

Green Hill Presbyterian Church
“Wisdom For These Days”
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Lessons: 1 Kings 2:10-12, 3:3-14; Ephesians 5:15-20

Many of us grew up with a story that was popularized by Disney and the extraordinary talents of Robin Williams. I refer to the story of *Aladdin*. It was one of the tales in the *Book of One Thousand and One Nights*—The Arabian Nights—and one of the best known. You know the story: an impoverished boy is sent to recover a wonderful oil lamp and, in that process, releases a genie from the lamp who does the bidding of the person holding the lamp: Your wish is my command! *I Dream of Jeannie* took up the same theme with Barbara Eden and Larry Hagman on TV. The fable led to childhood conversations about what one wish we might make if we were given one wish. Sometimes we said we’d wish for money or fame or athletic ability or beauty or popularity. If we had only one wish I thought we should wish for unlimited wishes. If only we had someone with magical powers who could do whatever we asked.

Today we have the story of Solomon the king and his encounter not with a genie but rather with the Creator of the world. The Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night and God said: “Ask what I should give you.” Can you imagine? God comes to you in the middle of the night and you get one wish. What would you ask for? Think about that. Solomon is remembered because he asked for an understanding mind to govern God’s people; Solomon asked for the ability to discern between good and evil and God was pleased. God gave Solomon a wise and discerning mind like no one else.

The irony of this story is that Solomon for all his wisdom actually failed to walk in God’s ways. There may have been a great flowering of Wisdom literature and thought during Solomon’s reign, but that stands in stark contrast to the principles by which he actually ruled. As one scholar writes: “For the Solomon who seeks wisdom at the beginning of his reign is the same Solomon who so oppresses his people that many of them rebel immediately following his death. If it stands for nothing else, the passage from 1 Kings 3 is emblematic of the frequent distance between God’s hopes for human life and the manner in which we, in fact, live.”¹

Celebrating and living the wisdom that comes from God is an everyday ongoing discipline and we are called to decrease the distance between God’s hope for us and the reality of our lives. Paul understood this. Writing to the Ephesians he says: “Be careful how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil. So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

In these difficult times, part of the reason that so many of us spend time pouring over our Scriptures—here at church and at home—is because we continue to believe that God speaks to us through these words and in listening for God’s voice in the midst of our study and prayer, in the midst of our singing God’s songs here in church, God will help us to live as wise people. The Psalmist offers much the same thinking: “Praise the Lord! I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation. Great are the works of the Lord, studied by all who delight in them. Full of honor and majesty is his work, and his righteousness endures for ever. He has

¹ Walter Brueggemann, Charles B. Cousar, Beverly R. Gaventa, James D. Newsome. Texts for Preaching, A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV—Year B. Westminster/John Knox Press © 1993

gained renown by his wonderful deeds; the Lord is gracious and merciful. He provides food for those who fear him;...The works of his hands are faithful and just; all his precepts are trustworthy....The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. His praise endures for ever.”

Right here in the congregation, in the company of the faithful, we give thanks and in singing God’s praise and studying God’s works we discover something of divine wisdom. Don’t be distracted by the use of the word “fear.” When the psalmist says that the Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, he is not suggesting that we need to be cowering in fear like the Cowardly Lion before the great and powerful Oz. Don’t go jumping out one of our windows today. Rather this fear is a kind of reverence, awe, respect and wonder of being a child of God. Peter Wallace says that it is a “humble respect, a deep and thorough acknowledgement of the place of God in the world and in my life. This fear is based on utter trust and a desire to follow God’s way in every area of life. When you start in that place, wisdom begins to flow. You see things in perspective. Our fears of this world fade away in the fear of the Lord. Notice this: the fear of God takes practice. We have to continually learn and work at this proper approach to understanding God which means God knows we’ll get it wrong. We’ll move our eyes off God and onto the fearful things of the world but we must keep practicing. And notice this too: the fear of God is not meant to be taken alone. The whole psalm has a community context. The psalmist says the praise of God comes out of the congregation, the company of the upright. So, coming together before God, learning God’s ways as a community, expressing together God’s love in action to a world in need, that’s how true wisdom is generated in our lives and it begins with fearing God together.”²

There are so many reasons today to give up on the church, but I continue to be a part of this place because here in this congregation, and in other congregations large and small, we still sing God’s song. Here we still pour over God’s word. Here we love and challenge each other to be more and more the people God is calling us to be. Here we encourage each other to keep our eyes on God when we might otherwise get distracted; here we remind each other that Jesus loves you. Here we still go out into the world sharing the extraordinary news of God’s grace and mercy. Here wisdom begins to flow as we practice the fear and praise of God. That is something done best in community. When I can’t sing, you sing for me and when I forget the words, you remind me what they are. Because we know something about God and who God is in this place, we don’t give up; we don’t lose heart.

We live in scary times. So did Solomon. So did the Psalmist. So did Paul. They each discovered that their fears could fade away in the fear of God, the starting point of wisdom. When God asks what we really want, I hope we can all answer that we really want wisdom.

Let us pray, and we pray using words that we will also sing today: “God of grace and God of glory, on Thy people pour Thy power; Crown Thine ancient church’s story; Bring its bud to glorious flower. Grant us wisdom, grant us courage for the facing of this hour. Lo! the hosts of evil round us, scorn thy Christ, assail Thy ways. From the fears that long have bound us, Free our hearts to faith and praise. Grant us wisdom, grant us courage for the living of these days, for the living of these days.” In the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.³

² Peter Wallace, *Wisdom in the Midst of Fear*. http://day1.org/1386-wisdom_in_the_midst_of_fear_peter_wallace_on_the_psalms

³ Harry Emerson Fosdick, *God of Grace and God of Glory*, in *The Presbyterian Hymnal, Hymns, Psalms, and Spiritual Songs*. Westminster/John Knox Press © 1990.