

When I was at the Second Presbyterian Church in Indianapolis where I served as a Lake Fellow, there was a woman on the staff who oversaw certain aspects of the church's children's ministries. I was pretty low on the totem pole so just about everyone was above me in seniority. I don't know if it was an intentional hierarchy or not, but there was a general flow of importance in terms of rank on the staff... the further your office was from the head-of-staff, the lower your rank. The senior associate was closest, followed by the theologian-in-residence, then others. Once we exhausted the offices, there were cubicles, also in rank order for size and importance. Mine was in the parking lot.

Well anyhow, one of the office occupants was a woman who always had her door open and in the corner of the room there was a rocking chair.

For many ministers the early days of ministry can be challenging. It's not so much that the work is hard – I've done far harder work the further along I've gone in ministry – as it is that the emotions are sometimes hard. That rocking chair was where unofficial therapy, cheerleading and sometimes a swift kick in the rear were dispensed to those of us who were just making our ways in the church. We all agreed that she was a wise woman.

There was another woman on the staff, the head of staff, in fact, who became a close friend to me. It was Joan with whom I talked about calling when it was time for me to seek a new call. As I was leaving Second I was faced with the choice between two calls. One was a very prestigious call to a position that would be created for me in a church of many thousands of members in a very large city with a pleasant salary but I would preach

once or twice a year at most. The other call was to a much smaller but intellectually rich congregation. There I would have the privilege of preaching a great deal to a discerning congregation. I was terribly torn between the calls and I went to talk to Joan.

The one thing we all knew about Joan was that she never gave direct answers to your questions. In her previous life she was a Harvard educated psychologist and you knew you'd get discernment but not answers. I sat in her office and laid out all of the career reasons why I should accept the prestigious call. Then she asked the pithy question, "but what do you feel called to do?"

I felt called to preach, to learn the art, to practice the art and to grow as a preacher.

We all agreed, she is a wise woman.

I have known other wise friends. I'm sure you have too.

Indeed I hope that each of us has known someone in our lives whom we would count as *wise*.

I wonder, sometimes, what makes for wisdom? Surely some of the wise sages that we have known have gained their wisdom through years. Life shapes us and if we have the good sense to learn we can gain something that may turn out to be of tremendous value.

I'm reminded of the old quote, "Change is inevitable. Growth is optional."

But even still, surely we all have known people wise beyond their years – old souls, we sometimes call them – people who are temperamentally suited to make good decisions and to help others in discerning the best path to follow.

We're fortunate if we have such a person in our lives. What makes for wisdom?

Both the Psalter and the Proverbs offer the same answer,

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."

I don't know that we think or talk so much about the fear of the Lord these days.

I could tell you that what the Bible means by, "the fear of the Lord," is something much more akin to respect and deference and much less than shaking in our boots, with fear and trembling, to borrow a line from Kierkegaard.

But it wouldn't be true. Whatever the author of Psalms and Proverbs believed about God, there is no question but that they attributed very real, very palpable and very usable power to God.

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."

This is not an invitation to a chummy relationship with the almighty. It is the awareness that God is the creator, we are the creation and the hierarchy of wisdom and knowledge runs one direction.

And yet, then there is David. Then there is Solomon.

David's kingship is the high-water mark of ancient Israel. Like George Washington who couldn't tell a lie and did in the cherry tree, the mythology that came to surround David was abundant. If you read the books about the period of the early kingship in Israel, you'll find plenty of mythology – one version of the story is the official royal biography and the other is more like the unauthorized version. It is hard at times to believe they are describing the same man.

The Old Testament lections for the past weeks have been the story of David and I have to confess to you that the reason that you didn't hear me preach from them, aside from a little time out of the pulpit, is that on the Sundays when I was preaching there was good reason not to.

The week our youth liturgists from Mission Camp led us in worship the Old Testament Lesson was the story of David and Bathsheba and their little extramarital tryst. (That would be an example of the unauthorized biography... Melinda reminded me who would be reading the lessons just in the nick of time.)

You see David was frequently shrewd and smart, but he wasn't always wise.

He saw Bathsheba taking her bath one night, and as Frederick Buechner says in Peculiar Treasures, he looked at her like she was a peeled pear.

Generally speaking, wise action does not occur after one has looked on another like a peeled pear.

What you missed in that salacious story was that an affair ensued, a pregnancy resulted and Bathsheba was inconveniently married to Uriah the Hittite. Uriah was a dazzling warrior in David's army who had not been home in many months. David, again acting shrewdly, tried one hare-brained scheme after another to get Uriah to come home and spend quality time with his wife so that their adulterous affair might be covered.

Uriah was an honorable man and refused to enjoy the comforts of home while his men were on the battlefield, and so to make a long story much shorter, David decided to have him done in.

Not wise.

These are not the actions of a man who feared the Lord.

Disaster followed. If there is one characteristic that one can find over and over and over in the Old Testament it is this: God is going to take the side of the injured party.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

(Wise people take note: God is going to take the side of the injured party.)

