

P13B 2024 1 Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14

I confess that I messed up in planning for today. I can't remember why I thought we shouldn't bless the backpacks on the same day as the church picnic, but we didn't schedule the back to school blessing until next week. Unfortunately, that means our teachers and students will start the school year—and the football team and marching band will start their season—before being officially blessed, and before we sing *Earth and All Stars*, with its great lyrics: *classrooms and labs, loud boiling test tubes, athlete and band, knowledge and truth*, and so on. But we can at least take a little bit of relevant scripture into the beginning of the academic year with today's Old Testament lesson recounting Solomon's gift of wisdom.

We have been following the story of David's rule throughout most of the summer, though we skipped some *Game of Thrones*-level palace intrigue between where we left off last week and where we pick up today with David's death. You can read the intervening history on your own. Honestly, it's a stretch for Solomon to claim that his father David walked in faithfulness, righteousness, and uprightness of heart before the Lord—after all, Solomon's mother is Bathsheba. But it is not false humility or self-deprecation when Solomon credits the Lord God himself with making him king, as Solomon was not the oldest, nor the heir apparent, and his mother and the prophet Nathan had to fight to secure his throne. Yet when God appears to him, sort of like a genie granting wishes, Solomon still doesn't ask for power or protection from his enemies or security for himself. Solomon—with a request that ironically already displays wisdom—asks for understanding and discernment in governing the people of God.

This would be a practical and necessary request for anyone in Solomon's position: leaders need wisdom and discernment so they don't end up invading Russia in winter. But besides military tactics, Israel's leaders also functioned like judges, settling civil disputes as the people grew into their practice of God's law. Solomon famously decides which of two women must be a baby's real mother by suggesting that they divide the infant and each take half. Scripture tells us that all of Israel is amazed at Solomon's wisdom because of that judgement, although it's not exactly rocket surgery to figure out that the woman who doesn't want to saw the baby in half will make the better parent.

Literature from *1001 Arabians Nights* to the last *Harry Potter* book include cautionary tales about what you're supposed to wish for if you are ever offered a proverbial blank check. The characters who want wealth or power or revenge always end up being undone by their own greed. The Lord is so pleased that Solomon doesn't choose one of these short-sighted prizes that God adds riches, honor, and long life to Solomon's gift of wisdom anyway. If God is gifting those things as well, we can see that they're not inherently evil. Instead, what makes Solomon's desire for wisdom and discernment more commendable is that he is not asking for his own benefit but in order to serve the people well.

This is not to say that Solomon always acted out of an altruistic sense of duty to the people of Israel. His legendary excesses are exactly why God through Samuel had cautioned the people not to institute a monarchy in the first place. Solomon enslaves Israelites to build the Temple—evidently missing the irony that the Lord whom they will worship there was known to Israel as the God who freed them from slavery in Egypt. Solomon had over 700 wives, which doesn't make him sound too discerning, and it is by worshipping his wives' foreign gods that Solomon strayed from following the Lord. As a consequence of his unfaithfulness, Solomon is the last king to rule over the united monarchy; Israel and Judah will be divided, making them easier targets for their warring neighbors. So for all his selfless intentions at the start, Solomon's descent into extravagance marks the beginning of the end for the whole community. We could argue that Solomon lost his gift of wisdom when wealth and power obscured his role as servant—the title by which he repeatedly refers to himself here.

As we get ready to send our students off to another year of learning, we remember that wisdom and knowledge—for them or for any of us—are not meant to be ends in themselves; these are just some of the tools by which we build a better world, for ourselves *and* for others. The Lord didn't grant Solomon wisdom and discernment so that he could perpetually win at Trivial Pursuit. His pursuit, at least at first, was service to the Lord through service to the people entrusted to him. Whatever gifts God may give us are not meant to be kept to ourselves but are given for the sake of the world that God so loves. May God make us ever wise and discerning of where and whom and how we are called to serve.