

{apologize for change in title and text}

Solomon for the Fourth of July

“Give thy servant therefore an understanding mind to govern thy people, that I may discern between good and evil; for who is able to govern this thy great people?”

1 Kings 3:9

Why Solomon for the Fourth of July?

Why a king for the holiday which celebrates our rejection of the tyranny of a king?

Well. I think I have a good reason. But that is finally up to you.

Let me set the scene.

It is the beginning of Solomon’s reign.

That “honeymoon” period which basks in the glow of newness,

before the corrupting forces of political reality have time to do their devastating work.

In this time of promise and possibility, much the same promise and possibility our ancestors must have felt on the first July 4, in such a time, Solomon prayed to the Lord.

Did you notice how Solomon Began his prayer?

He did not begin with “thanking.”

He did not begin with “asking.”

Solomon began with “remembering.”

“You have shown great and steadfast love . . .” – that is what Solomon remembered!

And that is where I connect Solomon with the Fourth of July.

Our need to remember.

Remembering is more than important. For Solomon and for us.

In his remembering prayer, Solomon avoided the convenient “amnesia” which forgets the past, our past, and therefore condemns us to repeat so much of it.

Those who are concerned with the neverending violence in the Middle East.

Those who read signs of resurgent racism at home and throughout the world.

Those who see us losing ground in the fight against poverty.

Those who see us despoiling the earth beyond human capacity to correct.

Those all plead for memory over amnesia.

For we have been there before – violence, and hatred, and destruction of the earth -- we have been there before, and it was deadly to us!

But there is more to remembering than learning the lessons of our past.

Remembering tells us who we are.

Who was Solomon?

Solomon was not just any king. He was David’s son.

And David was a shepherd boy made king by the grace of God alone.

So, if not for God's love, Solomon would have been a shepherd like his father, not a king!

And he knew it!

For he prayed: "You have shown great and steadfast love . . ."

Remembering our dependence on God's love enables us to keep from having a too inflated opinion of who we are.

Remembering gives direction to our lives.

While Solomon held to the memory of God's love to David, his father, the shepherd king --- while Solomon remembered to be a king like David, all was well.

I wish I could tell you that Solomon continued to hold to that memory.

To be that kind of King.

But I can't.

(though that is a sermon for another day)

For now, it is enough to know that, eventually, Solomon forgot.

Forgetting leads to amnesia, leads to death.

In Solomon's prayer, his memories of David, his father, reminded him to be faithful, righteous, and fair.

So, instead of asking for power, wealth, and glory (all of which will become very important to Solomon shortly, when Solomon forgets -- but that is that other sermon)

-- for now, instead of asking for power, wealth, and glory, Solomon asks:

“Give your servant an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil.” (vs 9)

For this one moment, at least, remembering allows Solomon the selflessness to ask for what his people need – not what he personally wants or desires.

Maybe that is the very thing we need to remember to ask this Fourth of July: to ask for what everyone needs, rather than ask for what we want.

No matter where you fall on the political spectrum – from left to right – I think you will admit that some important Fourth of July things have been forgotten in our country.

One of them is gratitude.

Gratitude for the love of God poured out on us.

Gratitude forgotten when we begin to think we deserve everything we have been given.

Deserve it personally.

Deserve it as a nation.

Just because we are.

Then gratitude is forgotten.

When Solomon and his children forgot gratitude, his kingdom was torn apart.

To me, the most important connection between Solomon’s prayer and our Fourth of July remembering is that Solomon remembered to ask God for the very thing we have forgotten (I said it a minute ago, let me repeat it):

the selflessness to ask for what his people need – not what he personally wants or desires.

That is the plague which besets our nation. When everybody thinks they should get whatever they want and desires. We forget to care about what all the people need.

From lobbyists to the Tea Party. From Republicans to Democrats. From special interest groups of the right to special interest groups of the left. All have forgotten.

The generation of 1776 was as divided as we are. Issues of region against region, of slavery, of economy could have doomed our revolution from the start.

Somehow they rose above their individual special interests for that first Fourth of July moment?

Even if it did not last, can we remember that moment?

The issue for us, as for Solomon, is how shall we “govern this thy great people?”

I am convinced that the only answer to that question is the one Solomon asked for (even if he eventually forgot it):

“an understanding mind that I may discern between good and evil”

Something our leaders on all sides seem blatantly unable to do! Discern between good and evil, discern between right and wrong, discern between corruption and integrity, discern between self-interest and the public good.

We have forgotten so much!

But I am an eternal optimist.

Even on a Fourth of July like this one, with unwinnable wars and political deadlock – I am an optimist!

In the first chapter of the book of Acts when the risen Jesus meets with his disciples, the first thing they ask is rooted in pure self-interest:

"Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?"

Now that your resurrection is a done deal, what are we going to get out of it? Will the power and glory of your kingdom start to flow into our pockets?

And Jesus said, no.

And reminded them that the resurrection was not an ending but a beginning.

"It is not for you to know times or seasons
which the Father has fixed by his own authority."

They would receive power. But not the power over the lives of others which they wanted.

Not power to enrich themselves.

Not power to take care of family and friends first.

Not even power to protect them from dying on a cross.

Jesus said: But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Sama'ria and to the end of the earth."

They would receive power for a purpose – power to do the work God needed them to do. Whether they wanted to do that work or not!

Even at substantial risk to themselves of poverty, persecution, and death.

God's promise was that if they would risk themselves doing what needed to be done for God's people – all God's people – then they would be given whatever they needed to do it!

As long as they remembered!

Our scripture lesson today ended with the words, "Then Solomon awoke, and behold it had been a dream."

And as long as he remembered the giver and purpose of that dream, the dream was reality.

Solomon's dream did not outlast his remembering.

When he turned away from the ways of David the shepherd of the people, he turned away from the ways of God also.

And it was deadly, for him and for his people.

Fourth of July remembering seems rather like a dream these days.

The reality of our political life has forgotten what that dream was all about.

"Liberty and justice, for all," has been buried under getting the most I can for me and mine.

And will stay that way.

Until we remember.

Solomon, for now at least, remembered.

He woke up, embraced the dream as the will of God for himself and his people.

He held a feast where he gave thanks for the presence and promise of God -- God who alone can turn the dream into reality.

And so it is for us.

As long as we remember.

Remember.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.