

The Wisdom of Resident Aliens
I Kings 2:10-12, 3:3-14
Ephesians 5:15-20

“At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, ‘Ask what I should give you.’”

If you read the eleven chapters that chronicle Solomon’s reign, you likely will miss the fact that the narrator of this story is playing games with his readers. “He may be openly and overtly praising Solomon on the surface, but he does not tell the story with a straight face,” according to Old Testament professor Daniel Hays, “and if look closely, we see him winking at us.” Without looking closely, my guess is that if the answer on Jeopardy under the category of “Kings” were “Split the baby in two” you would hit the buzzer and say “Who is Solomon?” remembering his wisdom when faced with two prostitutes arguing over which one is the baby’s mother. Or if the answer were “Built the first magnificent temple in Jerusalem,” you again would answer “Who is Solomon?” remembering the endless chapter describing its opulence.

Left out of the lectionary’s Cliff Notes, for those of you old enough to remember those yellow and black covered booklets for the slothful, are the less savory answers. “Murders his brother, his father’s army general, banishes his father’s priest and takes blood vengeance on his father’s critic to secure the throne.” Now you might respond with a different inflection in your voice, “Who is Solomon?” Or if the answer is “Married the daughter of Pharaoh, the arch enemy of everything his country stands for,” again you would wonder, “Who is Solomon?” And then if the answer is, “Loved many foreign women and sacrificed at the high places of the pagan gods” you just might be prompted to ask with a tinge of anger in your voice, “Who is Solomon?” This is precisely what the exiles had to be asking as they read the story of the king whose reign was the beginning of the end of the Kingdom of Judah and Israel.

For reasons that escape me, the lectionary’s redacted account of Solomon’s reign only includes the magnificence of the temple Solomon built for God to live in; includes what the court press secretary said concerning the wisdom of the king, wiser than anyone else, a magnet who drew all nations to his throne; includes the first dream of Solomon when God promised Solomon not only wisdom but also riches and honor; includes Solomon’s moving prayer at the dedication of the temple he built for God. Whatever could go wrong with such a star on the throne, with the economy humming, God in residence in the capital and the whole world in awe of their nation?

But now in exile--the land taken, the nation divided, and the temple in ruins—God’s people wept by the willows as they held the story of Solomon in one hand and Deuteronomy, their foundational story, in the other. The Book of Deuteronomy, also written during the exile, reminded God’s people of the strange blessings of the wilderness, of the utterly new social reality born of justice for the widow and orphan, of hospitality toward the stranger, and reminded them of the God who chose them out of all the peoples on the earth to be God’s people, God’s treasured possession: “It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the Lord set his heart on you and chose you,” Moses told them, “for you were the fewest [the least] of all peoples. It was because the Lord loved you and kept his promises to you that the Lord brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh.”

Back then, scarcity had led them, complaining and kvetching, to depend upon God’s providing. Judgment and mercy had taught them to seek the will of the God who was *for* them precisely when God was *against* them. Steadfast love and faithfulness had bound them to the God whose dwelling place was a portable ark that defied domestication even when they settled in the land God had promised. This was a history written to remind exiles of the people they once had been before they demanded of God a king to rule over them like other nations.

But they also read something else in Deuteronomy as they languished in exile. Written as if in anticipation of Solomon’s reign, Moses says to God’s people in the wilderness, “When you have come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you...and settled in it...you may indeed set over you a king whom the Lord your God will choose....Even so, he must not acquire many horses for himself, or return the people to Egypt in order to

acquire more horses....And he must not acquire many wives for himself, or else his heart will turn away; also silver and gold he must not acquire in great quantity for himself.”

