

B Lectionary 20 8.18.24

1 Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14; John 6:51-58

Focus Statement: God responds to our sincere, if inadequate, responses, giving us blessing.

A lot happens in the lectionary if you go away for the summer! Last time I was in the pulpit, the people of Israel were begging Samuel, “give us a king.” I return and David, the most famous and most important of the kings of Israel, is “sleeping with his ancestors,” a euphemistic way to tell us he died peacefully. Which, if you’ve been following along over the summer, was one of the only peaceful things about David’s time in the spotlight. Since I’ve been gone all summer and need a bit of a review myself, let’s start with a recap. The first week I was gone you very briefly met Saul, who was not a great king, to put it mildly. In the early summer, especially compared to Saul, David looked pretty great. He defeated the mighty warrior Goliath with nothing but a stone and a slingshot. He brought the Ark of the Covenant back to Jerusalem. He wanted to build a great house for the Lord. To which God said, no, your son will build me a house. Which, that right there is pretty great news, because it means that one of David’s sons will be king. This represents a huge shift in Israel, because remember what happened to Eli’s sons, and Samuel’s sons. And Saul was so bad, his kid wasn’t even given a thought. Sons have historically not been the best choice so far. But now we finally have a leader that God was like, this guy’s kids get to continue to lead God’s people. Surely this is a good sign for the quality of ruler that David was.

And that lasted for all of a week, because the very next Sunday gave you David and Bathsheba. Not a good look for David, stealing another man’s wife and then getting that man killed in battle so no one would notice. The lectionary skips over a lot of the story, but last week you got a taste of just how out of control David’s family had gotten, when David’s

son Absalom attempted a coup and was subsequently killed in battle. Absalom, fun fact, was David's third son. David's oldest son, Amnon, was killed by Absalom for attacking Absalom's sister. The second son, Chileab, was also killed, though we don't know how. Absalom died in a coup attempt. And if we'd jumped into today's reading at the start of First Kings, we would have learned that the fourth son, Adonijah, also made a play for the throne. Basically the end of David's life was marked by infighting between his sons. And Solomon, who eventually got the kingship, he's the second son of David and Bathsheba, so his lineage wasn't exactly legitimate in the way some might have liked. Also, he got the position because David promised it to Bathsheba, because she'd pulled one over on him. All's fair, considering she hadn't exactly chosen him as a husband, but still. I think one of the reasons we don't read a lot of these stories in worship is because the lectionary committee assumes there are children in churches, and a lot of David's family story is on the more R rated end of the spectrum.

But today, David is sleeping with his ancestors and Solomon has entered the scene. And if we take Solomon solely from this reading, he seems a pretty great guy. He was remembered for his great wisdom, he ruled over the apex of Israel's power and wealth, he built the temple to the Lord that David was unable to construct. He, as our text tells us this morning, "loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of his father David; only..." Did you catch that "only" that the writer of First Kings snuck in there? "Only he sacrificed and offered incense at the high places." This is an easy issue to miss unless you're well versed in ancient near east cultic tradition, which I only caught because I read it in a commentary, but what this line here tells us is that Solomon, wise, and faithful, and God-fearing Solomon, also hedged his

bets and worshiped at the altars of other gods. And worshiping at the altars of false gods was not Solomon's only weakness. The temple he built? It took him a while, because first he had to construct a pleasure palace for his wife, the daughter of the Egyptian Pharaoh, just one of the very many foreign women whom Solomon loved, at a time when marrying foreigners was outlawed for fear it would turn people away from God. In fact, Solomon's, appreciation, shall we say, of foreign women will lead to the end of his kingship in chapter eleven.

But that's then. Today we have the newly crowned King Solomon worshiping at Gibeon, where he had an encounter with God in a dream, much like the dream encounters his ancestors Abraham and Jacob had experienced. In this dream, God asked Solomon what God should give him. And instead of asking for wealth or power or glory, Solomon asked for wisdom so that he could govern God's people well. Which is, of course, the exact right answer for a wise and compassionate ruler, and God rewarded Solomon with wisdom, and also with "both riches and honor all [his] life," a pretty great deal.

Standing on its own, this passage of scripture gives us an admirable, if rather boring, picture of Solomon. This passage paints Solomon as humble and faithful, seeking wisdom so that he can serve others well. "Be like Solomon," is the tempting takeaway from this passage. But remember the whole first half of this sermon, where I outlined for you, in as vague of terms as I could because I am a pastor preaching a sermon on a Sunday morning, and also my kid is in the room. Solomon was not a stock character picture of wise and humble faith. He, like his father David, like every character in the Bible with the exception

of Jesus, like every single one of us, was complicated. He had good characteristics, and some that were really, truly awful. He was, in a word, human.

Placing this lectionary passage back in the context of the rest of scripture does a couple of key things for us. First, it reminds us of the danger of lifting sections of a person's story. As residents of a swing state, I think this lectionary text is an especially pertinent reminder about the need for context. I watch a lot of TV at this particular moment in my life, and I've been struck by the sheer number of campaign ads. Each very deftly portraying a particular candidate as either a divinely inspired hero or the basest of evil villains. As we go through the fall and are increasingly bombarded by ads and talking points, let First Kings 3:3-14 remind you of how easy it is to pull pieces of a story. Here let me offer a brief commercial interruption for the learning opportunity the synod is offering this fall on Zoom, "Witnessing to Christ and Love for Neighbor in an Election Year." I read the article in the August Trumpet, which I wrote, by the way, and it vastly undersells the class. What I wrote sounds mind numbingly boring and egg-heady. It won't be. Rev. Amy Reumann is an interesting human and an engaging speaker, and I promise the actual experience will be an engaging exploration of how our faith engages and informs our civic life. Basically, if you've been feeling overwhelmed about what it means to be a person of faith in our current political climate, this is a great opportunity to wrestle with that.

So there's your helpful life application from this text. This text also gives us some personal affirmation, which is this. Solomon is a complicated character. He was wise and humble and a good leader. But he was also a deeply flawed human. More than showing how God

rewards the faithful, this passage demonstrates how God responds to earnest, imperfect, and deeply flawed love. Solomon loved God, for sure, but he wasn't perfect, far from it. God knew Solomon's whole story, not just the portion today's lectionary gave us, and God responded by granting Solomon wisdom anyway. God gave Solomon wisdom not because Solomon deserved it, but because giving blessing is who God is. God responded to Solomon's sincere, flawed faith with blessing, and God responds to us with blessing as well. Let this passage both remind and comfort you to ask boldly of God and trust God's faithfulness, even, especially, in the face of your own shortcomings. Because God responds to us as God responded to Solomon, with undeserved blessing. Thanks be to God who sees past the carefully curated and filtered parts of our lives to the messy whole story, and loves us just the same. Amen.