

Last week we heard about David taking Bathsheba, and the prophet Nathan confronting David with the truth of his sin and that there will be consequences for David, his family, and the kingdom. The first son Bathsheba bore David died, the next one was Solomon. He was not the obvious heir, as he had several older half-brothers, but those other brothers were often in turmoil and trouble or even took their rivalry to the death. Bathsheba asked an old, frail, and dying David to appoint Solomon to be his heir, and the prophet Nathan concurred. David appointed Solomon king without telling his older sons. We pick up the story today just at the beginning of Solomon's reign, after he dealt with his rival brothers but before he built the Temple in Jerusalem. Solomon talks with God in a dream. Today's biblical story is very well-known. It has such popular cultural currency, in fact, that it has been parodied on both TV shows, *Seinfeld* and *The Simpsons*. Before we read the biblical version of the story, let us first pray. **PRAY. READ.** I am reading from **First Kings, chapter three, verses 5-6, 9-16, and 22b-28.**

For the narrator, this story is all about the young and very green King Solomon, yet my attention and curiosity go to another detail I somehow missed growing up hearing this story. I never knew or remembered that the two women were prostitutes or street workers. Did you all know? Maybe this is a detail my Sunday School teacher conveniently left out? I don't think I've ever heard this story preached, though it was always used to talk about having the wisdom of King Solomon. Maybe it's because we tend to view prostitution as a moral problem instead of as a political economic problem? Maybe it's the fact that Jasmine Road held

their annual “Rooted in Love” luncheon this week or that I attended the Community Foundation’s Annual Charitable Awards gathering Thursday night where Beth Messick, Jasmine Road’s Executive Director, received the “Community Spirit Award,” on behalf of Jasmine Road. For whatever reason, I cannot get these sex workers off my mind. This important detail of today’s story means possibly several things: 1) They didn’t have a husband or a man in the house to provide for them so they had to do what they had to do to provide for themselves and for their families. 2) We don’t know if they’re widows or not, we just know that they’re sex workers. However, maybe they became sex workers out of desperation?! *Town Magazine* featured each of the award recipients from the Community Foundation and Beth’s picture was taken here in this sanctuary in front of one of these beautiful stained glass windows. She begins her interview this way: “I’ve spoken with hundreds of women that have been involved in human trafficking and prostitution. None of them would tell you...that this was their choice. It was something they had to do in order to survive.” Jasmine Road helps women heal through a host of community partnerships and gives them an opportunity to recognize their God-given potential. Let me back up. In 2016 Rev. Becca Stevens, an Episcopal Priest from Nashville, TN, came to speak to a group of about 400 women at Christ Church here in town. Becca, as I call her, was my colleague for nine years at Vanderbilt where we both served as campus ministers. As a matter of fact, Becca and I shared office and worship space, so I was front and center for the birth of Thistle Farms, a two-year residential program for women who have survived trafficking, prostitution, and addiction. Thistle Farm has

become an international model for over 180 sister organizations. Jasmine Road is one of them, and it was started through God's wisdom to execute justice discerned by a group of people from Christ Church and Triune Mercy Center. It was decided at the time that Jasmine Road offices would be housed at Triune, and it still is to this day. And Beth, in fact, used to work on staff here at Triune as a Drug/Alcohol Recovery Advocate and was shocked when she first learned- from visiting the jail and going to the District- about human trafficking going on in her own hometown of Greenville. Jasmine Road launched with one house and five women in 2018. Though Beth says that they could easily fill five or more houses, they have only two at the moment. Mainly because many women find it difficult to leave their situations and rightly so, struggle to trust. Like many of the people we serve, it takes building relationships and time because no one in their world has ever done what they say they're going to do. Once in Jasmine Road, names for the SC state flower, represents light and hope, contrasting the shadows of the streets, they are exposed to a host of resources. As of right now, every woman who has graduated from Jasmine Road has not returned to the streets. Give God a handclap for that success! Beth ends saying, "Jasmine Road is a community effort; we can't do this alone. It took a lot of broken systems for them to wind up on the street, and it takes a community to welcome them back home" (*Town Magazine* Nov. 2022 issue).

