

SOLOMON'S HERITAGE

Mary Hall

August 16, 2015

1 Kings 2: 10-12; 3: 3-14

John 6: 51-58

Forgiveness has been a theme that we have danced with on these Sunday mornings for a while now. Sally talked about it last week when she discussed David and Absalom. I partnered with it back in June when Jesus brought the women back to life. And now I am going to get to it again, but not, I think, for a while.

Because after all, Solomon has inherited a lot of revenge. You will remember from last week, when David says those heartrending words, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!" Nothing has ever been so sad. Nothing, despite the fact that Absalom has been vain and disloyal and has participated in a revolution against his father. And now, in our reading for this week we have moved on to the reign of another son, Solomon, over a united Israel, for it is not until after Solomon's death that the kingdom is split into two, the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. And so this seems like progress, for we think of words like "united" as being associated with progress. David had left for Solomon a legacy of the continuing transformation of a tribal and nomadic people, a people given to generations of blood vengeance, into an established nation, one with an ongoing code that could be relied upon. Solomon, however, carved a record fraught with many misdeeds, by our own lights certainly, but even by those of his own times. His "story ends with personal corruption to pagan gods and goddesses whose practices included child sacrifice, and national catastrophe when his son (Rehoboam) provoked a civil war that ripped the country apart and that only ended

with defeat by Assyria and Babylon.” * If Solomon was so careless with his power, we have to ask ourselves about the nature of that wisdom that he is given by God and for which he is known so well. Like most things, we have to look at it in the context of the times and think about how it might be different from what people were used to, and how the way that Solomon began to govern promised a new kind of life.

And, we also have to think about what is going on around us right now and ask ourselves if we are so very much different from these ancient times.

And then, what does Jesus have to say about all of this?

In the reading from the book of First Kings today, we hear that Solomon had a dream in which the Lord appeared to him and asked him what he wanted.

Simply that... “What should I give you?” And Solomon says those beseeching words, “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... Give your servant... an understanding mind... able to discern between good and evil.”

Well, first of all we are really glad that he asked that question the way he did. Haven't you grown up on fairy tales like I have in which the poor peasant does something miraculous by accident and gets to ask for whatever he wants? And he ends up blowing his good fortune by asking for the wrong thing? Like the tale of the fisherman who lets the fish go and the fish is actually a prince who promises him riches as his reward and in the end takes it all back after the fisherman gets too greedy? Solomon doesn't do that. He asks the question really wisely because he asks for something that is going to help him govern his people in a new way, something that will help him in ways that riches and military strength never could

do. And God promises him wisdom, but that's because, it seems, Solomon was wise to begin with. He asked for how to question, how to see.

But now let's look at what happened right before this Q and As, happenings that will make Solomon's request even more meaningful. The lectionary people in their wisdom have not made this bit part of our reading, but we should summarize it to understand more fully.

Solomon's older brother Adonijah, who had wanted to be king, has made a request for a wife through the conniving Bathsheba, a request that Solomon sees, wisely, as challenging to his power. So, he has Adonijah killed. Then that old, crafty soldier Joab, of whom we've talked before, and whom David had told Solomon to get rid of, Joab takes sanctuary in the temple and Solomon has him killed too. And why? Because years ago, Joab had killed others and, as Solomon says, "so shall their blood come back on the head of Joab and on the head of his descendents forever." And then there was the issue of a guy called Shimei, another threat because he too has alliances and vengeance that bode no good for Solomon's reign, and eventually he has Shimei killed also.

These events that occur just before the dream are so complicated that it's no wonder Solomon asks for the ability to sort it all out. But it seems that there is more than that going on, that there is really the possibility of a shift to a new way of doing things, that God recognizes and encourages. Think about the dreadfulness of the blood vendetta that Solomon swears on Joab and his descendents. The curse is that forever his descendents will be responsible for the killings that Joab committed. And this was not unique, of course, to this situation. Throughout the stories of the Bible, in stories of old cultures throughout our history, indeed, even today, we see families, communities and nations torn apart because there is ancient

vengeance that must wend its way down through the generations. Imagine having a baby boy and knowing that that child would eventually have to go out and kill someone, or be killed himself, for some ancient murder, a murder or injustice about which he has, perhaps, little understanding at all. Imagine knowing that every mother's son would in some way be ruled by fear and revenge. Imagine the horror of living in a society in which that was the norm.

