moments filled with good intentions, poised for possibility, earnest in our integrity? But all these amount to nothing if we don't put some intentional **practice** behind our dreams.

Last year, I brought our daughter to the New York Philharmonic to their Young Audiences program; we have a friend who is in the orchestra who generously gave us free tickets. Before the concert, there was the chance for children to walk around and "try out" the different instruments with a musician to show them how to use it. With much trepidation and reverence, Kai approached the musician with the violin. The musician showed Kai how to hold the violin and positioned the bow so that what first sounded like goats dying turned into a resonant hum. Kai left Lincoln Center and I'm pretty sure she went a few months honestly thinking she had played violin *for* the New York Philharmonic. Since I had come to know Mineko from our church as both excellent musician and extremely patient with kids, I signed Kai up for violin lessons with her. This introduced the sound of dying goats to our household, which is extremely frustrating to Kai; after having played at the New York Philharmonic, she felt she had a musical genius inside that wanted to get out. It is only the rigors of practice that transform the dying goat sounds into recognizable notes and melodies.

Wisdom is not just something you can get by dreaming about it. It requires daily practice, much like upholding the vows made in marriage takes daily practice or learning a new language or culture takes practice or just about anything that matters becomes better when you take the time to cultivate it. Practicing wisdom means not only searching within yourself for what is

wise but also knowing when to hush up and listen to what other voices have to say. Practicing wisdom means making a **choice** for it even when it is not the most alluring option around.

What would you ask God if you had an encounter with the holy like Solomon had in his dream? There is a Prayer Chapel at Montreat, the Conference Center where I went for continuing ed the past few days. I have been craving time to sit in it lately to encounter the holy; it has been a spiritual place for me since I was a teenager coming to Montreat for spiritual retreats. The Prayer Chapel is a small wooden pavilion nestled among rhododendron bushes, along a bubbling mountain stream. There is a bible and a notebook in it. This time when I came, it was the week after the Montreat Youth Conference. Nestled in the cracks of the shingled walls of the Prayer Chapel are folded papers, each holding a written prayer, like a mountaintop Wailing Wall. There were several prayers wedged into the rafters and even into ceiling boards-- higher than even the tallest teenager might reach, so I was entertained imagining how they had maneuvered their gangly, growing bodies in their attempts to reach God. There were also several piles of folded papers sitting on the bench where I was praying, so after some time I decided I would read some of the prayers to help them along. The prayers were written in loopy cursive, miniscule print, hurried scrawl, and misspelled meaning. Their words were as diverse: heartbreaking lament, joyful praise, several requests for a boyfriend or girlfriend, and one prayer telling God how the writer planned to get back at her older sister for never coming to her swim meets. Judge if you will, but at least these kids are praying. Still, if their prayers do not engage with wisdom from seeing the world from perspectives that are not just their own, then their prayers will ring hollow. I am hopeful though; they are only just beginning; if they keep coming to that place in their hearts where they can meet God-- even if it isn't in a beautiful mountain setting with a bubbling brook-- and allow themselves to also be shaped by how God is at work in the life around them, their prayers will become smooth as a river stone and

their spirits will be filled with the living water that satisfies their deepest thirst.

On my retreat these past few days, I did anti-racism training. I want to build bridges and healing as a response to the brokenness I see in this world. I grew up with the vision of Martin Luther King, Jr. who had a dream, as he shared it, “that one day this nation will rise up , live out the true meaning of its creed: “We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all... are created equal.” The sad truth is that just because Dr. King dreamed it, doesn’t make it so. I saw a T-Shirt that said “Make Racism Wrong Again;” we live in a morally fraught time in which white supremacists and their racist ideas have claimed their space in the public square and somehow, we have acquiesced to their presence. We cannot wait for another dreamer to make things right again. Instead, we have daily work to acknowledge and shed our own racism, and to build compassion and educate for justice in our families and communities. It’s not enough to be against the KKK. Being **wise** in the face of white supremacy requires recognizing for ourselves how we have also been complicit in the culture of racism.

As we go about putting wisdom into practice, perhaps we need a soundtrack for this important work. When Paul wrote about wisdom in his letter to the Ephesians, telling them to “be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise,” he goes on to give instructions: “be filled with the Spirit as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts.” Isn’t it interesting that Paul connects music with the practice of wisdom?

Many of us have been listening to recordings of Aretha Franklin these days since her death. The Queen of Soul was the child of a preacher and her musical beginnings filled the sanctuary where her father preached. Her music couldn’t be contained by a church, but through music she put soul into those who listened to her and communicating a message in ways words alone could not. As Baptist pastor Michael Eric Dawson put it, she

transformed the song “Respect” into a timeless anthem for racial pride and a cry of feminist recognition. Her church got larger, her congregation composed of millions of people in search of a soulful vision of spiritual direction beyond sanctuary doors.” (New York Times)

It is true that not all of us are capable of making wonderful music. There are those among us who might be better at imitating the sound of dying goats than something that sounds pleasant to the ear. Whether or not music can be an avenue through which we express or experience wisdom, we all have the capacity to be wise. That is the beauty of the wisdom literature of the Bible; it is offered to the simple; it is a common sense that you only need to look for and practice with some measure of intentionality, to live and become it.

Solomon’s dream invites us to ask ourselves what is most important. What do we value most? What do we want more than anything? Will we seek wealth? Power? Will we seek privilege at the expense of other people’s well being? Or will we seek wisdom in how we care for our families and our communities? We know that God does not work like a genie in a bottle, granting wishes, even if we stuff our prayers into the highest rafters of the ceiling. But if we can make a humble effort to live our lives with daily wisdom, that is something God can work with and help to cultivate. Amen.