

Church of the Pilgrimage
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1 Kings 2: 10-12; 3: 3-14

Then David rested with his ancestors and was buried in the City of David. He had reigned forty years over Israel—seven years in Hebron and thirty-three in Jerusalem. So Solomon sat on the throne of his father David, and his rule was firmly established. Solomon showed his love for the LORD by walking according to the instructions given him by his father David, except that he offered sacrifices and burned incense on the high places. The king went to Gibeon to offer sacrifices, for that was the most important high place, and Solomon offered a thousand burnt offerings on that altar. At Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon during the night in a dream, and God said, “Ask for whatever you want me to give you.” Solomon answered, “You have shown great kindness to your servant, my father David, because he was faithful to you and righteous and upright in heart. You have continued this great kindness to him and have given him a son to sit on his throne this very day. “Now, LORD my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David. But I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties. Your servant is here among the people you have chosen, a great people, too numerous to count or number. So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?” The Lord was pleased that Solomon had asked for this. So God said to him, “Since you have asked for this and not for long life or wealth for yourself, nor have asked for the death of your enemies but for discernment in administering justice, I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be. Moreover, I will give you what you have not asked for—both wealth and honor—so that in your lifetime you will have no equal among kings. And if you walk in obedience to me and keep my decrees and commands as David your father did, I will give you a long life.”

A Word to the Wise

For those of you who find the task of parenting a bit of a challenge, I hope you hear a word of appreciation in what I have to say this morning; and for those of you who think that genuine authority, parental or political, requires a bit of wisdom at the very least, I hope you hear a word of affirmation. Mostly, I hope you hear what God might have to say to all of us. I think in both instances that would be the need for humility before God, in whom we all of us are wise to place our ultimate trust.

When it comes to wisdom and authority, I think of a conversation that supposedly took place in a London restaurant. Alexander Woollcott and G. K. Chesterton were having lunch together, discussing topics of philosophy. (You would think they might have been discussing menu choices or the latest football scores and taken a break from the heavier side of life!) The relationship between power and authority came up, and Chesterton said this: “If a rhinoceros

were to burst into this restaurant, there is no denying he would have great power here. But I should be the first to rise and assure him that he had no authority whatsoever" (*The Little Brown Book of Anecdotes*, p. 117). Words of wisdom, not for 20th century philosophers only, not for parents and politicians alone, but for all of us. And especially those of us whose Master is the Prince of Peace.

As we heard a moment ago in today's reading, David names his son, Solomon, as his successor. (I challenge you to say that five times quickly!) Queen Elizabeth notwithstanding, it's not every parent who can provide that kind of legacy to their offspring. Do you ever wonder what you might pass on to your progeny? The relationship we enjoy with our sons and daughters or whomever looks to us for guidance and hope in life is key, of course. I never know when one of my sons will get in touch with me, and while they don't always communicate their deepest appreciation, it's good to hear from them now and then nonetheless. Sometimes I crave it. A few weeks back one of them called me from a cemetery, where he was treating shrubs and trees for gypsy moths. (He's an arborist.) We talked for a good half hour, and I hung up feeling grateful. Earlier that same week the oldest of my three called me from the shallows of the Deerfield River, where he was fly fishing at dusk. I thought that was odd, as no doubt he was in the great outdoors for some peace and quiet more than for catching trout; but he insisted on conversing with me then and there. It was a blessing I hadn't expected at the end of a long day. The youngest of my three can go for great stretches of time without a word, and he's more apt to text me than to call, which is just as well because often it's hard for me to hear what he's saying. Like as not, for him there's a crisis in the making, and I think he needs to be reassured that I'm still somehow there for him. On the wall of our home here in Plymouth, there's a display of family pictures. One of these shows the three of them, along with my dad and me, at a restaurant in Brockton. It has to be one of my life's favorite moments. We're all together, well fed and glad to be in each other's company, three generations, "posing pictures with a smile," in the words of Stevie Wonder ("If It's Magic").

We don't know much of anything about David's relationship with Solomon, his son. We do know that David trusted him enough to anoint him as king over the new monarchy, and that David's authority in this was all that it took to remove any doubt as to who was to be in charge. Did David have a clue as to what might unfold with Solomon on the throne? Did he know of his son's great wisdom and the favor he would receive from their God? Or the exorbitant spending and building that would distinguish him down through the ages? Or the multiple wives? Not likely, but David himself didn't come on the scene without his own history that raised eyebrows along the way. Fast forward a few centuries, and Jesus gets tagged with the name "Son of David." Read Matthew's genealogy and see the cast of characters *his* family includes! Needless to say, this didn't diminish *his* power and authority. A recent cartoon in *The New Yorker* shows two women talking at a coffee shop. One pauses and says to the other, "I'm at that point in my life when I don't want my parents to tell me what to do, but I still want to blame them for it." David couldn't tell Solomon what to do, once he "slept with his ancestors;" but did Solomon ever resent his father's selection of him as ruler and king? The burden of responsibility over a

contentious people? The court intrigue and political back-stabbing? Perhaps he did. Above all that, however, the blessing and holy purposes of God sustained him and kept his people forefront in the history of salvation.