Let's go back to Solomon for a moment. Solomon succeeded his father, David, as king, which meant that he then became the primary instrument of carrying out God's plan for Israel. In Israel, one of the

duties of the king was to judge the people with fairness. The prophet Isaiah, in describing the king's responsibility for maintaining justice said this, "He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with justice he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth" (11:3-4). When God asks Solomon in the dream what he wants, he doesn't say riches or fame or power. No, Solomon asks for wisdom in the form of two things: 1) an understanding mind and 2) the ability to discern between good and evil (3:9). And Solomon's answer greatly pleased God so God not only gives him wisdom but also both riches and honor all of his life (v. 13). Notice the conditional statement that comes next: "If you walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your life" (v. 14). Then Solomon awoke, we are told. So what is wisdom exactly? Wikipedia's definition of wisdom is "the ability to contemplate and act using knowledge, experience, understanding, common sense and insight." Therefore wisdom is basically about decision-making- not in general but it's making the right, just, and good decision. It's ethical decision-making. Put simply it's the ability to see right from wrong. The simplest rule of thumb would be Jesus' greatest commandments, which is taken from the Shema in the OT (Deut. 6:4-5) and then adding the neighbor part from later in Deuteronomy- loving God and neighbor (which sum up all of the Ten Commandments). Now back to today's story- are y'all still with me? OK, Solomon asks for wisdom in the form of "an understanding mind." The Hebrew word for understanding is Shema. It means to hear God. But in scripture, the Shema is the Jewish confession of faith- "**Hear** O Israel, the Lord your

God is one.” This reminds the people of Israel and us that there is only one God. And then what follows that confession is this: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.” So maybe a wisdom question is which option is most loving? Which shows love most to our neighbors and gives glory to God?

This story begs to question what kind of leadership do God’s people deserve? Who and what needs attention in our society? As the text reminds us Solomon had wisdom that executed justice. “In the Bible, one measure of justice in the land is how the most vulnerable in society are treated, typically ‘the alien, the orphan, and the widow’ (eg. Deut. 24:17-22), following the example of God ‘mighty and awesome who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers’ (Deut. 10:17-18). These two women who were prostitutes are clearly on their own, fending for themselves economically, each with a new human being to care for” (Elna K. Solvang, workingpreacher.org). They are functional widows. Now yes, Solomon, at the highest rung of the social ladder is attentive to these two women, who are very close if not at the lowest rung, demonstrating that he is accessible even to the least powerful in society. However, “the same power dynamic that showcases Solomon’s accessibility also allows a spectacle to be made of the two women. Yes, the story presents a clever riddle, but it is also a heartbreaking tale of cruelty, loss, and grief. The power that Solomon holds in this moment is breathtaking. In many paintings of the story, guards dangle the baby upside-down, clutching the infant’s ankle in one hand and a sword in the other. This image reinforces the vulnerability of

the people under Solomon's charge. Babies, prostitutes, widows, orphans: society's most defenseless members live and die at the will or whim of the king" (Cameron Howard, workingpreacher.org). I find it interesting that we are told that justice was done because of Solomon's wisdom yet the women disappear just as Solomon's success in executing justice is made known throughout all of Israel. One scholar asks, "Judgement has been rendered, but is that sufficient to claim that justice has been done? What lies before each of these women as they leave their audience with the king? How might divine wisdom and justice lead beyond judgment? How might each of these women find emotional healing? How might leaders and the wider community advance social and economic equity that transforms the future of these women and the surviving child" (Solvang)?

We know that Solomon's reign, like that of his father, was not perfect. In Chapter 11 we're given a picture of Solomon the Foolish. He married 700 foreign women and had 300 concubines (v. 3) among other things. He turned away from God and as a result, God vows to tear the kingdom from him and give it to his servant (v. 11)- thus dividing Israel into two separate groups: the North and the South for over 200 years. Yet, it's interesting that Solomon is known for wisdom or the perception of the wisdom of God in him. Our gathering hymn this morning, *God of Grace and God of Glory*, was a prayer in which we repeatedly asked God to grant us wisdom and courage! Wisdom and courage for the facing of this hour... and for the living of these days! Wisdom, and courage lest we miss your kingdom's goal!

I was reminded with a friend's FB post of the late German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer's words which are a wonderful litmus test for discerning God's wisdom. "Our 'yes' to God requires our 'no' to injustice, to all evil, to all lies, to all oppression and violation of the weak and the poor." That sounds like divine wisdom to me! May we have the strength and courage to not allow the women of today's story to be downplayed or ignored but to continue to pray for, hear and respond with God's wisdom, as we care for the most vulnerable among us, not rushing to judgment but showing love and compassion. Amen.