

August 18, 2024 Sermon: Worship With Rejoicing: Benediction 1 Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14

“Ask what I should give you...Give your servant an understanding mind...I now do according to your word. Indeed, I give you a wise and discerning mind...I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honor all your life...if you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your life.”

Notice that God doesn't ask Solomon a question. God commands Solomon to ask what he should give him. We often end up focusing on the wisdom Solomon requests, but what if we began with God's command? What might God's command and Solomon's response tell us about benediction?

After five weeks of David, we turn to his son and successor, Solomon. After five weeks of questionable antics and behaviors, we get two weeks of prayers. We move from the one called “a man after God's heart” to the wise one. How do wisdom and passion for living and for worship work together? Maybe we're supposed to see something in the combination of the head and the heart as a pointer to a whole-bodied expression of faith and commitment to God.

Sounding loud and clear from all these texts is that God is not looking for perfect people to step up and lead. That David was a work in progress is undeniable; even late in his life, he was struggling with flaws and foibles that constantly got in his way. Now we have Solomon, and surely, he has learned from the weaknesses of his father. But he, too, is flawed. He, too, hedges his bets. Did you notice the “only” in the text?

Solomon loved the LORD, walking in the statutes of his father David; only, he sacrificed and offered incense at the high places (1 Kings 3:3 NRSV).

He loved the lord, we're told, only ... Only what? Only he snuck out to the high places and burned a little incense and left a sacrifice now and then. He was just covering his bases. Just a little contingency gesture. Is that harsh? Perhaps, but it is clear that the writers of 1 Kings disapprove of this action. It is a flaw in his character. Back in Deuteronomy, it was declared that when God brings the people out, they are to worship in the place that God declares, the place where God will reside (Deut. 12:5). So, to pay attention to the Canaanite holy places is to ... fudge a bit on this rule. Plus, the writers are laboring under the assumption that having kings at all is a risky proposition. So, it doesn't bother them that Solomon isn't perfect. And it shouldn't bother us. God can use any of us as inept, as uncertain, as wavering as we are.

In fact, and this is a mind-blowing note here in this text, it is at Gibeon where the Lord appears to Solomon. It's only a few verses after the wagging of the finger at Solomon for even being there, and the next thing you know, God shows up. And God makes one of those “chance of a lifetime” offers. “Ask what I should give you” (1 Kings 3:5). Was that a test? If Solomon asked for something trivial or something selfish or destructive, would God have said, “Sorry, no”? Or was it one of those things where the omniscient God knew what Solomon would ask for, so there wasn't really a risk in making the offer? We can't really know, but if Solomon wasn't really free to be selfish and greedy, then what's the risk? And why does God seem surprised and pleased with how Solomon responded to the offer?

What has God pronounced over Solomon in this encounter? Continuing with our theme of “Worship with Rejoicing,” this has all the marks of a benediction. God invites Solomon to walk in God’s ways as he leaves from this moment. There is a blessing imparted and a charge given.

Indeed, the benediction is our weekly response to God’s command, “Ask what I should give you.” It is in the benediction that we, as a community, boldly seek God’s blessing. This is not just any blessing, but a divine favor that extends the work we practice in worship into our daily lives, giving us a sense of purpose and inspiration.

If the benediction is our response to God’s command to ask, then Solomon’s response shows us the importance of answering God’s command according to what God values. God did not promise Solomon that he would receive whatever he asked for. What we ask for matters, not because God will condemn us for asking the wrong thing, but because when we ask God for blessing, we are actively participating in an ongoing conversation and work of grace with God and one another. How might our approach to communal blessing change if we understood it as saying “yes!” to all the good that God wants for us? Will our benediction extend or resist the work of grace in our communal life together?

When we gather for worship, we need a good word (*bene dictio*) to go with us as we depart. We need something that will go with us, something that will enable us to hold on to the wisdom we have heard and shared. We need something that will inspire us to continue in the same spirit we received and offered during worship.

The benediction reminds us that worship never really ends. The service might be over, but the worship goes on as we continue living as witnesses to God at work in our lives.

A benediction, then, is not a period at the end of our worship sentence but a comma connecting us to whatever comes next. For Solomon heard the call to walk in God’s ways, keeping the statutes and commandments as well as (or maybe better than?) his father David did. When we leave our places of worship, we go out to walk in those ways, too.

May we hear the blessing in our going out.