God did as God does. God acted on behalf of the one who had been harmed.

A judgment was issued. Calamity would follow. Solomon was not the first child of David and Bathsheba. That child died. David's house fell apart. His sons sought to kill each other and the oldest two both ended up dead. It is only with the unraveling of David's shrewdly patched together kingdom that Solomon became the heir apparent.

God has no love of shrewdness. Wisdom is what God wants for us.

And yet, in spite of ourselves, goodness is what God gives to us. With David's repentance came God's pardon.

Which brings us to our story today. After David's death, ultimately Solomon ascended the throne of Israel. And in a peculiar story, God offers him a choice:

Wisdom, long life or riches?

Which would it be?

We all know Solomon asked for wisdom and we all know God granted all three out of the abundance of God's generosity.

And Solomon was a wise king.

Perhaps you remember "the Bike Episode" of Seinfeld? You know, the one where Elaine finds a vintage bike with great big U shaped handlebars and tassels on the handgrips? In a fit of pain she promises anything to Kramer if he can just fix her cricked neck. He does and he claims the bike as his own. But Elaine's crick in her neck returns and so she attempts to reclaim the bike. Kramer insists that they go to an impartial mediator and so they draft Newman to judge the case.

Newman determines that the only fair solution is to cut the bike in two, giving half to each. Elaine agrees. Kramer says he would rather give up the bike than see it harmed.

Newman concludes that only the bike's true owner would rather give it up than see it harmed.

That plotline is shamelessly ripped virtually verbatim straight from the pages of 1 Kings. Solomon judged the exact same case except instead of a bike, it was two women claiming a baby.

He was known far and wide for his wisdom.

(He was also known for the number of wives he had, but that is another story for another day.)

The interesting thing about the question that God put to Solomon is this: it was a choice between shrewdness and wisdom.

There were two models of kingship that Solomon could choose between. One was the way of glory – that was represented by riches and an ever expanding kingdom. Mighty tempting... but not his calling – it was not the calling of any king of Israel, and yet, many chased it. The other way was the way of wisdom. It was to seek to be a king under the law that God had given. Deuteronomy has a description of the good king.

The good king was one who was marked by the virtues of faithfulness, righteousness, discernment and wisdom: the fear of the Lord.

The good king was one whose relationship with God was marked with covenantal faithfulness – an ongoing, enduring commitment to seek the way of wisdom.

Friends, I don't mean to be facile, but that choice remains.

The choice is always this: God's way or another way.

It would be easy to reduce this choice to a pedantic moralism – nothing more than a set of dead corollaries to which one adheres at risk of repercussion from God.

That's not wisdom. I've heard plenty of dead corollaries through the years, I've probably repeated some of them, but that's not wisdom. That's regurgitation.

Seeking to follow the way of God, to understand God's way for us in light of modern life, that's wisdom.

Sometimes wise people make mistakes. David did. The actions we recounted this morning were shrewd – they were beneath what God called for from him – but they weren't the whole story. The whole story was that David was a man after God's own heart, a man who feared God and sought to be faithful. That is what God saw and that is what God preserved.

Plenty of people make mistakes.

Wisdom is not the absence of mistakes from our lives. Wisdom is the ongoing, deeply personal relationship wherein we seek to follow Jesus Christ. Wisdom is seeking God's way.

I really don't mean to seem pedantic but it bears restating: wisdom isn't always the path of least resistance. It isn't always the most financially advantageous. Wisdom isn't a set of corollaries that reduce faithfulness – an ongoing relationship with God - to a handful of commandments, however biblical they may be.

Wisdom is more.

But then, I don't have to tell you that, do I? You have wise friends?

Some of you are my wise friends.

I love that hymn that we'll close singing today, it's one of my favorites. It's not my favorite because it tells us that there's a way for us to go that is marked by God's Word. It's my favorite because it tells us of what God promises to do with us and for us.

It's a paraphrase of a passage of Isaiah – that when we're in the deep waters, they won't overwhelm us, that God will hold us and that God will even redeem our distress.

It's a wonderful promise. It's the good news of the Gospel.

I saw a cartoon this past week that I shared with some of you... it was a parody on the old *Footsteps* poem that you've probably heard, you know the one where God affirms that in all of our travails, God doesn't forsake us but rather carries us. It's probably bit overused but the point carries.

Well this cartoon added an extra frame. After noting that there was one set of footsteps in the hardest places of life, that there God carried us, in that one more frame, God adds, "that long groove over there, that was where I dragged you for a while."

Ahhh, but isn't that the truth of it?

Sometimes wise people make mistakes. David did. Solomon did.

The point isn't that we're perfect. God can take care of that. The point of wisdom is that we're seeking, that we're searching for faithful answers to whatever falls on our way.

God can handle our imperfection. Wisdom is seeking to live faithfully to what God calls us to do, even if it isn't easy, even when it's costly.

I expect your wise ones know this.

It's quite a choice, isn't it?

Choose wisely.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.