It begs the question: are we similarly sustained as God's people in this 21st century? By what authority are we ruled in these challenging times? What wisdom sits in the seats of power, not just in our own nation but in nations throughout this troubled world of ours? Someone far wiser than I said that "to deny the political reality of life is to turn our backs on the world for which Christ died" (Geoffrey Shaw). Back to this business of *parental* authority: A few years ago, I was sitting on a dock in Ontario, Canada, where my family and I have vacationed for many, many years, talking with a cousin I hadn't *seen* in years. I told her she had her father's eyes. I told her how much I admired her dad, how if it hadn't been for him I wouldn't have wound up in the ministry. It's true. He was a Presbyterian minister, and the one who suggested seminary for me after I graduated from college and didn't have a clue as to what was next. It was one of those spit-your-coffee-out-of-your-mouth moments, because it seemed like an absurd suggestion at the time. "The rest is history," as they say. I remarked to my cousin how mild-mannered her father was—to which his daughter laughed and said that he wasn't always mild-mannered. Like the time she and her family were leaving that idyllic spot, the car all packed, the 15-hour drive ahead of them, everybody already tired and cranky. Suddenly, one of her brothers started screaming, which got his father (my mild-mannered uncle) screaming, too. Much to his chagrin, it turned out there was a bee loose in the car, and it had other plans than to make the trek back to central Illinois. My mild-mannered uncle lost his cool and had to apologize.

That same uncle knew the wisdom of listening for what God might have to say, and while some called him lazy for spending hours at meditation, he claimed his life (let alone his ministry) depended on it. One time he enraged a group of Presbyterians by leading devotions at a regional meeting and guiding them in five... long... minutes... of silence! Bruce was a man of no little faith, and if it weren't for faithful leadership like his, "warts and all," I suspect the history of salvation might have taken a serious turn for the worse.

Another cartoon in my files shows a dignitary on the tarmac of an airport, surrounded by media. His comment: "Our thoughts and prayers are with those who wanted a moral and ethical Administration." From what we can gather, the administration of Solomon wasn't known for its ethics and morality. It was certainly known for its prosperity, but if David had reason to be proud of his son, I'd like to think it wouldn't have been for the three-story high temple he built, the one with the breath-taking porch of Egyptian design, two thirty-foot bronze columns with lilies, intricately designed on top, there at the entrance. The one with cedar ceilings and floors of cypress, olivewood doors, and pure gold for trim everywhere the eye could see. That historic project was like unto "the Big Dig" and took Solomon seven years, after which he spent *thirteen* years building a palace for *himself*. (I wonder if he ever wore an Ostrich jacket?) No, I'd like to think that Solomon's old man might have been proud of his son for

somehow keeping faith in the One who brought Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Leah and Rachel and all the rest—David and Bathsheba included—to that moment in history, the One who *continues* to sustain people of faith to this day.

As *good* parents, guardians, or mentors, say, to those who count on us in one way or another, we do whatever it takes with the hope that those entrusted to our care lead happy and productive lives. We do this best relying on a power and authority that has guided and sustained us for centuries—and passing that along to them. I look at another picture in my study, showing a dad and his boys on a foggy seashore. The youngest is on my back, in a Gerry carrier. The oldest is dragging his foot in the sand, looking to see how quickly the water will fill up the indentation left by his toes. The middle son, the one who called me from the cemetery a few weeks ago, is running away from the surf before he gets soaked (or up close and personal with a Great White?!?). Fast forward a few years after that picture was taken, when all four of us were swimming in the waters of Ontario. Matthew got too close to me and nearly pulled me under. I was angry and called him a “twit.” No sooner was that word out of my mouth than I regretted saying it and apologized repeatedly. When I mentioned this to him the other day, many years after the incident, I asked if he remembered it, hoping against hope he wouldn’t. “Oh yeah, Dad,” he said. “I remember.” Rats! I’m *still* beating myself up over it, still praying for the wisdom to be the father they need me to be some 30 years later.

The words we speak matter, as does the acknowledgement of our mistakes and keeping our cool in the midst of chaos and modeling that for whoever looks to us for guidance. Above all, keeping faith in the One whose love for us forgives and restores and sustains us down all our days. These may seem like little things, but it would seem that the Almighty had in mind the little things when Jesus spoke of faith the size of a mustard seed moving mountains (Matthew 17: 20; Luke 17: 6).

You and I don’t have to be rocket scientists, or anything like the man pictured on the front of this morning’s bulletin cover, to know the truth of this. Or to know the truth that speaks to power with an authority from which there is no appeal, the God from whom Solomon derived the wisdom it took to carry on his father’s legacy. We don’t have to be the greatest of all time parents or saints or believers to find happiness—or to serve God’s holy purposes, for that matter. We have only to trust in the One whose love for us overcomes every obstacle, even death, to claim us for his own. In *this* God’s *good* stead we have reason to hope our lives, our church, our community, our nation, and our world will be redeemed. I would hazard to say they already have. It’s just a matter of our kneeling before *that* authority and nothing *less*, remaining loyal to the God whose Son no enemy, no government, no self-serving power could ever outlast.

One more picture to share: a little boy, from Honduras, surrounded by armed US border agents, a picture that appeared weeks ago in *The Boston Globe*. And a word to the wise, from a song Bob Franke wrote to the parents, guardians, mentors, and faithful among us:

Living and loving and standing the test
To carry our little ones through;
It may not be the thing we do best,
But it's the best thing that we do (repeat).

As God's people, standing in a long line of characters who, one way or another, kept the faith, may the best thing *we* do be to *remain* faithful to the One who embraces all humanity from the hard wood of the cross.

Amen.