

Proper 15, Year B  
August 19, 2018  
Saint James, Wheat Ridge

By the Rev. Becky Jones

Once upon a time, there was a wise prince. <sup>i</sup>

When his father, the king, died,  
the prince took the throne,  
married a beautiful princess from a nearby kingdom,  
and settled down to govern his people as best he could.

Soon afterward, God appeared to the young king in a dream,  
and promised to grant him whatever his heart desired.

This young king refused to ask for wealth or power or long life,  
or any of the things you and I would be tempted to ask for.  
Instead, he made a remarkable request:

"I am only a child," he said.

"Therefore give me an understanding mind to govern your people,  
and to discern between good and evil."

God was so pleased with the king's request,  
he promised not only to make him extraordinarily wise  
but also to grant him all those other good things.

In time, the king's reputation for brilliance  
spread across the land.

Nobles traveled from distant lands just to come and hear him speak.

Meanwhile, his wealth and power grew and grew.  
He made brilliant political and economic alliances;  
his military might was awesome;  
he built gorgeous temples and palaces;  
he wrote some of the greatest literature of his time.  
He presided over the Golden Age of his kingdom;  
and after 40 years of peace and prosperity,  
he finally handed over the throne to his son.

We're almost tempted to conclude this story  
by saying "they all lived happily ever after."

But now, let me tell you another story about a prince.

Following the death of his father, the king,  
this prince ordered the murder of his older brother — the rightful heir —  
so that he himself could take the throne.

The first few years of his reign were bloody  
as he carried out vengeance killings  
that his father had requested before his death.

Then, believing himself to be divinely blessed,  
he set out to amass great wealth, prestige, and power.

He was a man who denied himself nothing,  
and his appetites were enormous.

To support his extravagant lifestyle,  
he levied taxes his subjects could not bear.

He confiscated much of the world's written knowledge,  
and hoarded it for himself.

To complete his lavish building projects,  
he conscripted thousands of people into forced labor.

To satisfy his sexual desires,  
he assembled a harem of 700 wives and 300 concubines.

Worst of all, he constructed pagan shrines  
and offered worship to gods who demanded child sacrifice.

By the end of his reign,  
his people could no longer bear  
the crushing burdens of taxation and slavery he placed upon them.

In the wake of the king's indifferent relationship with God,  
his country became a country of idol worshippers.  
His subjects simply forgot what it meant to children of God.

Soon the king found himself surrounded by enemies.  
At last he died,  
denied the long life he had dreamed of.

His son tried to force the disgruntled masses back into servitude,  
but they resisted,  
and a civil war that would last for decades broke out.  
The kingdom split in two,  
and the famed king's once-golden dream

dissolved into chaos.  
Definitely NOT a happily ever after story.

Now, the first king's name was Solomon.  
We heard about his accession to throne of Israel  
in this morning's lesson from 1<sup>st</sup> Kings.  
We all love the story of King Solomon,  
who is famed for his wisdom,  
and for building the Temple.  
Like his father, David, before him,  
he is one of the heroes of Hebrew scripture.

The second king's name is also Solomon.  
In fact, the two Solomons are one and the same.  
So which story is true?  
They both are.  
They're each just based on what today we might call  
"alternative facts."

So let's try this again.  
Once upon a time there was a prince who became a king.  
He had big dreams, as most of us do.  
He had great faults, as most of us do.  
He lived a life marked by success and failure,  
nobility and disgrace.  
He loved God, except the times he didn't.  
He pleased God, except for the times he didn't.  
He left a legacy that was neither perfect nor wretched,  
as most of us will.  
But he was loved by God throughout,  
even when his foolish wisdom shattered God's heart.  
Just as we are.

We are all Solomon.  
We are all a mixture of good and bad,  
of wisdom and foolishness.

On our best days, we are each shining examples  
of what God calls all faithful people to be.

On our worst days,  
we are little better than pond scum.

There's no getting around it.

We are human beings,

which is to say our whole lives are a paradox.

The challenge for us  
is to maximize the good days  
while minimizing the bad days;  
to live into our inherent wisdom,  
while overcoming our inherent foolishness.

All of our lessons today speak to that issue.

How do we live as wise people, not foolish people?

Often, wisdom is equated with knowledge.

But we know mere knowledge is not enough to make us wise.

As someone once observed,

"Knowledge is knowing that a tomato is a fruit.

Wisdom is knowing not to put it in a fruit salad."

Writer and business consultant Paul Boynton

encourages his clients to search for wisdom

by first paying close attention

to what they already know and believe and value.

He quotes a bumper sticker he once saw that says:

"What do you know that you're not letting yourself see?"

The psalmist suggests much of the same by suggesting that

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

What do we know that we're not allowing ourselves to see?

Wisdom begins with noticing,

not closing our eyes to things we just don't want to see.

The Apostle Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, has some suggestions  
for wise living.

He suggests making the most of our time,

staying away from too much alcohol.

It's hard to argue with that.

But then he offers a most intriguing suggestion.

“Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord,  
always giving thanks to God the Father for everything,  
in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Give thanks for everything,  
not just the stuff we like,  
but EVERYTHING.

It's taken me the better part of my life to learn  
that some of the greatest gifts I have ever received  
were things I didn't like very much at the time I received them:  
The impediment that caused me to slow down...  
The lack of funds that forced me to find a better way of doing something

...

The blocked path that led me down an alternative way  
that I would never have otherwise taken.  
Things that at the time I was hardly grateful for,  
but that eventually proved to be great blessings.  
“Give thanks to God the father for everything.”

Then there's our Gospel lesson,  
which has a wholly different take on wisdom.  
John tells us that wisdom became flesh  
and dwelt among us.  
Wisdom came so that hungry and thirsty people  
could finally be filled.

But Wisdom said that the only way we can ever fill ourselves up  
Is to empty ourselves;  
To engage in the sort of self-emptying love that holds back nothing.  
Even if it means dying on a cross.  
For the bread that he offers for the life of the world  
Is his flesh.  
And the one who eats this bread, will live forever.

That's a promise even Solomon himself did not aspire to.

Solomon encountered God in a dream.  
This morning, you are all invited to encounter God  
in a different way.  
You are invited to encounter God

in some bread and some wine,  
and in the fellowship of the faithful.  
Know that God is saying to you  
the same thing God said to Solomon:  
“Ask what I should give you.”  
How will you respond?  
How will you make the most of your time?  
It’s a choice God gives to each of us.  
God help us to choose wisely.  
Amen,

---

<sup>i</sup> Based on an essay by Debie Thomas, [“A King’s Tale,”](#) in Journey with Jesus, Aug. 9, 2015