

January 4, 2025 – 1 Kings 3:4-15 & Luke 2:40-52

Who is the wisest person you know? Your mother or father? A sibling? A friend? A college professor? A scientist: perhaps Albert Einstein, Isaac Newton, Galileo, or Copernicus? A philosopher: maybe Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, or Confucius? A theologian: Athanasius, Augustine, Martin Luther, or C. F. W. Walther? Or it might be an author: Homer, Shakespeare, Dickens, or Austen?

Whoever it is, you undoubtedly have a good reason for your choice. This person has influenced you. Inspired you. Helped open your eyes to something you hadn't realized before. Or maybe you simply respect their contribution to the betterment of our world.

However, if you were listening to the Old Testament reading today, then you already know the Bible's answer: King Solomon. God gave to Solomon such great wisdom that it was said of Solomon, *"none like you has been before you and none like you shall arise after you."*

Just how did God make Solomon so very wise? Well, verse 9 says that God gave Solomon what he had prayed for: an "understanding mind." That's not a terrible translation of the Hebrew, but, more literally, it says that God gave to Solomon a "listening heart." A heart that listens to God's Word, listens to his people's issues, and then acts in a way that both loves God and faithfully serves his neighbor.

Now, in some respects, we might say that simply asking for a "listening heart" already showed a great deal of wisdom on Solomon's part. But there was also a reason why Solomon made this request. He didn't simply come up with this idea out of thin air. The truth is that it was born out of painful awareness of Israel's long and tragic history of not listening.

From the time of Moses, God had spoken clearly to His people, and again and again they had closed their ears. When the Lord commanded Israel to enter the Promised Land, trusting His promise and His presence, they refused to listen. Fear drowned out faith. And the result was forty years of wandering in the wilderness. Not because God was unfaithful, but because the people would not listen to Him.

That pattern continued once they entered the Promised Land. The book of Judges is a cycle of stubborn deafness: the people abandon the Lord, chase after false gods, suffer the consequences, cry out for help, and are rescued... only to then abandon the Lord once again, return to their old sins, and repeat the cycle. Over and over, Israel would not listen. They would not hear the Word of the Lord or serve Him only. Instead, they bent their ears toward Baal and Asherah, Molech and Dagon. Their hearts followed what their ears loved.

And introducing kings into the equation didn't help anything. King Saul heard the Word of the Lord but decided to improve upon it. He spared what God had condemned, and offered religious justification for his disobedience. David, a man after God's own heart, listened to his own desires rather than God's commands and fell into adultery and murder.

And just one chapter before this, Solomon sees firsthand the danger of a heart that doesn't listen to the Lord. Following David's death, Solomon's own brother, Adonijah, attempted to seize the throne by force and suffered the consequences of defying God's anointed king.

Solomon knew all of this. He knew how easily hearts turn hard. How quickly ears stop listening. So when God invited him to ask for whatever he desired, Solomon didn't ask for power, wealth, or long life. He asked for a heart that listens. A heart shaped by God's Word and attentive to the needs of God's people.

And God, in His steadfast love, gave him exactly that. God gave Solomon wisdom, discernment, and understanding. And along with them came blessings Solomon didn't ask for. The riches and honor he could have desired instead. God's gift to Solomon was an act of sheer grace. His wisdom wasn't earned. It wasn't a reward for moral superiority. It was given as a gift flowing from God's mercy.

Yet the Scriptures are brutally honest. Even the wisest of men remain sinners. Solomon's wisdom, though real and extraordinary, did not make him immune to temptation or sin. Over time, Solomon stopped listening. The very heart God had given him became divided.

The Lord had clearly warned him not to marry foreign women who would draw his heart away after false gods. Solomon knew the Word. He had heard it. And yet he chose otherwise. Seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines slowly turned his listening heart into a deaf one. He willingly chose to forsake wisdom in favor of foolishness. And a life that began as a testament of God's grace ended as a warning of what happens when God's Law is not obeyed.

And yet, Solomon's downfall isn't a mere historical tragedy. It's a lesson for each one of us. For we're not so different than wise King Solomon. We, too, know God's Word. We have heard His commandments. We confess them. We teach them. We spend hour upon hour in junior high confirmation class memorizing them and making our children memorize them.

And yet how often do we close our ears when that Word confronts what we love? The First Commandment alone is enough to reveal our willful foolishness. Money promises safety. Relationships promise fulfillment. Health promises control. Status promises worth. Possessions promise happiness. The idols and false gods of our life speak and we listen to them.

As our ears hear, our hearts follow. And from hardened hearts flow hardened lives. In Mark 7, Jesus gives a laundry list of what happens when a listening heart becomes a deafened heart: sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness.

These are the outcomes of a heart that no longer listens to God's Word. Even the wisest among us fall. Even the most disciplined minds cannot reason their way into the kingdom of heaven. As Solomon will realize by the end of his life and write about extensively in the Book of Ecclesiastes, our wisdom is never enough.

For that, we need wisdom not from below, but from above. We need not merely a wiser king, but a faithful Son. And so *"the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth."*

Jesus is the true Wisdom of God, not merely because He speaks rightly, but because He listens perfectly. In the Gospel reading, we find Him in the temple. Not asserting authority, not demanding obedience, but hearing, asking, and learning. Even in His youth, His ears are fixed on His Father's Word.

And throughout His life, He remains a listener. When Satan tempts Him in the wilderness, Jesus doesn't negotiate or improvise. He listens to what is written and speaks it back to Satan. He clings to the Word. He refuses to serve Himself. He worships the Lord alone.

And when the cross replaces the wilderness, when mockery replaces temptation, Jesus still listens. He listens to the will of His Father and does not come down. He listens to the insults of sinners and does not turn away. He listens even as nails pierce His flesh and thorns press into His brow.

His heart isn't hardened by suffering, like it so easily is for us. Instead, it is opened in love for sinners who need his forgiveness, for they know not what they do. For six hours He bears our idolatry, our deafness, our foolishness. And when the work is complete, when wisdom has accomplished salvation, He cries out in victory: *"It is finished."*

Where Solomon failed, Jesus remained faithful. Where Israel hardened its heart, Jesus listened. Where we abandon God, Jesus clung to His Father's will. And He did all of this not merely as an example, but as our substitute. In Him, we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace. In Him, God has given us a listening heart. A heart created by repentance and sustained by faith.

Which means you are so very blessed this day. For you have become the wisest people on earth. Not because you've gained some marvelous piece of knowledge. Not because of some insight you've had or because you've made some great contribution to society. Your boast is not in yourself.

No, you are wise because a few minutes ago, you took refuge in the infinite mercy of God, our heavenly father. You sought his grace for the sake of Christ. You stood here and prayed, "Almighty God have mercy upon us. Forgive us our sins and lead us to everlasting life." And then you heard and believed my word of absolution to you: "I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

In Christ, God has given you a listening heart. A heart that listens to his Law and repents. A heart that listens to his grace through Jesus Christ and believes. That is true wisdom from above. And that is wisdom that saves. Amen.