1 Kings 3, selected verses
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A Heart That Listens

On the heels of King David's egregious sins and extravagant confession, we meet his son and successor, King Solomon, who has just recently gotten a solid grip on the throne that his father David had established. After violent wrangling and careful alliances, Solomon now turns to building his kingdom in a more tangible way with the construction of the Temple, his palace and a wall around Jerusalem. [Read 1 Kings 3:1-15]

Is it just me, or does this sound like a scene from Disney's *Aladdin*? God comes to Solomon in a dream when Solomon is hanging out offering sacrifices and burning incense at Gibeon, "the most prestigious of the local shrines," *The Message* translation tells us. While it is true that the Temple is not complete and the options for offering sacrifices to the God of Israel are hard to come by, the writer is a bit ambivalent about Israel's king making a show of offering prayers in a place where other local deities are worshipped as well. The writer is ambivalent; God—it appears—is not. *Ask what I should give you*, we hear God say. After deferentially expressing his gratitude for God's faithfulness to his father David and stating that he is too young and inexperienced to know what he is doing, Solomon answers, "Give your servant…an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil." The Hebrew literally reads "a listening heart," which *The Message* translates as "Give me a God-listening heart." [1] In the world of ancient Hebrew, the heart is less the seat of emotions or sentiment and more the place where reflection and discernment happen. A God-listening

[1] 1 Kings 3:9, NRSVue and The Message

heart is vigilantly attentive to the one who created that heart—and every other human heart—to begin with.

In bible study this past Wednesday, several of you expressed a bit of skepticism about Solomon's account of his own dream. We only hear from him about his dream, after all, and it is mighty convenient that Solomon asks for wisdom and is told that he will be given not simply an understanding heart but riches and power too, as if his worldly success is God-ordained. It is also mighty convenient that in that dream God tells Solomon that he will be the wisest king ever. Yes, tradition credits Solomon with authoring the book of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon. And scripture tells us that Solomon was revered throughout the known world for his vast knowledge and his wisdom. Scripture also goes on to tell us how Solomon loses his way, conscripts the people for his building campaign, and gives himself and his worshipful attention to other gods introduced to him by his many wives who hail from other nations. It is also true that Solomon's reign leads to the splitting of the unified kingdom when his son, Rehoboam sits on David's throne.

It would be easy to write Solomon off, then, as a problematic, full-of-himself monarch who primes the kingdom for its demise. But for all his failings, I think it matters that Solomon asked what he did when given his moment with God. I think it matters that he asked for a "God-listening heart" to serve God and the people well. As complicated as his legacy may be, Solomon wisely teaches us what holy wisdom can and does look like, even if he flounders in being always wise himself and letting his heart be swayed by those things that are not God. Simply put, wise Solomon is not always wise. He's a mixed bag, as are we all.

Each year on the first Sunday in November, we observe All Saints' Day, a day set aside to give thanks to God for those who have come before us, those faithful ones who now see God face to face. We tied bells and listened as the banner was carried in; we wear white stoles and have switched to

white paraments, proclaiming the resurrection, just as we do for funerals and on Easter; and in a few moments, we will light candles and name those among us who died this past year.

This week another pastor spoke of our temptation to edit people's legacies, to perfect them and make them into something or someone they were not. We worry that recalling any flaws is somehow unfair, unkind, or unfaithful. But our tradition makes room for our remembering and giving thanks for real people, not idealized ones. Solomon was not perfect, nor was David. Not one of the people named in the bulletin was perfect. Faithful, yes. Beloved, yes. Grieved and missed, absolutely. Perfect, no. ***And*** they are saints, as are we. Saints are not sinless people sporting halos over their heads like the grade school angels who trick-or-treated at my house last night. Saints are God's beloved and holy ones, called and set apart to do holy work in God's name. That holy work is not limited to ancient kings or to those in the ministry or to those who serve as church officers. That holy work is our shared work. Together we are called to do our faithful best to love God above everyone and everything else and love our neighbors as we love ourselves and to help one another do those things. This work is not easy, and we do not always get it right, but it remains our work to do. Each time the church he served gathered around the table in the sanctuary where I worshiped in seminary, the pastor was known to say, "These are God's holy things. You are God's holy people." With those words he reminded us of the calling received at our baptism: claimed as God's own, we are called to do God's work in God's world for God's glory, which—to state the obvious—requires a good bit of paying attention to figure out what it is that God wants. A God-listening heart is essential for that work, because there are countless other voices, other forces, other interests who want to bend our ears and make their case. Wisdom, as it turns out, is not a fixed point or a possession that we can clutch tightly and claim for ourselves. It is instead a practice that takes practice and help and grace.

