

# Kings and Kingdoms

1 Kings 3:5-12; Matthew 13:31-33; 44-52

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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Last week, I said we were looking at one of the characters in Scripture that I have perhaps the least trouble resonating with in Jacob.

This week, it's the opposite. I have a very difficult time resonating with King Solomon.

Solomon is rich and immensely powerful. He is the king of Israel during the nation's most glorious years.

Solomon is a shrewd politician and military tactician, and a legendary womanizer. He's also fickle when it comes to faith and devotion to God, easily being led into idolatry.

You'll probably be relieved to hear that I don't have much in common with Solomon!

But our text from 1 Kings this morning comes closer to the beginning of Solomon's story, before the trappings of power send him off on a destructive trajectory.

In today's text, Solomon is a young man, only twenty years old. His father David is old and approaching death. The kingdom of Israel is poised for a power struggle.

David's son and Solomon's half-brother Adonijah is maneuvering to secure the throne. Adonijah is the logical choice as David's eldest surviving son.

Side note: David had three sons with three different wives prior to Adonijah:

1. Amnon, who was killed by his brother Absalom for raping his sister Tamar
2. Kileab, of whom we know very little and who likely died young
3. Absalom, who was killed by Joab after mounting a rebellion against his father David

Last week I said that Jacob's story had the feel of a tawdry soap opera at times. David's story is no different! Yet another reminder that in Scripture we are never dealing with squeaky clean characters or stories.

In light of Adonijah's maneuvering for the throne, the prophet Nathan, together with David's wife and Solomon's mother Bathsheba, talk the aging king into swearing that Solomon, not Adonijah, will succeed David as king.

Second side note: The story of *how* Bathsheba came to be David's wife and Solomon's mother is a grim one. Bathsheba was married to Uriah the Hittite until David decided to take advantage of her while Uriah was off fighting one of his wars. To cover up his adultery and abuse of power, David tried to get Uriah to come home and sleep with his wife to take care of an unexplained pregnancy and, when this failed, orchestrated his death by sending him to the front lines of battle. Once all this business was taken care of, David took—and that word “took” is very appropriate here—Bathsheba as his wife.

At any rate, Nathan and Bathsheba's plan works. Solomon is crowned king and Adonijah's life is at least initially spared when he promises to acquiesce to David's command.

But then Adonijah asks Solomon for one of David's concubines to be his wife, which Solomon interprets as a threat to his kingship (apparently, the previous king's concubines became the property of the next king!). Solomon's patience runs out and he has his half-brother killed.

He then consolidates power by dispatching a few more enemies and inconveniences, takes the daughter of a Pharaoh as his wife to cement an alliance with Egypt and gets cracking on a few building projects in Jerusalem (a palace and a temple, to be precise).

This is the messy, sin-soaked background and context which brings us to our text this morning.

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In 1 Kings 3, Solomon meets God in a dream. And in that dream, God asks Solomon a question.

*What do you want me to do for you?*

It's the kind of question we may dream of being asked. The God of the universe who can do anything asks us what we want?

We probably instinctively think of money or health or protection for our children or an end to pandemics or something like this.

Instead of any of these things that would naturally occur to us, Solomon asks for wisdom. He knows how little he knows and how ill-equipped he is for the task before him.

*I'm just a child. I don't have a clue what I'm doing here. You've given me this vast horde of people that are impossible to govern. I need your wisdom to discern the path forward, to discern good from evil.*

Given what we know of Solomon prior to this moment and what would become of him later in his life, his response here startles us with its humility.

*Give your servant a discerning heart to distinguish right from wrong.*

It's quite a response for a twenty-year-old who presented with a divine blank cheque! It would be quite a response for any of us.

It's an interesting passage to read at our particular time and place in the middle of a global pandemic. When I read this passage on Monday morning, it was hard not to read Solomon's response to God in the dream as something of a leadership manual for trying times.

I have spoken to many leaders over the past five months or so that we have been dealing with Covid-19—church leaders, business leaders, schoolteachers and administrators, and others.

I can't think of a single one who hasn't said that leading during a pandemic has been one of the most agonizing experiences they have ever been through. Speaking personally, these last five months have certainly been the hardest of my twelve years in pastoral ministry.

Many in leadership these days likely hear our own inner voices in Solomon's response to God's question.

*I don't know what I'm doing. I feel inadequate. I don't know the way forward here. Everything I do is second-guessed. So much is at stake—people's lives, people's mental and spiritual health. The future of my organization. How am I supposed to lead well when things seem to change weekly if not daily? When there seem to be too many factors to consider? I don't know what the right option is here!*

Give me a discerning heart! This is certainly the cry of anyone in leadership these days. Or at least it should be.

But beyond those in leadership, all of us need wisdom, don't we? We need wisdom to know how to live in complex times.

The pandemic is the most obvious challenge that we are facing right now, particularly as things seem to be trending in the wrong direction and the virus seems to be spreading more rapidly in our province again.

But there are others, too.

How do we cope with the bewildering pace of technological and cultural change? How do we help our kids and our loved ones in the midst of it all? How do we live responsibly in the midst of ecological and economic and socio-cultural crises, particularly when they all seem to be coming at us at once?

And what about the church? How will we bear witness faithfully in a context that seems determined to forget about God or create smaller gods in our own image? How do we navigate the crises of faith that we see in those we love or in our own hearts?

We all need wisdom. We all need to ask God for wisdom. We all need discerning hearts capable of pursuing the right thing at the right time and for the right reasons.

