

“Hearing With Our Hearts”

A man walks into a restaurant with a full-grown ostrich behind him. As he sits, the waitress comes over and asks for their orders. The man says, "I'll have a hamburger, fries and a coke," and turns to the ostrich, "How about you?" "I'll have the same," says the ostrich. A short time later the waitress returns with the order. "That will be \$12.40 please," and the man reaches into his pocket and pulls out the exact change for payment.

The next day, the man and the ostrich come again and the man says, "I'll have a hamburger, fries and a coke," and the ostrich says, "I'll have the same." Once again the man reaches into his pocket and pays with exact change. This becomes a routine until late one evening, the two enter again. "The usual?" asks the waitress. "No, this is Friday night, so I will have a steak, baked potato and salad," says the man, "same for me," says the ostrich. A short time later the waitress comes with the order and says, "That will be \$32.62." Once again the man pulls exact change out of his pocket and places it on the table.

The waitress can't hold back her curiosity any longer. "Excuse me, sir. How do you manage to always come up with the exact change out of your pocket every time?" "Well," says the man, "several years ago I was cleaning the attic and I found an old lamp. When I rubbed it a genie appeared and offered me two wishes. My first wish was that if I ever had to pay for anything, I would just put my hand in my pocket and the right amount of money would always be there."

"That's brilliant!" said the waitress. "Most people would wish for a million dollars but you'll always be as rich as you want for as long as you live!" "That's right. Whether it's a gallon

of milk or a Rolls Royce, the exact money is always there," says the man. The waitress asks, "One other thing, sir, what's with the ostrich?" The man sighs, pauses, and answers, "My second wish was for a tall chick with long legs who agrees with everything I say."

If I asked for a show of hands, I bet that almost everyone here would have to admit that they have wished for a magic lamp, a genie, a fairy godmother or maybe a winning lottery ticket at least once in your life. It really is just human to fantasize about what you would do if you truly could have ANYTHING you want. And that is precisely the scenario with Solomon in our Scripture lesson this morning.

After King David's death, his son Solomon became king. And the way he began his kingship is an example to anyone who is in the midst of changes in their life or in the process of decision-making. Fall is generally a season of change – kids move from kindergarten to first grade or high school to college. Some of you may find yourselves as empty nesters for the first time. Football fans are waiting to see how this year's team will look. National elections are on the horizon.

I have also had some changes in my personal life. Our daughter and her husband just gifted us with our second grandson. Our son and his wife got transferred back to Greenville and are living with us until their house in Columbia sells. Not empty nesters anymore!

This congregation is facing changes too. We are already in the process of finding new leadership in our Christian Education area since Joan Greene will be leaving us. We just elected new officers to serve on the Session. And of course, being in an Interim time means that soon you all will be forming a Pastor Nominating Committee and taking steps into the next chapter of your journey with God. So all of these changes weighing on my mind must be what caused the Holy Spirit to lead me to this story about how Solomon begins his reign.

Of course, as Christians we don't have to wish for a genie because God has instructed us to come to Him in prayer with our wishes and concerns. This is exactly why Solomon has gone to a high place to worship before he starts his work. But let me clear – I do not in ANY way mean to imply that prayers are simply wishes. **Prayer is seeking God's will, not purely stating our desires.**

Jesus says clearly in our New Testament passage, "If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you." I understand this to mean that when we stay close to our savior and seek his wisdom for our lives, he will bless us through our prayers. And the blessings we receive will be in keeping with the will of God. So perhaps it will be helpful if we look more closely at Solomon's methods and God's responses as we all seek to deal faithfully with the changes in life that come our way.

The first thing I noticed is the humility of Solomon. His approach to God is one of being completely unqualified to be king. Before he responds to God with any requests he says, "O LORD, my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David, although I am only a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in."

I remember the first time I was left alone with our first child Katie in the hospital. It was the middle of the night. All of my family had gone home. I was exhausted from a long labor and then surgery and the nurse brought this tiny little vulnerable HUMAN BEING who was COMPLETELY dependent on ME and left her in my arms. And I thought, "Now what – how did I get into this?"

Since she turned out to be a beautiful, healthy woman with two children of her own, I guess we can say that God helped me figure it out! But it was an overwhelming moment and I could not even PRETEND to know what I was doing. This is what Solomon expresses to God.

Even though he had seen the successes and failures of his own father as a ruler, a soldier and even a man, he himself had not had to walk this path before. So he turned to God in complete dependence on Him and said, “I have no idea how to take the next step.”

This is a valuable example for us to follow, not only as individuals or families, but as a congregation. It helps us remember that our successes depend on trusting in God for guidance and not simply on our own wishes. If we go to God with an honest desire to serve, as well as an open mind and an uncluttered heart, there is more room for God to send us out with Heavenly wisdom in our search for answers.

