

1 Kings 3:4-28 Sermon

[Pray with me]

He had to be anxious. He has just been named the third king of Israel. Sure, he knew it was a possibility – he was a prince, after all. But there were older half-brothers than he. He was prepared to serve one of them and continue being a prince. But no... David, his father, the king named him his successor. And now instead of little Sol he's King Solomon. And because David was such a fierce warrior and had taken over most of the surrounding lands Solomon inherited a tremendous wealth. Israel was doing alright and now... Solomon was in charge.

I know we like to complain about how messed up the politics of power are in this country and the world right now, but truth is, this is nothing new. I read again this story of the making of the Kingdom of Israel and it is pretty interesting stuff. It's like "House of Cards" meets "Game of Thrones." Let me give you a quick rundown of what was going on. I'm not going to use names because... well... they're hard to pronounce and if I try they will just confuse you. Check it out....

The great King David was nearing the end of his life. He was pretty much confined to bed and running things from there. Everybody knew his time was short. Dangerous times to be part of the royal family or an important ally to anyone in the royal family. When it comes to fighting over that level of power... they play for keeps. And the power usually went to the one who played the hardest. And though succession usually went to the oldest son, anyone in the bloodline could make a legitimate claim to the throne. And King David had a pretty extensive bloodline. Any of his sons were eligible to take the mantle from him. Now, there was some input from the priests and the other people of power in the government. But all the factions had their own set of folks to push their ascension. So, it really was like fighting a battle. You had to be clever, have a strong team, some luck and be a bit ruthless to achieve the throne back then. And it was not unheard of... in fact, it was common for them to go as far as murder. They would literally assassinate their opponents and anyone that stood in their way.

Sometimes I almost feel sorry for anyone born into that kind of family. It had to be hard at times. I feel the same way sometimes about the rich and powerful today. Yes, they have a lot of advantages but there's some burden that comes with that much wealth and power. And the things they will do to keep that power... I mean we clearly see folks killing each other for power in the so-called 'third world' but we have the same thing happening in our poli-tricks today. Right here in the US of A. Maybe we aren't literally killing each other anymore, or should I say... yet, because I believe if we keep going like we are going we might again come to political assassinations in this country. We may not be

there literally right now, but the bombs this past week are a dangerous signal. Things are getting out of hand. But I don't want to get off into today's mess... I mean political environment right now, but you know what I mean. Let's get back to the story.

David's oldest son took advantage of his father's pending death, got his team together and claimed to be king. Had his own ceremony and everything. And technically he had the right to the throne but not while the king was still living. And David hadn't died yet. So, what he did was risky. And as it turns out it was a bad bet. Word got to Bathsheba that the throne was occupied, and she immediately got to work. She wanted her son, Solomon, to get the seat. Not only would she gain power as the mother of the king, she would also guarantee their safety. Or at least give them a better chance at survival. Besides, David promised it to her. And Solomon would remain a threat to whoever was on the throne. All the brothers were a threat. It was only a matter of time before the new king would get paranoid and Solomon and all who supported him would be killed. So, Bathsheba went to David on his deathbed and reminded him of his promise to her. David called together his priest folks and had the official coronation. David gave Solomon the king's mule, put him in some of the king's clothes and sent him out in public to be the king.

Solomon wasn't a great warrior like his dad. Maybe he as too young... I don't know. He seemed more like the intellectual kind. Like he did well at his studies but could barely pass gym class. I'm sure I'm overstating it but that's how Solomon looks to me. In any case he is now king and must rule. But there's a big difference in getting the job and doing the job. And a job as important as king is one that you have to do right. There are a lot of repercussions if you do it wrong. A lot of people depend on the ruler.

Before he died David called Solomon to him and advised him. Told him exactly who in the court he needed to watch, who he needed to get rid of and how he needed to treat the people. Told him about things David wanted to do but couldn't get to. Things he needed finished. Gave him a crash course on how to be king. Most importantly he counselled Solomon to continue following their God and the law given to them through Moses. David promised that if Solomon did this and lived according to God's word then the country would continue to be blessed. It was a promise God made to David. Told him that as long as they were faithful and lived a proper life God would bless his line and one of his folks would always be king of Israel. As long as they stayed faithful.

I've often wondered why David chose Solomon. Could it be his love for Bathsheba – because after all he did to get her I believe he did come to love her. Scripture makes her out to be a clever and strong

woman. She helped Solomon follow David's advice. And when David finally died, Solomon was completely King of Israel. It was all on him.

That's a lot of pressure on a young person. It's a lot for anybody but particularly someone young with little life experience. He knew he needed to make a big first impression. He needed to come in and do something to let folks know he was in charge. But he didn't have the same heart as his dad. He wasn't a fierce warrior. He wasn't comfortable starting his battles with the sword. Don't get me wrong, he wasn't against it. Violence just wasn't his reflex action. He was a thinker. Solomon knew he needed help. He knew he needed God. So, he went to God in prayer and asked for assistance. One night, God came to Solomon in a dream. In the dream God told Solomon to ask for anything he desired, and God would give it to him.