And in order to have any chance of being wise, we must listen and help one another listen to the one scripture describes as "the only wise God."[2]

Wisdom is ultimately not a party trick or a courtroom stunt, nor is it about being shrewd or savvy in a way that tramples others so that I come out on top. If we are to take the words of today's text seriously, wisdom demands less talking and more listening, disciplined listening first and foremost to the one true God. And by the grace of God, wisdom then leads to a way of living and being in the world, especially when the world is a jumbled, fractured, tangled mess, which—spoiler alert—it always is.

It has been about two years since Hurricane Helene tore through the western part of the old North State, leaving destruction in her wake. Judith Whelchel is an episcopal priest in Black Mountain. After Helene blew through, Whelchel made her way to her church because she had a wedding to officiate. Ahead of the storm, the couple had insisted that they did not want to cancel or reschedule. The flowers were ready. Their families were enroute. The reception venue was non-refundable. Whelchel writes:

> I pulled into the church parking lot to find a crowd of people, a bride in white, and a groom in a suit. I thought, 'This is crazy.'
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> There was a mix of people milling around—people asking for water, for food, for access to electricity, for a toilet. There was no power or water in the church, but we offered what food and drink we found in the kitchen. Then we took a moment to catch our breath before the wedding. I mentioned to Magdalene and Matt what a gift it was that, despite the storm, so many of their friends and loved ones had made the trip.

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[2] Romans 16:27

> ‘I don’t know these people,’ Magdalene said. ‘Only our parents.’
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> The people surrounding them were travelers displaced from the interstate, people who had come into the inns hoping for a room. Magdalene and Matt had given the rooms intended for their friends and family to complete strangers. Each one of them walked from the inns to the church to stand in for friends and family. They were the wedding party.
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> I donned vestments and took my place in the shadowy chancel of the church. With the background music of [helicopters] overhead, with thirsty, desperate people wandering through, Magdalene and Matt got married. They vowed to love, for better, for worse.
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> Love [Whelchel writes] is the sanest thing we’ve got.[3]

Pressing ahead with the wedding seemed on the face of things to be ridiculous, unwise even. And yet, the bride and groom somehow let their hearts keep listening and invited their pastor to listen, too. They offered hospitality to strangers and those strangers—stranded and frightened as they must have been—showed up for their wedding. Together this group of saints joined in a boldly defiant act of hope, promise, and love in the face of devastation. Wise indeed.

The wisdom to which Solomon aspires and to which God calls us requires tuning in to what God has in mind. Wisdom is not a possession we acquire, nor is it a level or status we achieve in any permanent way. It is not a fixed point, nor is it a skill we will ever perfect. It requires and demands persistent praying, studying, wondering, reflecting, discussing, and discerning—a lot of verbs ending with *-ing*. Present tense. Ongoing. Never settled. Never finished, not in this life anyway. This work does not happen in a vacuum where I pay attention only to my own thoughts or my own opinions, an insulated echo-chamber where I can too easily convince myself that I alone am right, that I alone am

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[3] https://substack.com/inbox/post/217717256. I’m indebted to my friend the Rev. Shannon Kershner for pointing me to Whelchel’s reflections.

wise. I need to be in relationship with other saints, in conversation with others who also long to hear what God wants, not simply for my sake but for the sake of each and all of God's beloved ones. When our hearts stop listening to God, we flounder. When we allow fearmongering, vitriol, bluster, meanness, hatred, selfishness, or cynicism to have the last word, we are not wise and we have lost our way. But all is not lost forever. We are not lost in any final way.

Because we follow one who came to show us a different way. When we failed to listen to God speaking through the prophets and forgot the promise God made with us in the wilderness, God came to us in the flesh, in the person of Jesus Christ. When I am tempted to cover my tracks or insist on my own way, I am grateful for saints who remind me of this Jesus who hung out with the left-behind and stood up for the left out, who healed the hurting without blaming them for their own pain and made friends with the ones that polite society shunned. Jesus stared down a brutal empire, called out oppression at every turn, and gave his own life to save the entirety of the bumbling human family, you and me included. The larger world deemed him a fool. And yet in Jesus we meet God's love, God's own heart, God's wisdom in the flesh. And in him we foolish and floundering saints are given grace beyond our deserving and life more abundant than we can begin to imagine or dream.

Thanks be to God. Amen.