

## ***Even Solomon in all his Glory***

I Kings 3:3-28

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October 26, 2014

"Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these." (Matt.6:28-29; Luke 12:27) The Gospels of Matthew and Luke include this reference to Solomon in Jesus' teaching about worry and anxiety over food, drink and clothing. Solomon is known and revered for his great wisdom and his extravagant wealth--he lacked nothing. Yet, these verses give a slightly different picture, one in which Solomon's glory, which he worked hard for, pales in comparison to the way that God has clothed the world--flowers which don't do anything related to their own existence.

The story of Solomon is a story with many layers and complexities. For the most part, we have a single, glorified image of Solomon: he was wise, and because he asked for wisdom instead of riches or a long life, God honoured his request and also rewarded him with riches and power. And certainly, the first part of chapter 3 shows Solomon at his best. In a dream, God appears to him and asks him what he would like. God says, "Ask what I should give you." Essentially, God will give Solomon anything he wants, he just has to ask!

Solomon then recounts the steadfast love and faithfulness that God showed to David, who walked in righteousness, who followed God faithfully, whose heart was always open to God. Solomon recognizes the great gift it is that he is now king, following his father. He recognizes his own inexperience--he calls himself a child, but he isn't referring to his age--it is an expression of humility. In a moment of wisdom, he recognizes the great responsibility he has to lead this people, and he asks for a discerning heart, one that is able to discern between good and evil. He recognizes that all the other things he could have asked for--riches, honour, long life--would not help him to lead and govern this people.

And so, showing wisdom even in the asking, he prays for wisdom. And God grants him wisdom and more. God, so pleased that Solomon did not ask for everything he could have, gives him in addition to wisdom, riches and

honour. God also grants a conditional gift--if Solomon will walk in God's ways, keeping God's statutes and commandments, as his father David did, then God will grant him a long life.

But under this story, or behind this story, lies a story that could well be the script for any current television show about the White House, or a novel of intrigue and suspense. The 2 chapters before this one tell of how Solomon came to be on the throne, and it involves deception and murder. It involves backroom deals and private conversations, parties lobbying for the ear of the dying King David. Really, who needs television or Netflix when one can just read the Bible!?

1 Kings begins with David's son, Adonijah, his oldest living son by his wife, Haggith, declaring to himself that he will be king. By this time, David is very old, and needs a young, beautiful companion to lie with him to keep him warm. Her name was Abishag, and she was very beautiful. We are told that she became the king's attendant and served him, but the king did not know her sexually. (1:4) So David is old, and Adonijah decides to consult with his supporters, Joab and Abiathar the priest, and they support his decision to be king. So they sacrificed sheep, oxen and fatted cattle, and he invited his brothers--all but Solomon--and other royal officials, but not the prophet Nathan or Benaiah or Solomon's warriors to the celebration in which he becomes king.

Word reaches Nathan that this is happening, and he goes to Bathsheba and asks her to go in to David and let him know what is happening, and that he should make Solomon king, instead of Adonijah. So that is what she does. David makes arrangements for Solomon to be king, and the celebration begins.

Of course, the celebration is loud and joyous, and when Joab hears all the noise and festivities coming from the city, he realizes what is happening, and tells Adonijah. Adonijah is afraid of Solomon and what he will do to him, and he would have been fine, until he asked Solomon if Abishag could be his wife. At that request, Solomon has him killed. Joab is allowed to live, as long as he doesn't leave his house, but when he does leave, he too, is killed.

That's just a quick synopsis of how Solomon became king. I'd invite you to read it for yourself, or if you want the longer drama of David's life, and the backroom dealings of his reign, you'll find them in the books of Samuel.

So, indeed, Solomon's past and his arrival on the throne are complex and multi-layered. It is not only a story of wisdom, but it's also a story of deception and murder.

If we read the text closely, though, we see that the narrator of these stories also has an ambivalent view of Solomon--certainly, the narrator sees the wise king. But included also are references to the fact that Solomon worshipped and made sacrifices at the "high places", a reference to the altars of foreign deities. We are told in 3:2 that the people were sacrificing at the high places because no house had yet been built for the Lord. In the previous verse, we're told that Solomon was working on his own house--something he was doing before he built the house of the Lord. His delay in building a place of worship meant that the worship of foreign gods was still happening. We see the ambivalence in 3:3: Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of his father David; only, he sacrificed and offered incense at the high places.

We are also told that Solomon made a marriage alliance with Pharaoh king of Egypt--a disturbing fact, given that Egypt and its Pharaoh enslaved Solomon's ancestors. Solomon married Pharaoh's daughter and brought her to the city of David, until he finished building his own house and the house of the Lord.

The story of how Solomon dealt with the 2 mothers and the baby is held up as an example of Solomon's wisdom--v 28: All Israel heard of the judgment that the king had rendered; and they stood in awe of the king, because they perceived that the wisdom of God was in him to execute justice. And there is much about this story that shows creativity and the ability for Solomon to think on his feet and determine who the real mother is.

