

The Queen of Sheba

While reading Solomon's story, my mind keeps wandering to events in our world: heads of state vying for power, religious violence, military conflicts, diplomatic summits, politicians boasting they will solve all our problems (some doing so in God's name) with little understanding of human suffering.



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Solomon's story begins with humility and promise as he prays, confessing to God his weakness and inexperience, seeking discernment from God (1 Kings 3:7-9). But as the years passed, Solomon solidified his power, built the Temple, organized an army, forged treaties with surrounding kingdoms and amassed amazing wealth.

Today's text concludes with ominous undertones, describing "King Solomon far exceeded all the earth's kings in wealth and wisdom so the whole world wanted an audience with Solomon...to hear his God-given wisdom...year after year they came with their extravagant gifts" (1 Kings 10:23-25).

We have no firm identity for this "Queen of Sheba" who came to test Solomon's wisdom and witness the reputed splendor of his court. The best scholars can suggest is her kingdom was located in the southwest corner of the Arabian Peninsula.

The picture painted resembles a Wagnerian opera with "camels carrying spices, a large amount of gold and precious stones" (1 Kings 10:2). Their conversations must have been fascinating as she "told Solomon everything that was on her mind" and he "answered all her questions...nothing was too difficult for him to answer" (vv. 2-3).

The tentative young king who sought God's strength and guidance is now a self-assured power broker who wows the queen with his palaces, banquets, servants' quarters and the appearance of his considerable staff and advisors. The amount of his burned offerings at the Temple "took her breath away" (vv. 4-5).

Statecraft, even as in our day, was often stagecraft, and the queen was building an alliance with Solomon as she flattered him, saying everything she had been told was true, "half of it wasn't even told me"

and "your people and these servants who continually serve you and get to listen to your wisdom are truly happy!" (vv. 7-8).

Some of the queen's words could have drawn Solomon's heart and mind back to God's answer to his original prayers: "Bless the Lord your God because he was pleased to place you on Israel's throne. Because the Lord loved Israel with an eternal love, the Lord made you king to uphold justice and righteousness" (v. 9).

History and experience testifies to how power and wealth can seduce a person into a god complex, believing in his right to rule, his infallibility and privilege. One of our well worn sayings, "pride goes before a fall," comes from the book of Proverbs (16:18): "Pride comes before disaster, and arrogance before a fall."

Much of Proverbs is attributed to Solomon. Wouldn't it be ironic if Solomon formed that statement? Did he write those words early in life and then failed to apply them to himself? The tragedy is that Solomon became so wrapped up in pride, so convinced that he deserved or earned God's blessings that he lost himself in a world of opulence and selfishness. Wise Solomon warns us that pride and praise can blind us to the world and deafen us to God's voice.

The Queen of Sheba's words could have called Solomon back to his beginning relationship with God: "the Lord made you king to uphold justice and righteousness" (v. 10). Read the rest of chapter 10 and discover that Solomon's annual revenues amounted to 14 tons of gold, plus income from traders, merchants, surrounding kings and officials of the land. His drinking cups were gold. He amassed chariots and horses.

It took him seven years to build the Temple, but it took 14 years to build his own palace. Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines. The reality goes beyond grandiose to obscene. Solomon was so consumed by self that he forgot ordinary people and his calling to bring justice and righteousness to all of God's people. We must be cautious lest our fascination for a self-indulgent Solomon interferes with our confrontation with the needs that surround us in our world. Solomon is not an example to emulate.

Are we quick to bless God for our successes and prosperity while failing to offer justice, mercy and help to those in

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our town? Is our society structured to favor the wealthy and deny opportunity to those below middle class? Jesus was not the first voice of hope in our Bible for those who are poor, suffering, outcast or regarded as foreigners. The Old Testament speaks often of compassion and generosity for "others."

The Queen of Sheba witnessed the wisdom and wealth of Solomon, his impressive court and majestic buildings, and she said: "Your people and these servants who continually serve you and get to listen to your wisdom are truly happy!" (v.8). She was swept up by the glitter and pomp but never interviewed a struggling farmer, saw an orphan's tears or heard the story of a stone mason whose health was ruined in building Solomon's palace.

Solomon put on a great show, but the sad truth is even Solomon had come to believe his charade! This story is not recorded as a parable. But we can learn from a gifted man who could have made Israel great in the ways that truly count, could have shown the world the God who cares for all people and could have modeled compassion and moral courage but, instead, abandoned his birthright and heritage as God's servant.

Who has made a positive impact on your life that still encourages you or shapes your decisions? We have all learned wisdom, not only in words but by another's example.

Justice and righteousness are packed with emotional meaning. In this election season we are hearing a lot of words shouted in rallies and on television spots. Sadly, saying "God" and living by the words and actions of Jesus are not always true to God's Word.

Solomon was noted for his wisdom, but the results of his leadership are inadequate. True wisdom is modeled when we not only claim to be God's people but when we live out justice and mercy. James 3:17 points us in the right direction: "But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy" (NAS).

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