

One of the joys of Christmas is giving and receiving gifts. Everyone enjoys having brightly wrapped gifts to open. Maybe we like to shake a package to guess what’s in it. Maybe we have no clue and we’re totally surprised. But sometimes gifts are not a total surprise. Maybe we got a sneak peek when we opened the hall closet. Or maybe our loved ones asked us directly what we wanted and they bought us exactly what we asked for.

That can be tricky. When someone asks what we want for Christmas, oftentimes we don’t have anything at all in mind. Yet most of us have a short list of items, but we don’t want to appear greedy by asking for a gift that is too expensive. We try to factor the cost into our request. We wouldn’t ask Mom for the new Jaguar coupe we have been admiring. But then we wouldn’t ask her for something like new socks either. Something more middle of the road is best.

Solomon didn’t have that problem with God. In 1 Kings 3:5, we read, *At Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon during the night in a dream, and God said, “Ask for whatever you want me to give you.”* When God asks what we want, we don’t have to worry about limitations. What do you want? If God were to address you today and say, *“Ask for whatever you want,”* how would you respond? What do you want? What would you ask God for? And what did Solomon ask for? He asked for *“a discerning heart,”* and God gave him *“a wise and discerning heart.”*

Our passage begins with a very brief summary of the transition of the kingdom from David to Solomon. We have heard much about David in recent weeks and it is easy for us to assume that this transition was smooth and painless. But, in fact, it was far from that. David had more than one son who wanted the throne after his death. Absalom didn’t want to wait until David died, so he mounted an ill-fated campaign to take the kingdom from David.

Nor did Solomon arrive at the coronation without trouble. In fact, he had to eliminate several key people before he could solidify his grasp on power. Joab had to be killed. And Shemei, who had once cursed David, was killed. And then there was Solomon’s brother, Adonijah who was his main rival for the throne. He had to be killed too. And it took the helpful maneuverings of the prophet Nathan and his mother, Bathsheba, to make sure Solomon would become the new king. So when we read our passage today, let’s not be lured into thinking that Solomon was an innocent young lad who stepped up quietly after David’s death. These are stories filled with intrigue, plots and violence.

But this gory background is not even hinted at in our passage for today from 1 Kings. Instead, we see here a pious young man who seeks to be the same type of devout and beloved king his father was. Most of us remember Solomon only from these early stories about his wisdom and from the fact that he was the one who eventually built the Temple that David had desired to build. Though Solomon’s reign was filled with outward success, it was also characterized by idolatrous worship. It is no accident that the kingdom divides and begins the descent into destruction at the end of Solomon’s reign. It’s a sad commentary on his ineffective leadership.

Solomon’s main shortcoming was his habit of worshipping at high places. Prior to the construction of the temple in Jerusalem, high places were acceptable places of worship. But Solomon builds high places for his wives’ foreign gods and, in fact, made sacrifices there himself. The other problem that Solomon had

was the high taxes he put on the people and requiring forced labor from the people. His building projects were spectacular, but the cost to the people was high. They resented the heavy burden Solomon placed on them. So his reign was not as successful as we might expect.

So our story finds Solomon at one of those high places in Gibeon. As often happens, God comes to Solomon while he is sleeping: *At Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon during the night in a dream, and God said, "Ask for whatever you want me to give you" (3:5).* And in verses 6 through 9, Solomon recounts the steadfast love God had shown to his father David. There is some debate about how old Solomon actually was at this point. I have seen figures that range from 12 to 20. He says, *"But I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties" (3:7).* That seems to be a bit of false modesty. But the commentators say that the context indicates he is talking about the duty of leading the army. Solomon was no soldier, but his gifts of wisdom and administration more than made up for that particular weakness.