But there is also something disturbing about this story; and I confess that I come to the story as a 21st century female and mother. What concerns me is not a concern at all for the narrator. The narrator is focused on Solomon and his wisdom, and uses this story to illustrate that. But my ears hear a story of

power and vulnerability. Here are 2 women--prostitutes, the lowest rung on the social ladder--who come to the king, who sits at the highest rung on the social ladder. On the one hand, the fact that he hears their case at all is commendable--it shows that he truly does hear cases from anyone, not just the rich and privileged. But because they are the lowest rung on the ladder, they are especially vulnerable. And perhaps the baby who is held up before the sword is the most vulnerable of all. It is a frightening and horrific picture--if this happened in a courtroom today, the judge would be disbarred. It would not be an example of wisdom, but of utter disregard for human life. What would Solomon have done if the real mother had not spoken up when she did? And why did he assume only the real mother would speak up? Most grieving parents I have known would do anything to avoid other parents having to experience the death of a child. Most grieving mothers would speak up for the life of a child, even if that child is not her own. Or sometimes, grief makes it impossible for us to speak, for us to even summon the energy to take action. What would Solomon have done if neither mother had spoken, or if they both had spoken? Was he really prepared to follow through on his threat, and if so, what kind of wise king is that? Rather than a display of wisdom, this serves only to show the incredible power the king has to give and take away life; and the incredible vulnerability and powerlessness of his subjects.

Again, these are questions I/we bring to this story. They are not the point of the story for the narrator. But I think they are one part of the lens with which we view, and perhaps with which we need to view, Biblical characters and stories. These are not single narrative stories, but stories with layers and complexities that serve to illuminate, cloud and disturb us.

I, for one, am grateful for those layers, because I know myself to be a person of complexity and layers, just as all of us are. We are not defined by a single narrative, or at least, most of us hope not to be defined by that one story of failure or shortcoming. Heaven knows we have a hard enough time with the internal narratives and tapes that run through our minds about the kind of person we are. While we don't want others to define us by our shortcomings, and we certainly don't define others by their shortcomings, we tend to define ourselves by our shortcomings and weaknesses. We tend to let the single narrative dominate our own thoughts.

And our focus on those shortcomings and weaknesses can tend to paralyze us, or keep us from doing new things, or pushing ourselves to move into experiences that are uncomfortable. They can become our excuses for not changing, or not stretching ourselves, or trying new things, or leaving a job that is no longer fulfilling. We can let our shortcomings define us to the point where they impair our ability to make necessary changes in our lives--certainly they impair our ability to see ourselves as greater than the sum of our weaknesses.

And that is the gift that Biblical characters like Solomon give to us. We read his story, and we see a man who on the one hand really does desire wisdom and really does want to do the right thing. However, he is also man of expensive tastes, which compete with his desire to do the right thing--4:22 tells us that his provision for one day was 30 cors of choice flour, 60 cors of meal, 10 fat oxen, and 20 pasture-fed cattle, 100 sheep, besides deer, gazelles, roebucks and fatted fowl. He had 40,000 stalls of horses for his chariots, and 12,000 horsemen, who each had to supply barley and straw for the horses and swift steeds in his charge. We are told that he composed 3000 proverbs and 1005 songs, so his extravagance also had a creative outlet. But he also conscripted his people in forced labour to build the temple. His appetite also included foreign women: chapter 11 says that he loved many foreign women along with the daughter of Pharaoh--among his wives were 700 princesses and 300 concubines! And his love for these foreign women caused his heart to turn away from God and turn toward foreign gods. His expensive tastes led him away from the path of wisdom and away from God.

In chapter 9 God comes to him again in a dream, only this time, God alone speaks. God again tells Solomon that he needs to keep the statutes and commandments; that he needs to walk with God in integrity and faithfulness, as his father David did. If he does that, then God will establish Solomon's throne over all of Israel forever. But if he turns away from God, then all of Israel will be cut off from the land, and the house of the Lord will become a heap of ruins.

And yet, in the midst of these narratives, God still appears to Solomon, God still uses him, and God still calls him. In many ways, he is not unlike all the

other flawed people whom God calls and uses. God takes weakness and turns it into strength. God meets us in our places of vulnerability and fear, and empowers us to step out in courage and strength. God sees even our most broken and flawed places, and loves us as we are.

Perhaps this is not so much a story of Solomon's wisdom, as it is a story of God's wisdom. The wisdom of God sees whole people where the world sees flawed and broken people. The wisdom of God sees potential and strength where we see only weakness and vulnerability. The wisdom and love of God sees the narratives and stories of our lives in all their complexity and beauty, and incorporates those stories into the story of God's mission in the world.

"Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these."  
May we trust in the wisdom of God, which clothes the lilies of the field, feeds the sparrows and loves us far beyond what we could ever ask or imagine.  
Thanks be to God!