

TEXT: 1 Kings 3:3-14

### A question of wisdom

I've had a couple of long car rides since I saw you last Sunday –to Maine and back. And it reminded me of a question – one asked to pass the time on long car trips, or on 1<sup>st</sup> dates, or even on job interviews. If you could have one wish granted, what would you wish for? Now the clever are quick to answer “That’s easy – I’d wish for more wishes”. But the wise take their time. They take their time to wonder, to weigh out the possibilities, to play out the implications. Because the wise know that it is anything but an easy question.

Just ask Solomon. His father, King David, had died after a 40 year reign. David, hand-picked by God literally out of a field, had conquered enemies beyond Israel’s borders, and created soap operas within them. He’d slain a giant with a single stone, and written hymns – psalms we read today. It would be fair to say that he cast quite a royal shadow.

In which Solomon had come to stand, although not without manipulation and intrigue, as the Davidic soap opera had a spin off. Solomon was politically smart, shrewd, strategic. He had all the makings of a presidential candidate. And, we’re told, he loved the Lord. He went one day to worship at Gibeon, and that night God visited him in a dream, asking “Ask what I should give you”. Solomon, if you could have one wish granted, what would it be?

He could have asked for anything – an undefeatable army, a pox upon his enemies, irresistible good looks and popularity, a budget surplus, the ability to pass anything he wanted through Congress, an ever-friendly media, a long life and reign – even a thousand more wishes. But Solomon didn’t have a quick or clever answer on the tip of his royal tongue.

First he marveled at the love of God through ages past, and God's steadfast relationship with his father David. In that light, he then looked at himself – and admitted to feeling small, child-like, ill-equipped and humbled for this task before him. He reflected enough to know that there was no quick fix, no easy answer, no one magic wish that would address it all. And so, in light of that, he asked for this: "So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong." And God was pleased – both at what Solomon asked for, and what he didn't ask for. And God gave him what he asked – and as a bonus, God also threw in riches and honor. But for Solomon, it was really a question of wisdom.

And for us – in our own lives, and in the life of this congregation – it is a question of wisdom, too. A question like "What?" is a good place to start. The "what" of wisdom is to be selective, to know what is yours to handle and what is not. As William James said, "The art of being wise is the art of knowing what to overlook". It is to choose your battles, to know what you can manage and not to take on more. It is to live the words of the Serenity Prayer: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and the wisdom to know the difference."

"When?" is another question of wisdom. And while the easy answer would be "all the time", remember – wisdom isn't about the easy answer. The "when" of wisdom gets at the importance of timing. Wisdom knows what it is time for. It knows the value of waiting and restraint. Wisdom knows the difference between reacting and responding. Wisdom also knows the value of time, and to make the most of it. To be wise is to sense the moment, to discern the realities now, to see what is called for, and to rise to occasions that come your way. It is both

not letting yourself get rushed into things, and not letting opportunities pass you by. As Theodore Roosevelt said, “Nine-tenths of wisdom is being wise in time.”

Some would say that wisdom starts with the question “Why?” It is the question that calls us to examine and reflect. It asks us to be honest about our own motivations, and what purpose our attitudes and actions will serve. “Why?” is the question that will unlock our imaginations, our sensitivity, and help us better understand others. All of which will feed our wisdom. So before you act, or react, ask yourself “Why?”

“Where?” is a wisdom question, too. It’s a question that puts us in our place and gives us perspective. It keeps us humble, reminding us that, where we stand, we don’t have all the answers or authority. “Where?” also asks the wise question “Where is this going?” What is the goal of a particular course of action or inaction? Where will it get you? And is that where you want to be?

“Who?” is wise? Those who consider the question “Who?”, that’s who. It is the question that understands that words or actions of mine, and yours, have an impact on others. Who is affected by consequences or collateral damage? And who am I to inflict it? The “who” of wisdom reminds us of our God-given connection to others, and invites us to God-like compassion.

What, When, Why, Where, Who – you know what question is left. “How?” How to be wise, how in the world, how in the church, to live out wisdom – it’s a good question. The question “How?” reminds us that it matters how we communicate, how we treat others, how we engage and respond. We can be right, but fail to be wise. We can be justified, yet lack wisdom. The way in which we convey our decisions, our opinions, our actions and attitudes

makes all the difference. As the saying goes “Wisdom packaged in love will be received.

Wisdom packaged in righteousness will be marked return to sender.”

You know the expression “wise beyond your years”? I confess that, as I was growing up, I thought it was “wise behind your ears”. Which now, as we’ve listened to God’s words and Solomon’s, doesn’t seem so wrong. To be wise behind the ears – to listen first. In one translation, Solomon’s request is given as “Give me a God-listening heart”. A God-listening heart – quieting ourselves enough to hear how God may be leading us. Wise behind our ears – listening – is also how to deal wisely with others, equipping us with both information and understanding. To listen first opens us up to new ways than perhaps the one way we’d assumed to be the only way.

Wisdom – God knows we need it – the what, when, why, where, who and how of it. We need it in our own lives, and we need it now in this church’s life. This is a season of discernment, a time of reflecting on realities, and imagining the paths before you. Your Session has sensed the need for wisdom now – and for some reinforcements in discerning. At last Sunday’s Session meeting, they voted to invite a Consulting Team from Presbytery’s Committee on Ministry to seek after wisdom with them. Wisdom in evaluating carefully and honestly what the current realities are – and wisdom in envisioning creatively other, different possibilities beyond now. Their insights and guidance, together with the input from you in our “Let’s Talk” sessions in September, are our best hope for some future here. Together we’ll ask questions about your vision – what God may be calling for from you now, what chapter this may be in your life together, and how to faithfully hear and respond to that with a God-listening heart. I

applaud and affirm your Session for doing what can be one of the hardest, but wisest things we can do --- ask for help.

So in these days, in these lives we live, in this church we are together, let us seek God's wisdom – and let us use it – when and how it is called for. Be wise behind your ears, and have a God-listening heart. We can't have too much wisdom – in the world, or in the mirror. There's no question about that.