And we do! Even in our own society right now, this very week, we had people protesting at the year's anniversary of Michael Brown's death in Ferguson, and a young black man apparently shot at a police car and was apparently shot in return. I say apparently, because that word too, is part of this now ritualized event. In Ferguson, as I hear on the news, people expect the protesters, who seem largely peaceful, but they also expect the violent people, that that too is part of the tradition that has now become part of Ferguson. So, we have our own tribalized killings and revenges that will go on and on and on, unless we can find a way to be discerning and to be individually forgiving. It seems that it has to be more than law, though we need law too, but something within ourselves that will subdue these outbursts.

We saw a play called *An Iliad* last Sunday, at Boscobel in Cold Spring, a one man rendition of the story of the Trojan War. In part of it we hear of how Achilles, the Greek hero, manages to subdue his addiction to rage, (they are all addicted to rage, the storyteller tells us) so that he can come out of his tent and talk to Priam the king of Troy, and give him the body of his dead son, Hector. In another part, the storyteller takes fifteen minutes to recite the wars that have occurred since Troy - the Peloponnessian War, the Hittite War, Corinthian War, Macedonian War, Yellow Turban Rebellion, Norman Conquest, Hundred Years War, American

Revolution, Russian Revolution, World War II, VietNam, Syria, Ukraine. One is numbed by the seeming endlessness of this list. It was a marvelous play, and one of the things that struck us was that though the technical aspects of wars have changed quite a bit in the three thousand and some years since the Trojan War, perhaps not so very much else has. We are still given to gruesome vendettas, still anxious to spring to revenge so as not to seem afraid.

David, and Solomon after him, seem to be feeling their way toward a society in which the government is responsible for justice, in which the responsibility for blood is taken away from the individual and given to a larger and, one hopes, more objective body, one in which the goal is order and security rather than personal revenge and honor.

But that is a society, in a way, such as ours. But if it is like ours, much seems to have broken down, or never to have been established, for events such as those in Ferguson occur with tormenting frequency.

Jesus, too, talked of a new way and he was a revolutionary in many, many ways, as Bob has talked of earlier. The passage that we read today is troubling in some respects because it alludes literally and specifically to the eating of Jesus' flesh and the drinking of Jesus' blood. We talk in this church about alternative interpretations of communion, that is, the literal transformation of the bread and wine; but also the commemorative celebration; the celebration of the love of God, and the celebration of community.

This passage must also make us think about forgiveness, however. Jesus is also pointing to another way, to a new life, a life without generation after generation of revenge and bloodshed. He is saying take my blood and my flesh. I atone for all

wrongs and for all sins. And those are wrongs and sins that are committed by us but also those committed against us, so that we have no reason to be indulging in these endless blood vendettas, for the wrong has been taken away. Jesus has absorbed it by his sacrifice... he says that he has given his body and his blood so that we might live. He is offering the bread of forgiveness so that people might move on and look to a future with optimism and expectations of life, not to the hell of eternal recriminations and revenge.

If we are to take advantage of these lessons that Solomon and Jesus have brought to us, we have a lot of work to do. We can't be forever keeping score for all the bad things that have been done to us. Indeed, we can all see in the news every day how these resentments grow like a cancer and absorb the entire life of a people until all they can think about is how to wreak revenge on those that they have learned to hate. The lessons of Jesus and Solomon are to let go of those resentments, that it is not appropriate or right for us as individuals to right these wrongs. If we hold onto them we will be forever imprisoned in an endless spiral of bitterness at the very least, in killing and warfare that lasts for generations at the most extreme.

If we let go, we can be free.

We've been talking about David for a long time, and now we've come to the place in the story of ancient Israel where he has died. He has left a legacy to his son Solomon, Bathsheba's son and the next king, that is not without problems. But is it also a legacy of the continuing transformation of a tribal and nomadic people, a people given to generations of blood vengeance, a transformation of that people into an established nation, one with an ongoing code that can be relied upon. Solomon, however, carved a record fraught with many misdeeds, by our own lights certainly, but particularly by those of his own times. His "story ends with personal corruption to pagan gods and goddesses whose practices included child sacrifice, and national catastrophe when his son (Rehoboam) provoked a civil war that ripped the country apart and that only ended with defeat by Assyria and Babylon."

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In the wonderful Old Testament reading today, we hear that Solomon had a dream in which the Lord appeared to him and asked him what he wanted.

*Clarendon, Don: "King Solomon, Politics and Power", web posting 8/14/06

Simply that... "What should I give you?" And Solomon says those beseeching words, "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... Give your servant... an understanding mind... able to discern between good and evil."

