

*Lantern Lights of Wisdom*

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

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Let me begin by restating the obvious: our church has horrible timing. For the past 73 Sundays, we have worshipped online and in person. And here we are trying to take a step toward normal activities at the crest of the Delta wave. Could we not have picked a better Sunday? We're in this position because most other churches began experimenting with indoor services at the beginning of the summer, when we opted to stick with our outdoor schedule. It's very frustrating, isn't it? While our community guidelines are consistent with the best practices for churches that we've been able to find, it doesn't feel good to any of us to be taking this step at a high point of fear and uncertainty. Some call this situation unlucky. Some call it unwise. I think most of us are reaching a point of acceptance that we don't have any control over our circumstances.

However we got here - whether we should be here or not - here we are. And here is Solomon, David's son and the most celebrated king of Israel. God has granted him a discerning mind. God has blessed him with special wisdom and understanding. Why do you think Solomon is here today? Has he come to oversee and bless our decision to resume indoor services? Or does he stand here in mockery of us? Maybe you remember the Bible story commonly told to children about Solomon. Different women claim to be the mother of a child and come to Solomon seeking a final judgment for custody. Solomon decrees that the child can be divided in two, whereupon the real mother is broken down in grief and the king awards full custody to her. I don't know why that story is found in so many Children's Bibles - it doesn't seem very comforting. But this is Biblical tradition of Solomon's wisdom - one man invested with special powers to solve the most confounding riddles.

In fact the story of Solomon as we tell it in Sunday school is a crude reduction of the Biblical tradition. The first mention of Solomon's wisdom does not feature the king as a sage but as a young man overwhelmed by his new responsibilities and dependent on God's guidance. God appears to Solomon sort of like the Genie in Aladdin, offering not to grant three wishes but offering to grant one. "Ask what I should give you," God says to the new king in a dream. As the successor to the reckless, impulsive, erratic king David, Solomon seems aware of the corrupting properties of his office. He's also struck with the gifts of the community that surrounds him. "Your servant is in the midst of the people you have chosen, a great people too numerous to be counted." Notably - Solomon doesn't describe himself as chosen, but the people as God's chosen people. So he responds by confessing his weakness and his ignorance. "And now, O Lord, you have made me your servant in place of my father David; although I am only a little child and I do not know how to go out or to come in." Because his predecessor lacked any apparent powers of discernment, Solomon requests "an understanding mind" and the ability to "discern between good and evil." So what's really interesting to me about Solomon's wisdom is that it begins in humility. The wisdom of Solomon starts with confessing all that he does not know. And furthermore, the wisdom of Solomon isn't even his own. It is a special grant and blessing from God. To me these facts in the text supersede anything found in that violent Sunday school story that I grew up hearing.

So then we might return to that question - is Solomon blessing our worship today, or mocking it? Are we wise to gather in this way or are we foolish? If there were such a sage who could solve such a biblical riddle for us, we surely would have asked him. But in our tradition we don't expect such perfect truth and wisdom from any individual. The closest thing we have to

Solomonic wisdom is this practice of turning to one another. Wisdom is not the special property of one - it is the quality of our community. So as we go about answering this awful question - how should we worship, and what is the right time for us to return indoors - we begin by confessing all that we don't know. This is the 74th Sunday of our great lesson in humility. So we cannot presume that how we are practicing worship today is some kind of final judgment. Instead we are pleading our ignorance, asking God to give us wisdom, and looking to each other for the knowing signals of trust and care that will help us discern our next most faithful steps.

I found a certain prayer last week that really spoke to me. It was a prayer for wisdom - not that we might know all of the things about which we are ignorant or that the fullness of our journey might be completely revealed. The choices we make would be easy and effortless if we had perfect information. But God has not yet appeared to me in a dream as if a genie from a bottle. So this was a prayer simply for a lantern light. A lantern light that we might carry as if on a darkened trail. We cannot see the long path ahead but by this dull light we can see just enough to take the next step. Thanks be to God for the lantern light we have for the path ahead and for the wisdom that we share together. Amen.