

“Humility”

A sermon by Rev. Martin Hager

I Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-10/Philippians 2:3-11

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The First Presbyterian Church of Dunedin

Philippians 2:3-11 “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus. Philippians 2:3-5a (NRSV)

Proud people that we are, O God, we bow our heads before you. Move our souls to praise you as we ought, and grant us humble, obedient hearts that we may receive what you have revealed and do what you command, for the sake of Christ our Lord. Amen.

“There once lived a poor tailor, who had a son named Aladdin, a careless, idle boy who would do nothing but play all day long in the streets with little idle boys like himself,” So begins the famous tale of Aladdin and the lamp. Aladdin comes across a magic lamp. When he takes it home, his fastidious mother rubs it to get it clean, and out pops a genie who will obey Aladdin’s wishes. As the rest of the tale unfolds, Aladdin learns that even with a genie on your side, you seldom get something for nothing. Which, I suppose, is a good lesson to learn.

The scripture readings begins with three swift verses, the succession is accomplished, finally. David dies. In those last years, David is so advanced in years, so old, that he cannot get warm. They cover him with clothes, but he does not get warm. They bring him a young maiden to lie beside him, but he does not get warm. I imagine David shivers in the knowledge of all that his life has taught him, the hard way. Nathan and Bath-Sheba come to him.

They come to David to remind him of the promise for Solomon to succeed him. "Yes," David thinks to himself, shivering under a pile of covers. "Yes, that is the covenant, the promise, God is with me still. God forgives my indiscretion and my downfall: God has left me with Solomon." David warms a little with the recognition, son of his love of Bath-Sheba. Solomon is his successor, his son. Finally, David is calmed and warmed and as his time to die draws near, he calls Solomon to come to him,

"Solomon, my son, I want to sum up what I know for you, as you begin, what looking back over my long life and reign has taught me. Hindsight is good vision, what looking back over my long life reveals to me, my son, is that “fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” Suddenly the shivering slows, David is calm as he shares what he knows, "Be strong, my son Solomon, and keep the charge of the Lord your God, walking in God's ways, keeping God's statutes as it is written in the law, that you, that you, my dear son, may prosper." David is buried outside the city gates of Jerusalem, the city of David and Solomon sits upon the throne. The succession is accomplished.

Moving over to the third chapter of First Kings, Solomon goes to Gideon to make a sacrifice as was the custom. At Gideon the Lord appears to Solomon in a dream. And God said, "Ask what I shall give you." Solomon answers, "You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant, my father, David, because David walked before you in faithfulness and righteousness and uprightness of heart and now, O God, I am in the place of David, and I am depending on you ... I am only a little child. Or so it seems all of a sudden and I do not know if I am coming or going, and besides, I only got to the throne by the skin of my teeth. I only got to the throne because all of the other brothers knocked each other off and I was the only one left standing (except Adonijah, who was exalted but not for long). Then there is the subject of my mother, Bath-Sheba. She is rather infamous (not always admired). And there is the matter of the people of Israel you have chosen for me to lead. There are so many of them they cannot be counted. Who, who could

govern them? Help! God! I am so scared! You ask what you can give? Please let's begin with an understanding mind to govern your people and an ability to discern good from evil."

At the very beginning of the reign, Solomon demonstrates his knowledge that "fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." Maybe the source of this fear of the Lord is fear of the job of king. But never again will Israel know such security, peace, well-being, affluence, as under Solomon's reign - 40 years of it. There is this extra little play on words as well since Solomon's name comes from the root of the Hebrew word shalom, "shalom" which means peace and wholeness and well-being. Solomon brings wisdom, peace and magnificence to Israel.

Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, peace, well-being. When God said, "Ask what I shall give you." Solomon answers, "An understanding mind, and the ability to discern good from evil." This request is literally for a hearing heart. For the ancients, the heart is the center of the self and the soul. The heart is the place of thinking and feeling. The heart is the place for discipline and will. Solomon's request implies the desire for a reason that understands - a heart with the skill to listen, the ability to judge, an instinct for integrity. And it pleases the Lord that Solomon has asked it. The Lord grants what Solomon asks and adds to it.

The Hebrew word for wisdom - hokmah - distinguishes wisdom in three ways, all three of which are granted to Solomon. First and foremost, wisdom - hokmah - is the capacity to discern ... to reason ... especially good from evil. And it is the ability to make good judgments. Solomon demonstrates this capacity to discern soon after his dream at Gideon. Two harlots come before him both claiming to be the mother of an infant. Solomon calls for a sword, proposing to give one-half of the baby to each. The true mother responds, "Give her the child." The other harlot says, "Divide it." Solomon returns the child to its true mother and "All Israel heard of the judgment (hokmah) which the king rendered. They stood in awe of the king because they perceived the wisdom of God was in him, to render justice." Wisdom, hokmah, is the capacity to discern good from evil, the ability to judge.

The second meaning of wisdom - hokmah - is encyclopedic knowledge, used in practical matters such as government and administration. Wisdom is the knowledge of fact and the power to use that knowledge well and with skill. Solomon has such a knowledge. Solomon's wisdom in this manner is so wide and so deep that almost any spoken wisdom, from clever proverb to deep truth, is attributed to Solomon for generations.

Wisdom, hokmah, is also a secular asset, a kind of savoir faire, sophistication, savvy. This aspect of wisdom, Solomon has in good measure as well. His knowledge and capacity to discern, and his savvy, are all used to build Jerusalem's temple and Solomon's palace. Solomon designed courtyards and paths through Jerusalem. This particular aspect of wisdom reflects Solomon in all his glory.