So after Solomon makes it clear that he is trusting in God’s vast knowledge and love, he then asks for only one thing. WISDOM! Solomon doesn’t ask for worldly riches or a long life or victory over his enemies. He asks for wisdom. And friends, wisdom is not the same thing as knowledge. I used to have a sign hanging on my refrigerator that said, “Wisdom doesn’t come from study. Knowledge does. Wisdom comes from showing up for life.” Solomon knows that he will encounter many experiences and struggles so he asks to be made wise. But in truth, Solomon asks for a specific KIND of wisdom.

You see, in the original Hebrew what he really says is “Give me a hearing heart.” I believe that Solomon means that he wants to seek FIRST the good of God’s kingdom, the just rule of God’s people and not his own private interests or gain. He wants to do what is best for the WHOLE and not just what pleases him.

This is a beautiful example for any of us who are dealing with changes in our lives, making decisions or facing dilemmas that we feel we are not equipped to handle. To seek God’s wisdom and to live in God’s will. Yet, I have found in my own life that I can convince myself that just about ANYTHING is the will of God if I want it badly enough. It is easy to convince

ourselves that we need what someone else has, or that we should follow an easier path or can refuse to get involved in a conflict by saying, “God wants me to live a life of joy”. But I think we can be living in the danger zone by taking this approach. Maybe that is why Kent Crockett wrote in his book I Once Was Blind But Now I Squint, “The grass is always greenest in the center of God’s will.” Because it takes God’s wisdom to understand God’s will and then it takes courage to follow it.

I also believe that Solomon’s request for a listening heart is a reminder to us that God really CARES about what is going on in *our* hearts. Solomon teaches us that when we truly seek God’s will, we are letting God know that we are making Him our highest priority in life. And this is the only way to make decisions, affect changes or simply deal with the task of every day living while seeking to be a true disciple of God.

Perhaps in light of the choices that continually challenge us as individuals and as a congregation, Solomon’s prayer is a reminder that we cannot make decisions by trying to work God into *our* life story. Instead we are called to live and work and worship with the conviction that we are blessed to be a part of *God’s* story. God delights when we desire to live with **that** focus in mind.

Solomon's story also teaches us that even if we ask for a listening heart, it does not mean that our lives will be perfect. As we seek God’s will in our lives, for our families, in our decision making as a church, we **will** make mistakes along the way. But God uses our imperfections, our weaknesses and even our sinfulness to accomplish His task and draw us closer to His presence.

And I also believe there are times when God allows us to sink into the miry clay deep enough for us to ask for help. When Peter began to walk on water it was because he was focused on the living Christ and he was doing just fine. But when he got distracted and looked at the

world around him, he began to sink. However, it was ONLY THEN that he cried out for help. So when we get complacent and begin to think our wisdom is our own, when we listen ONLY to our own hearts, God may shake our world up a little to remind us who is in charge.

And often our lives are impacted when someone else has *not* sought God's will. After all, if we were not affected by our sins and the sins of those around us we would not have needed God to send Jesus Christ to save us. Our very salvation is a reminder of our need to depend on God alone.

On May 8, 1984, Presbyterian minister and missionary Benjamin Weir was in Lebanon and was kidnapped by Shiite Muslims at gunpoint. During his 16 month imprisonment, he was constantly threatened with death. On his first night in captivity he was made to face a wall where his mask was removed and he was forced to wear a pair of ski goggles with the eye holes covered in thick, adhesive tape. He could see no light and in his mind the sun had set.

Then he remembered a hymn, "Abide with me – fast fall the eventide." He wrote, "I felt vulnerable, helpless, lonely. I felt tears in my eyes. Then I remembered the promise of Jesus, "If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask what you will and it shall be done unto you."

Right then Weir prayed, "Lord I remember your promise and I think it applies to me, too. I've done nothing to deserve it as a free gift. I need you. I need your assurance and guidance to be faithful to you in this situation. Teach me what I need to learn. Deliver me from this place and this captivity, if it is your will. If it is not your will to set me free, help me to accept whatever is involved. Show me your gifts and enable me to recognize them as coming from you. Praise be to you."

For the next 16 months, his hope and joy was that he was not simply abiding in captivity but that we he was abiding in Christ. This enabled him to bear fruit in the darkest of days. And I

would submit that it was because his listening heart was so attuned to God's will, that he was able to survive his ordeal and live out his days as a witness for Christ. So may it be the prayer of all us to seek God's will and have the courage to abide in it as we walk through this life and wait in hope for the life that is to come. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.