

1 Kings 3:5-12; Psalm 119:129-136;
Romans 8:26-39; Matthew 13:31-33, 44-53

Grace to you and peace from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

In our lesson this morning, Solomon comes off looking pretty good. Hopefully, we remember that he's a smart guy – you might remember Jesus talking about him: Solomon in all of his glory was never dressed as beautifully as the lilies of the fields, and you might remember that Solomon is the second son of David and Bathsheba. In general, Solomon seems to look pretty good.

But let's recap events leading up to our first lesson this morning. David is king; he's the second king of Israel. David has several wives and concubines and therefore, he also had lots of children, the oldest of whom was a boy named Absalom. Absalom decided that he wanted to be king before David died, so he attempted a coup but is defeated in that attempt. David is heartbroken over all of this because first of all, he loved his son, but also he's upset that his son attempted to overthrow him. Years pass. Children grow up. David grows old, and it looks as though his time is nearly up and so another of his sons, Adonijah, declares himself to be king.

That rankles Nathan the prophet. You might remember Nathan the prophet; it was Nathan who lambasted David when he had his affair with Bathsheba to begin with. So Nathan the prophet and Bathsheba, mother of Solomon, both go to David. Apparently at some point unrecorded in scripture but after Absalom's failed coup attempt, David promised Bathsheba that her son Solomon would become king when David died. So Bathsheba and Nathan go to David and ask what's up with Adonijah, he's declaring himself to be king? David is upset about this. He remembers the promise he made to Bathsheba, so while Adonijah is off celebrating his self-coronation, David publicly anoints Solomon as king, with the help of Nathan the prophet, Zadok the priest, and Benaiah. Once that happens, Adonijah realizes he's in a truck load of trouble, so he runs to the altar, grabs the horns of the altar and begs for mercy, which Solomon grants him.

Now, on his deathbed, David imparts three last important issues to Solomon: first, he wants Solomon to kill General Joab for crimes against the state because Joab killed generals from neighboring countries, even though it was a time of peace; the second thing, David said, is that Solomon has to show kindness to Barzillai because he supported me during the time your brother Absalom tried to overthrow the throne; and finally, beware of Shimei, a relative of King Saul, who was a troublemaker.

David died. Solomon's older brother Adonijah is up to his old tricks and still wants the throne, so he thinks he's going to make an end run around Solomon by going to Bathsheba with a scheme to depose Solomon. [Read chapters 1 and 2 of 1 Kings – this stuff is better than “24” or “Desperate Housewives”!] Now, either Bathsheba is duped by Adonijah's request (which is probably not the case) or she understands what is going on (which is probably more likely), but she goes to Solomon and makes the request that Adonijah made of her, which really ticks off Solomon, who sends his buddy Benaiah over to kill Adonijah. (One down.)

Joab hears that Adonijah is has been killed, so he quickly runs to the altar, grabs the horns, and begs for mercy. Solomon hears of this and says, No way! and sends Benaiah over to the altar, and Benaiah dispatches Joab. (Two down).

Okay, that leaves Shimei, the relative of King Saul. Solomon tells him that if he builds a house in Jerusalem and stays put, he can live out his days without being bothered. However, if you leave and cross the wadi, you're toast, bucko. So Shimei agrees, and for three years he stays put but eventually through what we could call a series of unfortunate events, Shimei leaves and crosses the wadi. As soon as he does that, Solomon sends out Benaiah, who dispatches Shimei. (Three down, point and set).

All of this is leading up to our lesson today. At the end of chapter 2 and the first couple of verses of chapter 3, we find out that Solomon wants to begin his reign as king of Israel by bringing about peace, and the way he plans to do that is that he marry the daughter of Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, because Solomon knows that you in-laws are less likely to attack your house if their daughter is living there. So Solomon marries Pharaoh's daughter. Now there's nothing necessarily wrong with that, in fact, it's a really smart political move. But it's not so smart on the faith side of things, because the daughter of Pharaoh does not worship the Lord God Almighty.

All of this is background to our lesson today, and in our lesson Solomon, as king, goes to Gibeon (a hill outside Jerusalem – remember, the temple hasn't been built yet) to make his thousand burnt offerings sacrifice to God, and then lays down to take a nap. While he is sleeping, God comes to Solomon and speaks to him, asking what it is that God can give to him? Solomon replies, "Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil." God replies to this request, "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 now do according to your word. Indeed, I give you a wise and discerning mind; no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you."

