

Wildest Dream

As of this morning the Powerball payout is estimated at \$1 billion. The drawing is scheduled for tomorrow night, prompting a fair amount of discussion about how people would spend it if they win. I've heard some say they would retire, go on the trip of a lifetime, make sure their families were taken care of or buy a professional basketball team (or maybe football? Maybe one close by?). I guess Twitter is off the market. I have even heard one of you say in recent weeks that you would invest in the church. While Solomon does not win the lottery, this scene sounds almost like a holy answer to one's wildest dream, if not an outtake from *Aladdin*. God comes to Solomon in a dream and says, "Ask what I should give you." And Solomon responds, not with his own dreams of Starbucks for life or a yacht or a private island or even world peace, but "an understanding mind...able to discern between good and evil."¹

Solomon is known throughout history as the wise king. Maybe his wisdom comes from this encounter with God, or maybe he is already wise in asking for wisdom itself. Either way, God is thrilled with Solomon's request, so much so that God grants him wisdom and more—much more. What Solomon actually asks for in Hebrew is a "listening heart." This is no throwaway detail. As the spouse of an Egyptian princess, Solomon is no doubt aware of the legacy that his wife's heritage carries. Pharaoh was after all known for his hardened heart, his disregard for both the suffering of the enslaved Hebrews and even his own self-interest in the end. His heart did not listen. He was not wise.

¹ 1 Kings 3:9, NRSVue

This is Solomon's high point. The curse on David's house that we heard about last week, the power struggles, bloodshed, and heartbreak that God unleashes in the wake of David's taking Bathsheba and conspiring to have Uriah killed have already come to pass, not only in David's lifetime but in Solomon's as well, and there is more in store. Solomon will go on to play the part of king in the drama, the kind of king God warned the people about. Like his father before him, Solomon takes. And he will take more. He winds up with hundreds of wives and eventually will enslave his own people to build his kingdom. On the heels of his reign, the kingdom will split in two. And yet the scribes and the tradition insist on his being wise, at least in his best moments.

This tradition also wants us to know that God is poised to give. Always poised to give. In God's question to Solomon in the dream, I hear echoes of God's lament from last week. You may recall, in the midst of Nathan's words of judgment offered to David on God's behalf is that haunting line:

I gave you your master's house and your master's wives...and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah, and if that had been too little, I would have added as much more.²

It is God's character to give, and God is heartbroken when his beloved children insist on taking. And here again, abundantly faithful to his covenant with this one who sits on Israel's throne, God is eager to give. And give God does. Solomon's reign is marked by peace and prosperity. It is he who builds the Temple, as well as a palace for himself. He enjoys riches and fame, just as God promises. One could argue that none of it is truly deserved. Especially when we consider where God shows up and offers the gift.

Because not only has Solomon already made his way onto shaky ground through his marriage with Pharaoh's daughter, he is also not where he should be. The writer tells us that

² 2 Samuel 12:8, NRSVue

Solomon loves the Lord and that he spends a fair amount of time worshipping in the high places, sites where other gods are worshipped in addition to or instead of the God of Israel. In Solomon's defense, the Temple is still just a dream itself, but Israel's identity is shaped by the covenant that God shall be their only God and that they will worship the one God alone. The historians who write down Solomon's story for us seem to be a bit ambivalent about Solomon's worshipping in the wrong place at what should be the wrong time. And they also make it clear that instead of a reprimand, God offers gifts. Generous, underserved gifts.

That's who God is in relation to the covenant community. No matter how many times they—or we—disappoint God or let God down or worship someone or something that is not God, the Lord of the Universe comes to us and offers us gifts and trusts us to use those gifts for the good of the community, for God's work in God's world.

One winner of a billion-dollar lottery payout a few years ago was slow to come forward, but the residents of Simpsonville, South Carolina where that winning ticket was purchased had hopes that the winner would spend his or her winnings locally. The store owner, C.J. Patel intended to “do some good with” the \$50,000 he won as the seller of the winning ticket and hoped that the winner would, too. Tony Cooper, the chief executive of the South Carolina lottery offered some advice to the winner, “Take a deep breath.” And meet with legal and financial advisors before making any decisions.³ In other words, be wise. Seek wisdom before using the gift. That's what wisdom is, after all. Wisdom is not wise on its own or in a vacuum, nor is wisdom a fixed point. Even wise ones stumble and act in unwise ways on occasion. Wisdom is about discernment and understanding and then choosing to do what is good and right. And even faithful.

³ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2018/10/24/mega-millions-jackpot-winner-reported-south-carolina-its-not-official>

On this Reformation Sunday, we give thanks for the ways God has reformed and transformed the church through the centuries, always calling us into who God wants us to be. From the earliest moments of the Protestant Reformation, the leaders insisted that God calls all sorts of people to guide and lead in the church. Through the centuries, the requirements for being considered for ordination as clergy or as an elder or deacon have changed. Just over sixty-six years ago, Margaret Towner was the first woman ordained as a pastor in the Presbyterian Church. Sixty-five years after her ordination, I was installed as your first female senior pastor. In this role, I do not lead alone. Embracing the priesthood of all believers, the Presbyterian church is governed and led by the session, ruling elders who work to listen to the leading of God's spirit together in and for this congregation and our service to God in God's world. And with God's leading, they use their insights, their experiences, their talents, and, yes, their wisdom to guide us in where God is calling us to be and what God is calling us to do. And they—and we—make mistakes along the way. To be wise is not the same as being perfect. Even the wisest leaders make mistakes. Even the wisest leaders stumble. And when mistakes are made, wise leaders acknowledge where they went wrong, ask forgiveness, and seek God's guidance in making things right. Wisdom is not about pontificating from on high. It is not about bombast or bluster. Wisdom—true wisdom is grounded in listening. Listening and serving. Because that is what wise leaders do. They seek to listen first on behalf of the community and to use their God-given talents and insights in service of that community. They serve a God who is always poised to give, and so wise leaders who listen well are poised to give and serve, too.

We are on the cusp of stewardship season, the time of year when we give thanks for all that God has given us and seek God's guidance for how we will share those gifts in the coming year. And when we talk stewardship, we talk money, as we should, but stewardship is not only

about money. Yes, to be faithful in supporting the robust ministry God is building here we need money to pay staff, maintain buildings, buy curriculum, keep the lights on and the organ tuned. But God gives us other gifts, too. Creativity, energy, love, intelligence, experience, and compassion, just to name a few. And God gives us wisdom. Unlike the lottery payout, wisdom is not once-and-done. Wisdom is always reflecting, always considering, always listening, and always trying to discern the good and act on it. Holy wisdom stays in conversation with the all-wise God. It is less a question of what Jesus would do in one fixed instance, and more a question of constantly and consistently asking what the truly wise God, what Jesus would have me or have us do here and now. And heaven knows the world can use some holy wisdom right now.

Though Solomon loses his way, turning his back on wisdom and the God who gives that wisdom, God's wisdom is still a good thing, ever available to those with hearts turned to God and out toward one another. And wisdom is crucially essential right now. The challenges we currently face have not been and will not be solved by anger, hatred, fear, or greed. When migrants risk their lives to flee never-ending violence, when fellow citizens are afraid to venture to the polls, when countless children continue to starve around the world and in our own backyard, when violent threats and attacks on leaders we disagree with are accepted as commonplace, when hatred and antisemitism saturate our public discourse, we can no longer deny that we live in an age hungry for wisdom, hungry for holy listening, hungry for a better way. The world's many challenges are not easily solved. Society's tattered social fabric is not easily mended, but wisdom—genuine, deep-breath, God-given wisdom could help. In fact, it may be the world's only hope.

If God came to me and asked what I long for in my wildest dreams, I'm fairly certain I'd be quick to ask for health, comfort, peace for the world, and happiness for all those I love. Some

days, I might even ask to win the lottery. But what if God wants more for me, more for us? What if God longs for me, for us to be wise, to listen with our hearts—not to our fears or our hurts or our grudges or our suspicions—but to God’s leading and God’s guidance? From what I read here in these ancient words, our God longs to be in holy conversation with us, longs to give us the world, longs for us to shape a place and people grounded in compassion, justice, hope, and love through us, to build the covenant community in and with us, to give us a life beyond our wildest dreams. Could it be that our being wise, our serving wisely is God’s wildest dream?

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.