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Pentecost 11B

I Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14
Psalm 111
Ephesians 5:15-20
John 6: 51-58

Seeking Wisdom

Imagine that you could wish for anything you wanted. What would you ask for?

A story has it that an angel appears at a faculty meeting and tells the dean that because of his unselfish and exemplary behavior, God is going to reward him with his choice of infinite wealth, wisdom or beauty. Without hesitating, the dean selects infinite wisdom.

"Done!" says the angel, and disappears in a cloud of smoke and a bolt of lightning. Now, all heads turn toward the dean, who sits surrounded by a faint halo of light. At length, one of his colleagues whispers, "Say something."

The dean looks at them and says, "I should have taken the money."ⁱ

Such magical wishes are fun to fantasize about, although there's a nagging little voice in me that says that even if I had a chance to have my fondest wish granted, I would probably choose the wrong thing. Solomon was offered anything he could wish for—absolutely anything—to help him to be a worthy king.

Solomon was only about 20 years old when King David died, and he didn't feel ready for the responsibility of ruling a nation. God came to him in a dream and offered Solomon anything he asked for to equip him to accomplish the great task before him. What should he choose? There were several enemy nations that stood in the way of peace, so perhaps he should ask for his enemies to keel over. He could ask for wealth to enrich the nation and help finance that temple he had promised to build. Perhaps he should ask for a harem of many wives and numerous children to extend his lineage. In the end, he chooses none of these. Instead, he asks for "an understanding mind" with the ability "to discern good and evil" so that he may govern his people wisely.

Of course, Solomon's wisdom became celebrated throughout the Ancient Near East, and even today his name remains synonymous with wisdom. If this story were a fairy tale, perhaps Solomon might have done just as God wished and lived happily ever after. But this isn't a fairy tale; it's a covenant story. That means that God gives us all kinds of opportunities to live up to our side of the covenants we make, including the freedom NOT to live up to God's hopes and expectations for us.

So, as ideally as Solomon's story starts out, it does not culminate in a happy, golden age in which wisdom unfolds through the lives of the people of Israel. Instead, the long history in the Books of Kings is a bloody narrative of infidelity, violence, and sin, leading at last to the calamity of exile in Babylon. In spite of the bright, promising start Solomon makes when he becomes king, somewhere along the way, he lost the thread of wisdom and let down his promise to God.

I said earlier that it's hard to imagine actually being offered our choice of fantastic wishes. What's not hard for us to identify with in Solomon's situation, though, is feeling overwhelmed by a task ahead of us. In the face of the loss of a loved one or undergoing a health crisis or even just raising children from day to day, it's easy to feel overwhelmed. In the face of large, collective challenges, like the economy, our health care system, or our global environment, it's easy for us to feel like Solomon: "I am only a little child."

We see that Solomon starts his reign well, but in the long run it's a mixed success. We could probably say that about most of history. There are few unmitigated successes, so maybe a story that doesn't end "happily ever after" touches our experience. The good news-bad news of God's favor misused and

covenant promises broken may help us understand a few things about meeting some of the seemingly impossible challenges we encounter.

First of all, the story tells us that Solomon was given the gift of confidence that he could do the job that seemed so overwhelming. I don't think Solomon got wisdom dropped on him overnight, like winning the lottery. Young as he was, he was already wise enough to know what he needed, so the seeds of wisdom must already have been there. His dream of receiving a gift from God gave him the confidence that he could do the job that seemed impossible.

In the Disney film "Dumbo," there's a scene in which the little elephant with the outsized ears wakes up in a tree. It turns out that Dumbo flew up there under circumstances he doesn't remember, and he doesn't believe he can really fly. He's scared. He has no idea how to get down. Then one of the crows sitting on a telephone wire gives him a feather and tells Dumbo that as long as he holds onto this "magic feather," he can fly. The "magic feather" does the trick and Dumbo discovers that he really can fly. Of course, the feather held no magic. The power was in Dumbo's belief that he could fly.

In the assurance of our faith and the strength of community, we receive the "magic feather" of confidence that we are equal to the great challenges life throws at us.

A second thing we can glean from Solomon's story is that to do things that seem impossible on the face of them, sometimes you have to think outside the box. An example occurs in I Kings 3, immediately after the passage we read today. Two women came before the king with an irreconcilable dispute, each claiming to be the mother of a baby boy. You would expect Solomon to hear both their stories and decide which woman was telling the truth. But, no, instead, the king calls for a sword and proposes to cut the child in half so that he can be divided between the two women. In a flash, the true mother surrenders her claim so that the child can live. Creative, out-of-the-box thinking.

Knowing what to do when you feel overwhelmed sometimes needs you to stop trying to solve the problem and look at the bigger picture. Once I was wrestling unsuccessfully with hooking up some electronic equipment. Eventually I stopped in frustration. I considered some options. I could read the cryptic instruction book. I could ask an older, wiser person to look at it. Then I hit upon the solution: I called my 12-year-old neighbor, who connected it in about 30 seconds without even looking at the instructions.

Solomon initially succeeded in his impossible challenge of governing because he had confidence in his God-given abilities and he was creative enough to think outside the box. In the long run, though, Solomon broke his covenant promise and he failed. We can also learn something from his failure.

A time-management expert was giving a seminar to a group of business students. He began his presentation by taking a one-gallon wide-mouthed jar and setting it on the table. Then he took a dozen fist-sized rocks and carefully placed them in the jar. When no more rocks would fit inside, he asked, "Is this jar full?" Everyone said, "Yes." Reaching under the table, he pulled out a bucket of pea gravel and dumped it into the jar, shaking the gravel down between the rocks.

Then he asked, "Is the jar full?" The students were starting to catch on, and some of them said, "Probably not." "Good," he said, as he took a bucket of sand from under the table. He dumped sand into the jar, shaking it to get it between the rocks and gravel. Again he asked, "Is the jar full?" "No!" the group shouted in one voice. The man took a pitcher of water and poured water up to the very brim.

Finally, he asked, "What is the point of this illustration?" One bright student said, "The point is, no matter how full your schedule is, if you really try hard, you can always fit some more things into it!" The speaker replied, "NO! That's not the point. The point is: if you don't put the big rocks in first, you'll never get them in at all."

Even with all his wisdom, all his wealth, and all his resources, Solomon forgot about the "big rocks," about justice and mercy for the poor and marginalized members of his empire. He built a great temple and a

great empire, but his temple was destroyed and his people led away into captivity because Solomon neglected God's priorities—he forgot to put the big rocks in first.

The recurrent image of feeding on the Living Bread of Christ says that in community, and in communion with God, we are nourished in the ability to do more than we ever dreamed. The letter to the Ephesians was addressed to people who lived in challenging times, as we do. The Jerusalem Bible translates 5:16: *This may be a wicked age, but your lives should redeem it.* That certainly sounds like an impossible task, at least as daunting as Solomon's job seemed to him. But lest we throw up our hands in despair, let us remember that we are called to dwell not in hopelessness but in hope.

In the presence of this Body of Christ,

we can nourish in one another the confidence that we are gifted with whatever it takes to meet life head-on,

we can remember that we are equipped with the creativity to think boldly and imaginatively,

we can keep our priorities straight by reminding each other to put the big rocks in first.

ⁱ Betsy Devine and Joel E. Cohen, *Absolute Zero Gravity*, Simon & Schuster)