I have to believe that God's tongue is tucked firmly inside of God's cheek because, going backwards, let's take a look at this. Because you have not asked for the life of your enemies – of course not – his three biggest enemies are already dead, he's killed them. And because he's killed his three biggest enemies, that tends to mean that his life will be exponentially expanded, so he didn't have to ask for long life. And because he's king, he's going to have lots of riches, so he doesn't have to ask for that, either. "Because you haven't asked for riches or the life of your enemies or for a long life yourself . . ." Well of course not, he's already got those! I can just hear God chuckling at Solomon there.

But God grants Solomon's wish. God grants to Solomon wisdom and understanding the likes of which this world had not seen before and has not seen since. We see this immediately, because the last half of chapter 3 shows how wise Solomon is when two women come to Solomon, both with infant sons, one dead and the other alive, but both claiming the living son. Solomon says fine. You're both claiming the infant, let's cut that infant in half so you each have half a child

and then you'll be satisfied. Of course, the real mother cries No, no, no! Don't kill him. It's better for her to have my son than for him to be cut in half. And so Solomon knows who is the true mother. His reputation as a leader is off to a fantastic and flying start.

Solomon goes on rule over a time of peace which is unparalleled in all of Israel's past, present, or future. He builds this amazing incredible temple to the Lord God Almighty. But – he then goes on to build an even bigger palace for himself. Now, the way he is able to bring about this incredible peace and make all of these treaties and do all of these things is because his method of making those treaties and ratifying them, is by marrying into those ruling families. Eventually, he ends up with 700 wives and 300 concubines (he had some real women issues!). But, one of the drawbacks is that, in order to appease all of these women, he built for them temples to their own gods. He built those temples for them on the hills outside of Jerusalem. He built those temples on Gibeon. Can you guess how well this goes over with the Lord God Almighty?

For all of his wisdom, Solomon is not really all that bright. He builds a fabulous temple, but he allows other things to get between himself and God. He not only allows these other things to get between him and God he actively pursues those things, because Solomon himself goes and sacrifices in those other temples. He built a wonderful temple to the Lord, but he built for himself an even larger palace. He brought peace to the Middle East, the likes of which has yet to be repeated, but by doing so he allowed non-believers to take over a considerable part of his own life. It's not so much that they weren't of the people of Israel; it's that these wives and concubines brought with them their own idols, and he began to worship them. He began to worship Molech, and Chemosh, and Astarte. Solomon learned not only to put stuff between himself and God, he put things before God. Not "before" as in offering a sacrifice to God, but before God as being more important than God. He allowed these idols to overtake his own life, regardless of his wisdom.

But we all have idols. Now to the best of my knowledge, we don't have anyone who worships Molech or Chemosh or Astarte, but we do have other idols in our lives. Maybe it's Miley Cyrus, or Madonna, or Mick Jagger? Maybe it's the great god Volvo, or BMW? Or perhaps we worship of the altar of the NFL, or hi-def television? Maybe we follow the idols of the Libertarian party or whatever other political organization there might be out there? What are the gods, what are the idols in your own life? What is it that you put before God, not as an offering, but before you begin to worship God? Maybe it's your job, maybe it's your family. I can't answer what it is in your life; I can only answer what it is in my life.

Another thing about Solomon is that he lived a life of astonishing comfort. He lived in this fabulous palace, surrounded by amazing wealth, which was brought to him because he put his own people in forced labor. Now I know that I am extremely fortunate to live in a country where food is readily available. I have employment that allows me to live in a house, to sleep in a bed, to have good clothes – I enjoy amenities like a dishwasher, a washer and drier, televisions, computers and cell phones – because I know firsthand that there are people who can put everything they own in a locker that's 3 feet by 2 feet by 18 inches. I understand that I live a life of astonishing comfort. And even though lately I've been watching my pension go into the toilet, I know that eventually the market will work itself out and hopefully by the time I retire, I'll be able to live a comfortable retirement. But at whose expense?

I know that unlike Solomon, I'm not wise enough to claim to know all of the answers. Most days I don't even know the questions. But then I hear the words that Paul wrote to the Romans roughly two thousand years ago, "The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words." Even when I don't know what to ask for, the Spirit knows. For all his smarts, for all his brains, for all his wisdom, Solomon got to the point where he thought he had all the answers to every question. But he forgot about his faith in God. Fortunately for Solomon, God did not forget the promises that God made to Solomon, that God made to the people of Israel. Solomon may have pushed God aside, God never pushed Solomon aside. Solomon needed to be reminded, as I need to be reminded, as all of us need to be reminded, as Paul reminded us, no matter what we do know or what we don't know, what we do or what we fail to do, what we say or what we're afraid to say, God is always with us. "For I am convinced," Paul writes, "that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Had Solomon remembered that in all things God comes first, he might have been able to save himself and his country a whole lot of trouble.

Amen.