We all need to adopt Solomon's posture in this passage which conveys two vitally important truths:

1. To be human is to not know everything. Therefore, humility is required.
2. The right path at a given moment isn't always obvious. Therefore, discernment is required.

And, I would add, so is charity. Because we'll get things wrong along the way. We'll misinterpret and misstep. We'll make mistakes.

This, too, is what it means to be human. In a culture where we can be absolutely merciless with one another, we so desperately need a bit of charity.

To return to Solomon, the Lord grants his request in the dream. He praises Solomon for not asking for riches or long life or the end of his enemies. He grants Solomon's request by giving him a wise and discerning heart.

In addition, God promises to give Solomon what he *didn't* ask for—wealth and honour and a reputation unprecedented in Israel's history.

And he exhorts Solomon to continue to walk in obedience.

Well, we know that while Solomon did many good things and his reputation was indeed unlike any other king in Israel, he did not always walk in obedience.

His story unfolds in the reverse of what we often expect. In many cases, human lives are characterized by the gradual accumulation of wisdom and maturity from youth to old age. Solomon seemed wiser at twenty than he was at the end of his life. Which is sad.

In the end, Solomon was a king and his kingdom was a kingdom like so many others before and since. It was characterized by a lust for power and wealth and sex and domination.

Even though Solomon had moments of wisdom and discernment and faithfulness, his story had a tragic end.

He constantly drifted into idolatry. The kingdom he had presided over began to fragment toward the end of his life and would blow apart once he was gone.

Israel would never again be the united nation that it was under his reign.

And the God who was pleased by the response of a twenty-year-old king who was humble and knew of his need ends up saddened and angered by a king whose heart had turned away.

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In our text from Matthew, we encounter a different kind of king and a different kind of kingdom.

We don't see military might and political marriages and the accumulation of spectacular wealth. Instead, we see Jesus sitting by a lake talking about the kingdom of heaven to a curious crowd.

It's important to note that "kingdom of heaven" is not just another way of talking about "heaven."

Jesus is talking about what it looks like when the culture of heaven makes its way on earth. "Kingdom of heaven" language was, to quote one of my colleagues at a Mennonite church in Ottawa put it,

the way Jesus spoke about God making things right. For the people Jesus spoke to and ate with, the "kingdom of heaven" meant justice that was complete and fair. It meant an end to arbitrary and selfish rule by whomever was strongest. The "kingdom of heaven" referred to the opening up of things so that everyone could flourish.<sup>1</sup>

And what we immediately see is that the kingdom of heaven is... small.

Jesus uses ordinary tactile images drawn from mundane peasant life.

It's like a tiny seed planted in the field of the world, growing into a large bush that fills the land... or a bit of yeast dropped into the dough that slowly mixes until the whole batter begins to rise.

Jesus talks about how the kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field or a pearl of great value. Or like a net full of good and bad fish that will be sorted out by God in the end.

The metaphors Jesus employs to talk about what it looks like when heaven makes its way on earth are all so very ordinary and un-kingly.

There's no display of overwhelming force, no strategic alliances, no opulent palaces or temples. Instead, Jesus evokes images of a change that comes gradually, unobtrusively. Sometimes, it can barely even be noticed.

He talks about organic processes that do their slow, steady work over time until something good and nourishing has taken over.

Jesus also talks about kingdom as the discovery of something of great value that is pursued with singular clarity and devotion.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://anthonysegrist.com/2020/07/24/homily-for-sunday-july-26-of-fungi-and-the-kingdom/>

And this brings us back to the theme of wisdom that we encountered in 1 Kings 3. Solomon asked for a discerning heart—a request that pleased God greatly.

Jesus, too, implicitly points us to the value of a discerning heart. It is only discerning hearts that are drawn to this different kind of king and his different kingdom.

It is only those with eyes to see and ears to hear that will recognize it. It is only those whose longings are properly oriented that will hear its whispers.

It is only those who have learned to attend most carefully to what matters instead of the headlines of doom that scream for our attention daily that will see evidence of its progress.

It is only those whose hearts are aligned with God's desires and purposes for the world and for human life who will celebrate this kingdom's advance and respond with joy.

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I talked at the beginning of my sermon about how I resonated with the mixed-up character of Jacob last week and how I struggled to connect with Solomon.

If I'm honest, there are times where I struggle to resonate with Jesus. But the difference is that I when I look at Jesus, I want my life to more naturally align with his.

And perhaps this is the first step in wisdom. To have our longing oriented in the right direction. To recognize that where Jesus and I don't look much the same, it is I who am out of alignment, not him.

Jesus, not Solomon, is the measure of what a true king looks like. And the kingdom of heaven, not the United Kingdom of Israel three millennia ago, is what a true kingdom looks like.

It is a king and a kingdom defined by mercy, by justice, by simplicity and self-sacrifice, by love and forgiveness, by the last and the least taking their place at the head of an overflowing banquet table.

It is a king and a kingdom not defined by overt displays of power but by entering pain, embracing suffering, and bringing life out of death.

It is about salvation from all that threatens our flourishing, both from within and without.

It is about being saved from sin, death, and the enemy that comes to steal and destroy. It is about being saved from ourselves and our relentless tendency to seek after smaller gods (usually, the god of self).

This king and this kingdom are always advancing, even when things look bleak, even when it is not obvious.

This king and this kingdom are our hearts true home.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