Finally, Solomon says, *"So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong" (3:9).* The solution to Solomon's problems as a young man suddenly on the throne of his father's kingdom is to pray to God for WISDOM. This is the first biblical passage to introduce this theme, which will become the hallmark of Solomon's reign. The remaining account of his monarchy is peppered with stories of how Solomon's wisdom made him world-famous and successful beyond anyone's wildest dreams. It pleased God that Solomon had not asked for long life, riches, or the destruction of his enemies. So God gave him wisdom. Then God adds, *"Moreover, I will give you what you have not asked for—both wealth and honor—so that in your lifetime you will have no equal among kings. And if you walk in obedience to me and keep my decrees and commands as David your father did, I will give you a long life."*

Now how's that for a Christmas gift! The lesson is that we should also seek God's wisdom, and the other things will fall into place. Matthew 6:33 puts it this way: *"But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you."* Isn't it very interesting that Solomon asks for wisdom above all else. This is one of the places where the Bible connects with philosophy. Of course, ideas from Greek philosophy saturated the culture in which the New Testament was written. Paul and especially the book of Hebrews reflects very clearly the ideas of the philosophers about an alternate reality, a realm of ideas that the biblical writers referred to as heaven. But in many ways they were talking about the same philosophical ideas.

Here Solomon anticipates Greek philosophy when he asks God for wisdom. The word "philosophy" means "the love of wisdom." The philosophers wanted to know what the good life was. They wanted to know what makes a wise person, a happy person, a genuinely good person.

Socrates and hundreds of other philosophers would pursue wisdom. Socrates' most famous line was "The unexamined life is not worth living." But he also said, "The only true wisdom is in knowing you know nothing..." Seventeenth-century writer James Howell, put it simply, "Some are wise, and some are otherwise." And Calvin Coolidge once said, "Some people are suffering from a lack of work, some from a lack of water, many more from a lack of wisdom."

Someone has said, “Wisdom is a quality of mind, a way of looking at life. It is to see life both horizontally and vertically. As we look deeper we see that all life is connected to everything else and that in turn causes us to take in more—to see wider. Wisdom requires that we arrange what we observe and know and create meaning from it. It is integrated thinking that directs our life.”

I suspect that we recognize a wise person when we see one. But we may not be so clear on how we can become wise. A study of those people through the ages who were considered wise clearly shows that spirituality is a key ingredient to becoming wise.

In an article entitled “Living Wisdom” Troy Dunn writes, “Confucius was a government worker. Socrates was a decorated soldier. Jesus of Nazareth was a carpenter. Muhammad a tradesman. Martin Luther was a monk, Gandhi a lawyer, Mother Teresa a nun and Henry David Thoreau was a Harvard graduate. All of these people have been recognized as being wise, but at first glance it seems that they have little in common. Yet, as we move deeper into the understanding of these individuals, we discover similarities. It does appear that there is some sort of relationship between spirituality and practical wisdom.” (From www.poetrybytroy.com/)

These wise people are people who sought after God. They were people with profound love in their hearts and gentleness about their spirit. They were all selfless people. Solomon lets us know that we must go to God and ask for those qualities. James 1:5 says, “*If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.*” The sections of the Bible that tell us how to live are called wisdom literature and include Job, Psalms, Proverbs, and the book of James in the New Testament that we will be looking at next month in worship.

Solomon’s WISDOM is vividly demonstrated in the story that follows our Scripture for today. There were two women who came to Solomon, both claiming the same child as their own. They both were prostitutes, lived together and had babies about the same time. One of the mothers rolled over on her child in the night, suffocating it. So she surreptitiously replaced her dead child for the other mother’s living child. When that mother awoke, she was shocked to see a dead baby. But on closer examination she knew this was not her child.

So both mothers came to Solomon asking for him to rule between them. Solomon asks for a sword and commands that the baby be cut in two so that each one could have a half. One of the women said, “*Neither I nor you shall have him. Cut him in two!*” But the real mother, of course, protested and insisted that the child remain alive even if it was given to the wrong mother. Solomon wisely knew who the real mother was. Since Solomon had so much wisdom, we should learn from him to ask God for wisdom in decision making.

Another book of the Bible that is attributed to Solomon is the book of Ecclesiastes. This most wealthy and influential of men wisely observed that there is nothing new under the sun. He comments, “*I have seen something else under the sun: The race is not to the swift or the battle to the strong, nor does food come to the wise or wealth to the brilliant or favor to the learned; but time and chance happen to them all*” (9:11).

At the very end of the book he reveals, “*Of making many books there is no end, and much study wearies the body*” (12:12). And then he boils down all of his experience into one final thought, “*Now all has been*

heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind” (12:13).

The thing that matters most in life is reverencing God and obediently living for God. A life like that, reflects real wisdom. God, give us wisdom! Amen.