"In Over My Head"

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Sermon for Matins
Society of the Holy Trinity – General Retreat
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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

The text for the sermon this morning is 1 Kings, chapter 3, especially the portion of the text that follows:

I am but a little child; I do not know how to go out or how to come in…. 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?

Thus far, the text.

Dear Christian friends,

When I read that prayer of Solomon's, I think of my daughter, Lily. She is growing up with a whole family of lifeguards teaching her how to swim, including her mother, grandmother, and two aunts. I remember the first time she dove off the diving board and into the deep end of the pool. The look of fear in her eyes as she realized her feet were not going to touch the bottom of the pool, gradually replaced by confidence as she remembered the lessons she learned and swam again.

It is unusual to think of that when thinking of Solomon's prayer, because this prayer is famous mostly because of what happened afterward, namely, that Solomon did become wealthy and a great king in the world. But, I read this as a pastor and it gives me greater pleasure knowing that before he stood at the pinnacle of greatness, Solomon pleaded with God because he knew he was in over his head. I don't know about you, but I feel that way very often in ministry.

I feel in over my head very often, and I look with envy at pastors who have no financial worries in their congregation, and no painful cutbacks in this year's budget. Or, pastors who have no conflicts in the congregation and no two parties contending against one another, no backbiting and no gossiping. Or, perhaps pastors that are blessed with clear vision of how the church can engage the community she resides in with the love and grace of Christ. Perhaps, with a well defined plan that is being executed daily by the church staff and laity, working together.

I am more familiar with churches that do struggle with finances. I am more familiar with ministries that have conflicts small and large. I am more familiar with ministries that struggle with what God wants them to do in the community, and how to be the most effective in sharing the love of Jesus where they are.

Whether we struggle, or not, I think pastors can relate very much to the words of Solomon: "Lord, I am a little child: Give Thy servant therefore an understanding mind to govern Thy people." If only I could get the same results as Solomon with that prayer! If only I could pick up on some Solomon *mojo* for wisdom and then subsequent success in life! Of course, what I am doing then is

asking God to build a kingdom for me, and not for Him. Ultimately, Solomon lost his kingdom, despite the great wisdom that God gave him.

Solomon lost his connection to God. Our text says that Solomon loved the Lord, at first. God appears to Solomon several times to converse with this king. I read a rabbinic commentary on the Song of Solomon that said the encounters between Solomon and God parallel the meetings of the Beloved and Lover in that poem, including the way the Song ends with a longing and the lovers apart. Even with wisdom, Solomon failed. God departed from him.

Knowing that Solomon failed, ultimately, is not going to get me what I want – namely, a program on how to pray for wisdom, bring financial security, conflict resolution and clear vision to my church – all so that I can write my bestselling book: "Courageous, Purpose Driven, Once and Future Churches."

But, it seems that as great as Solomon and the Davidic kings were, their kingdoms did last. Only when God chose to come to this earth in the line of David, can we see the fulfillment of God's promise to David and a kingdom that does last forever. This Kingdom was preached by one who urged disciples to follow after, learning to be content in plenty and in want. "The birds of the air have nests, and foxes have holes, but the Son of Man has no place to lay His head." The Kingdom of God also came in the midst of conflict and Jesus saying that Mother will be against daughter and Father against son, for He did not come to bring peace, but a sword. He was at the center of many conflicts and it was in the violent act of arresting David's Son and David's Lord – nailing Him to a cross and causing Him to suffer – that God would bring His Kingdom of everlasting peace. And when death could not hold Him and the Body did not see corruption, the Kingdom of God went out with clear vision and direction – to make disciples by baptizing and teaching, by those sent out as witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the Ends of the Earth.

So here we find that this sermon is a failure. I am simply not able to give you a program that will eliminate financial worry and conflict while giving clear direction for your church's ministry in the community. I simply do not have that kind of wisdom.

The wisdom that I know will not make you free from want (Christ was not) but it will make you secure and confident as You learn to trust and rely on God above all things.

The wisdom that I have will not make you free from conflict (Christ was not) but it does point to the peace Christ won for us by becoming the ransom for our sin and offering and acceptable sacrifice to God so that we may have His peace reigning in our hearts.

The wisdom that I seek will not give you an automatic, clear vision for growing your church, but it is a solid foundation in Word and Sacrament.

And, at the end of the day, we may still be in way over our heads – which may be just where God wants us, so that we may come to praise Him when we find: "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken, struck down, but not destroyed…" We may bear the death of Jesus in our bodies because the world sees our weaknesses, but we also bear the power of Christ and His Resurrection, which is stronger than our weaknesses. The world must know that this all surpassing power comes from God, because there is no way it could come from me (from us). Who is able to govern this great people? Not me. Christ,

who lives in me. I am more than a conqueror through Him who loves me. It is that love of Christ that gives true wisdom and understanding, so that we do not build a kingdom for ourselves, but seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and then all these things will added unto us.

While I am still in way over my head, I've learned to swim in the deep end with confidence – not because I am such a great pastors, but because I am so blessed. Christ lives in me and sends His Spirit the wisdom from above – so that I may work in His Kingdom. All the while, I know my heavenly Father is watching me swim, and He will not let me drown.

In Jesus' name, Amen.