Well, first of all we are really glad that he answered that question the way he did. Haven't you grown up on fairy tales like I have in which the poor peasant does something miraculous by accident and gets to ask for whatever he wants? And he ends up blowing his good fortune by asking for the wrong thing? Like the tale of the fisherman who lets the fish go and the fish is actually a prince who promises him riches as his reward and in the end takes it all back after the fisherman gets too greedy? Solomon doesn't do that. He answers the question really wisely because he asks for something that is going to help him govern his people in a new way, something that will help him in ways that riches and military strength never could do. And God promises him wisdom, but that's because, it seems, Solomon was wise to begin with. He asked for how to question, how to see.

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These events that occur just before the dream are so complicated that it's no wonder Solomon asks for the ability to sort it all out. But it seems that there is more than that going on, that there is really the possibility of a shift to a new way of doing things, that God recognizes that and encourages it. Think about the dreadfulness of the blood vendetta that Solomon swears on Joab and his descendents. The curse is that forever his descendents will be responsible for the killings that Joab committed. And this was not unique, of course, to this situation. Throughout the stories of the Bible, in stories of old cultures throughout our history, indeed, even today, we see families, communities and nations torn apart because there is ancient vengeance that must wend its way down through the generations. Imagine having a baby boy and knowing that that child would eventually have to go out and kill someone, or be killed himself, for some ancient murder, a murder or injustice about which he has, perhaps, little understanding at all. Imagine knowing that every mother's son would in some way be ruled by fear and revenge. Imagine the horror of living in a society in which that was the norm.

David and Solomon after him are feeling their way toward a society in which the government is responsible for justice, in which the responsibility for blood is taken away from the individual and given to a larger and, one hopes, more objective body, one in which the goal is order and security rather than personal revenge and honor.

That is the wisdom that Solomon is after. He asks for it not only because he is a young and new ruler who comes after a father, famous for his exploits and cleverness. It is also because he is operating in new territory and must find his way. When he says that he is only a little child knowing not how to go out or come in we can see that he is being respectful, but also that he means it in some way quite literally. He asks to be able to “discern” between good and evil, and God says that he will give him a “discerning” mind. Discern means to separate, to pull apart the meanings of things, to be able to see clearly the different parts of things. Solomon’s wisdom is to relieve his people of the burden of that gut-nawing revenge and to substitute for it the cool, analytic clarity of discernment.

Jesus too talked of a new way and he was a revolutionary in many, many ways. The passage that we read today is troubling in some respects because it alludes literally and specifically to the eating of Jesus’ flesh and the drinking of Jesus’ blood. Pastor Stew has talked to us in the past very eloquently and effectively about the three interpretations of communion, that is, the literal transformation of the bread and wine; the commemorative celebration; and the celebration of community.

This passage must also make us think about forgiveness, however. Jesus is also pointing to another way, to a new life, a life without generation after generation of

revenge and bloodshed. He is saying take my blood and my flesh. I atone for all wrongs and for all sins. And those are wrongs and sins that are committed by us but also those committed against us, so that we have no reason to be indulging in these endless blood vendettas, for the wrong has been taken away. Jesus has absorbed it by his sacrifice... he says that he has given his body and his blood so that we might live. He is offering the bread of forgiveness so that people might move on and look to a future with optimism and expectations of life, not to the hell of eternal recriminations and revenge.

If we are to take advantage of these lessons that Solomon and Jesus have brought to us, we have a lot of work to do. We can't be forever keeping score for all the bad things that have been done to us. Pastor Stew talked to us about this last week. We would never get finished just toting it up, let alone doing anything about it. Don't we all know how something in our deepest brain makes us hold onto resentments for years and years... "she said this mean thing to me 30 years ago, so I can never really trust her or be her friend."

That, of course, is only the most trivial example of how these things might affect us. Indeed, we can all see in the news every day how these resentments grow like a cancer and absorb the entire life of a people until all they can think about is how to wreak revenge on those that they have learned to hate. The lessons of Jesus and Solomon are to let go of those resentments, that it is not appropriate or right for us as individuals to right these wrongs. If we hold onto them we will be forever imprisoned in an endless spiral of bitterness at the very least, in killing and warfare that lasts for generations at the most extreme. If we let go, we can be free.

Let us pray.

Dear Lord,

We ask for an open heart and a free mind. We ask that we might acknowledge injuries and move on to live in the fullness of your love and forgiveness.