Can you imagine having an opportunity like that? The creator of all that is tells you to ask for whatever you want, and you'll be given it? I would be like, "I'm gonna need a minute, Lord. Because my list is so long I'm almost embarrassed. Give me a minute to cut some." I might've needed to ask for another day. "Can you come back tomorrow, Lord? I'm gonna need some time to think about this one. Make sure I get the right stuff." Hate to ask God for something, get it and realize it's not what you thought it was going to be. I bet I'm not the only one here who has done that.

But that's not what Solomon did. He quickly surveyed his situation. The kingdom under David was vast and extremely wealthy. Solomon had inherited a tremendous estate. He had nothing to worry about on that front... ever. Neither he nor his family would want for a long time. Not that that would've stopped any of us. Most of us would've still asked for more. But not Solomon. He was a thinker. He took a practical look at things. He knew that he had plenty of wealth. That wasn't what he needed. And he had plenty of power. He could get what he wanted. The other thing he had was a nation full of people who were looking to him for direction. He quickly figured out that if he did good by them and led them well, they would ensure he stayed on the throne and everybody would be getting paid. Everybody would have enough. Solomon figured out if there was one thing he could never have an over abundance of, it was wisdom. If he was able to lead his people justly and in the right way, not only would all his needs continue to be met but so would the needs of all his people. So, when given this opportunity to ask for anything, Solomon asked for a discerning heart. Solomon asked for wisdom.

This pleased God. It was the perfect thing to request. Interesting that it showed Solomon was already wise. He asked for the right thing, showing that he already had a discerning heart that knew right from wrong. A lot of times the things we are always begging God for... we already possess. If we knew

where within ourselves to look we would see that we already have all we need. Solomon asked for wisdom showing that he was already wise. And that pleased God.

Not that asking for more wealth or power would have been wrong. Had he done so I believe God would've given it to him. Sometimes there isn't a right or wrong. Sometimes there is a right and a more right. Solomon's wise request for wisdom was more right. God was so pleased that not only was Solomon's wisdom increased as he requested but God also increased his wealth and power. God rewarded him with more than what he asked for. Why? Because his thoughts were not selfish. Yes, he had a self-interest in doing a good job as king. Bad kings tended to wake up dead... if you know what I mean. But Solomon's real desire was to not do harm to his people.

God gave Solomon the wisdom he requested and our storyteller in this text takes us right into an example of him using it. We all know this story. In fact, it's been used by cultures going back to way before the time of this period. There are examples of similar tales as this in much older texts than the Old Testament. It's the story of two recent mothers who come before the king for judgement. I know tradition calls them prostitutes but I suspect, and many scholars agree, that this is just another example of the toxic masculinity found in our sacred text. So, I will think of them as mothers since that's all that is material to the story right now. Anyway, one lost her baby. And she lay claim to the other lady's baby. I know that may sound pretty messed up, but grief will make people do some outrageous things. She may have genuinely believed that someone messed up and the babies got switched or something. I kinda understand here reaction. I kinda feel sorry for her. I don't support her putting this other innocent woman through all this turmoil, but I understand.

We know what happened. Threaten to split the baby. Real mother cries no. Fake mother cries yes. Misery loves company. Solomon figures out the answer. Everybody goes on their way. A lesson about two good people – King Solomon who used his position to help people instead of himself by asking for wisdom instead of more wealth. And this mother who was willing to let an evil woman have her baby and give it a chance at life rather than see it slaughtered. Two great people and the story is clearly about them and leaves us with the lesson that we should go and be likewise. And that is very true. We should be selfless like them.

There is a faction of scholars who suggest that this story is a political fiction. Its purpose? Look at the last verse.

When all Israel heard the verdict the king had given, they held the king in awe, because they saw that he had wisdom from God to administer justice.

That might lead some to see this story as manipulation. Trying to trick us into thinking a certain way. But the scholars who suggest that this story might be of that type also suggest that the people who heard this originally would have immediately recognized it for what it was. They would have known then, to not pay attention to the vehicle but listen for the lessons. Sometimes the storyteller may be clumsy in their attempt to get you to see their point. But what happens if you just stop and pay attention to their point? What have you lost? Nothing but a little time. And you also might learn something.

There is nothing new or mind exploding in this story. It's an old, well known. A common story. We know it. So maybe what we get from it is a reminder of God's love. This is the story of a few people living very ordinary lives. As king and as mothers. It's a story about stuff that happens to ordinary people. And in those lives and the living they do, we can see God making things right. We can see God blessing those who show love to others. We see God loving us despite ourselves. We see God loving us with no restrictions. God loves us unconditionally.

Amen