Through the lens of their founding story, the exiles begin to read the story of Solomon with listening hearts—with wisdom. What now surely leaps out of the papyrus is the import of Solomon’s marriage alliance with Pharaoh, king of Egypt, turning his heart away to idols from the get-go and initiating a reverse exodus. His uncorroborated dream of God granting him not only a “hearing heart” but also riches and honor suddenly sounds a bit self-serving. His forced conscription of thirty thousand men to fell cedars in Lebanon, seventy thousand laborers to mine and eighty thousand others to cut stones in the hill country, three thousand three hundred overseers of the laborers who built a house the Lord did not want in seven years and a house for Solomon in thirteen suggest a return to slavery. Then there were the horses and chariots brought from Egypt anticipated in Moses’ warning and the king’s excesses that the people took to be, at the time, a sign of the nation’s well-being. But wait, there’s more! King Solomon loved many foreign women along with the daughter of Pharaoh, seven hundred princesses and three hundred concubines who “turned away his heart after other gods.” Israel had become Egypt which, in Israel’s memory, “bespeaks brutality, exploitation and bondage, the demeaning of the human spirit and the suppression of covenantal relations.”

Yet at the heart of this cautionary tale is the king’s attempt to coopt the God who brought Israel out of the land of Egypt. “In this time in Jerusalem,” Walter Brueggemann writes, “a radical revision in the character of God” was taking place. The God who has refused, from the beginning, a dwelling place on earth is about to take up residence in the capital—or so the king says. Except that in “responsible biblical faith,” Brueggemann explains, “the freedom of God is always in considerable tension with the accessibility of God. This tension was sharp for Moses, who tended to stress the freedom of God at the expense of [God’s] accessibility. With Solomon, that tension has been completely dissolved in the interest of accessibility. Now there is no notion that God is free and that [God] may act apart from or even against this regime.”

Consider Solomon’s excess when he dedicates the temple, telling God, “I have indeed built [infinitive absolute plus perfect] a magnificent temple for you.’ In case anyone misses the fact that Solomon is responsible for this temple, he reiterates this fact five additional times, referring to ‘this house which I have built.’” God roars with defiant freedom, “I have consecrated this house. [My presence alone makes this house holy.] But as for you, you must keep the law and walk obediently or else I will leave this temple and it will be destroyed.” Two chapters later, the jig is up. In his third conversation with Solomon, God says because “you have not kept my covenant and my statutes that I have commanded you, I will surely tear the kingdom from you.” Israel is first to fall to Assyria, then Judah to Babylon. Finally with the temple and the palace destroyed, God’s people are marched into exile. Yet God knows it is only in exile that God’s people will begin to remember who they are and to whom they belong. In a sense, the exile frees them from their self-imposed slavery to wealth and power in an Egypt of their own making and bows them down anew before the God whose freedom is bound only by the love that God is.

What, I wonder, will cause those of us, whose founding story is the life, death and resurrection of God’s Son and David’s true heir, to remember who and whose we are in the midst of every present day empire? Paradoxically, our founding story is the story of the God who *chose* accessibility in freedom, chose to quit heaven and the highest heaven to dwell in the scandalous particularity of a first century Jew. In Christ, God’s kingdom, God’s reign comes near and judges all who presume to rule in God’s name even now. Therefore if the category is “Kings” and the answer is “Dined with sinners and outcasts,” the question is “Who is Christ the King?” If the answer is “Identified with the poor and had no place to lay his head,” the question is, “Who is Christ the King?” If the answer is, “Crucified as an enemy of the state and religion,” the question is, “Who is Christ the King?” If the answer is, “Defeated death dealing powers with the power of self-giving love,” the answer is, “Who is Christ the King?”

To be his subjects is to live as resident aliens, knowing in our bones and sinews what it feels like to be a stranger in a nation that oppresses strangers, knowing in our hearts and souls what it feels like to be orphaned in a nation that has orphaned the children of refugees, knowing in our minds and memories what it feels like to be a slave in a nation that was built on slavery. Thanks be to God for David’s heir whose reign of love will forever make us wise to the ways of kings, reminding us of the human beings we were created to be and of the God who reigns eternally.