"Because you have asked this and have not asked for long life or riches or the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, behold I now do according to your word. Behold, I give you a wise and discerning mind, so that none like you has been before. I give you also what you have not asked, riches and honor. And if you walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, then I will lengthen your days."

So, that's the story of Solomon. There's not much of a similarity to the Aladdin story, is there? Solomon has been through the ringer. He admits to God, what God already knows, that though he is in his twenties, he is still a little child. He also confesses to God that he doesn't always make the right decisions. He comes to God humbly. He comes to God not asking for things, simply for a wise and discerning mind. And God say "I give you Hokmah, wisdom, the ability to know right from wrong, the ability to dig up answers for yourself. No matter how well you did in school, no matter how many brain cells you imagine you have, the gift to learn, if not so much by books, at least by experience. You have a unique genius. And finally, walk throughout this world as if you deserved the breath you breathe. But walk humbly, you are the creature, I am the creator.

I used to receive a monthly newsletter from our missionary in Peru. She works with orphans, and I'm always struck by the way she asks for prayer for the most mundane things: for the ability to understand all the necessary government paperwork, for the clarity of mind to make sound financial decisions for the orphanage, for the patience to deal kindly with coworkers who drive her crazy. I am struck by this because I think I still forget that God is not just about mystery and dreams, but is also in the everyday world of thinking hard and making decisions.

So because I forget that, I am very glad that Solomon asks for and gets something as practical and reasonable as wisdom to help him make decisions in his job. Solomon's story has one foot firmly planted in the world of mystery, spirit and visionary dreams and one foot planted in the world of decisions, politics and critical thinking. And in this story, as in real life, God has to do with both those worlds. And since God has to do with miracle and mystery and also with everyday life, you don't have to choose between being someone who prays fervently and being someone who thinks critically.

I recall when I was an intern at the Texas Department of Corrections many years ago. We were told that the great Percy Foreman, a defense lawyer with huge credentials, was to defend a retarded inmate, granted a new trial that would, perhaps, spare him the death penalty for a murder he committed. I went to the trial. The press was there eager to see the old man at work. Percy Foreman had a colorful reputation. Notorious for his high fees and courtroom theatrics. He was often ridiculed for his clothing and disorganization, but he was a respected master of tactics. He lost only 53 of 1500 death-penalty cases and only one finally resulted in execution.

Foreman's clients included Candy Mossler, James Earl Ray, who was convicted of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Charles Harrelson, convicted murderer and the father of actor Woody Harrelson. James Earl Ray, on the advice of Foreman, later took a guilty plea to avoid a trial conviction and therefore the possibility of receiving the death penalty. It is possible that Foreman's advice at the time saved Ray's life, but Ray believed the decision backfired. Ray later fired Foreman as his attorney (from then on derisively calling him "Percy Fourflusher").

Foreman made his grand entrance trailed by the press, his legal aide of many years, the retarded inmate looking bewildered and confused. Foreman said a few words to the Bailiff, then took his seat with his client – grabbed the hand of the young man and bowed his head. I was amazed. Here was a man who was known to brag about his abilities, cuss out waitresses for being slow, bowing his head – presumably, asking for – not an acquittal, but simply the some Hokmah, the ability to know right from wrong, to think critically, and hold a position of authority before the court. As the trial proceeded, I knew Foreman had received what he prayed for. He spoke barely over a whisper, the members of the jury leaning forward to listen. Yes, the man was spared the death penalty.

We all studied Charles Dicken's David Copperfield in high school and heard the unctuous Uriah Heap say "I am a very humble person," and of course, we wanted to wring his neck, didn't we?

Jesus said something else altogether about humility. "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matthew 11:29)

Paul writes to the church at Rome, "For by the grace given to me, I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of yourself than you ought to think." (Romans 12:3). It is legitimate to infer that thinking too lowly of yourself is not such a good idea either. The admonition is to not think more highly of yourself than you ought to. Be realistic about who you are and what gifts you have, as well as what limitations you have. Grandiosity, conceit, self-righteousness are antithetical to a Christ-like way of life, but so is neurotic lack of self-regard. That's the kind of outlook on life that says, "Well, I am just not worth anything. I can't do anything. I do not have what it takes. The problems of the world are so great, I'm so ineffective" and so on and so on and so on.

We certainly are not gorging ourselves with humility these days - wouldn't you agree? Ours is a self-assertive, everybody-wants-to-be-a-winner kind of culture, in which we rarely ever hear a good word said on the subject of humility. Gone are the days when your grandmother, after you had bragged to her about some accomplishment you had achieved, would look over her spectacles and solemnly remind you that "pride goeth before a fall". (Proverbs 16:18). And since we live in an age that appears to be on a never-ending ego trip, it seems to me that worship would be an appropriate occasion to think afresh about the meaning of humility.

Humility reminds us that God is God and that you and I do not have the responsibility to play God. As my friend and seminary professor Stuart Currie once said to me: "Marty, remember, there is only one savior, and you are not he." It helps us to remember that Christ is Savior. The job has already been taken. Therefore, we need to be busy doing what our job is. I would use the word servanthood to describe it. It is receiving the gifts, abilities, resources that God gives us and then taking advantage of every opportunity to do justice and to love mercy, and, as the prophet Micah said, "to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8).

It's good to know that when we pray, we do not go to God, God comes to us. I'm often asked if we ever are given a load too large for us to carry. I suppose we are. But, in those times, it is God who carries that portion of the load that is breaking our back. And it begins with greeting God with humility. "I am but child," Solomon said. "this is too big for me." And the gift? Hokmah. Wisdom.