“Worthy Questions”
1 Kings 2:10-13, 3:3-14

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From the Pulpit
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Prayer for Illumination: Gracious God. Open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit that as the Scriptures are read and your word proclaimed, we may hear with Joy what you have for us this day.

Ever been thrown in the deep end? You find yourself without your water wing floatation device. You panic, you clamor for the side of the pool and you ask God, “Can you save me?” You are in over your head. You don’t think you have the skills to tread water or doggie paddle to the edge. All you want is to bob your way close enough so you can either hold on to the edge or touch your toes on the bottom of the pool. So there’s more security. It’s exhausting! You wonder for yourself if you are qualified…or who was the person who thought you would be a good candidate for deep end diving so early…too soon! He wasn’t ready to lead the team. She wasn’t ready to be partner. He was too young, too inexperienced as quarterback. (It is quickly turning into football season.)
Maybe the question you ask yourself is “How can I do this? How can I maneuver in this unfamiliar territory with so little skill and float, let alone swim.”

Maybe the question is “God do I have what I need to get through? To survive?”

Those are worthy questions.

In my time working with college students, I appreciated when a student would ask a question bigger than the current issue on the table. It would be a question of identity. A question of life’s passion. A question worthy of the person she would become. Over the series of months and years—I would see students wrestle and question, explore, wind through clouded moments and find clarity on what a series of worthy questions might mean for them.

Those conversations were full of worthy questions. The passage that Joe [9am]/Fran [11am] read a few moments ago from 1 Kings is so appealing because it opens up worthy questions. One brought by God. One brought
from Solomon, the next ruler of Israel after his father, King David.

Young Solomon questioned, “What does it really take to be king?” (If you’re running for political office, do candidates ask themselves “what does it really take to lead a people?” If you’re looking for a suggestion on the best seller -- full of power, politics, riches, deception, manipulation, destruction you might try 1st Kings or any of this summer’s Old Testament lectionary narratives. The reading from 1 Kings is the continuation of the Old Testament narrative following the lives, debauchery, military successes and failures of Israel’s kings.

Solomon is in over his head. Father David is dead. Solomon now ascends the throne to head his family and lead the people of Israel. He carries a heavy load. Solomon no longer swims in the shallow end. His father’s death tosses him into the deep end of adulthood and into the depths of his father’s legacy.¹

¹ Sermon from The Rev Dr. Timothy Boggess, Northwest Presbyterian Church, Atlanta GA. Daily podcast on this text. Ideas from this sermon have shaped my own. http://day1.org/6757-skills_and_gills
In the deep end Solomon faces his father’s legacy. King David was magnificent; talented, handsome, larger than life. He slayed Goliath and unified the tribes. David was a poet and master musician, “a man after God’s own heart” (Acts 13:22). But he regularly lived and ruled as if accountable to no one. He wielded absolute power. His story narrates what happens to even the best of leaders when no checks or balances curb their appetites. He murdered. He committed adultery. And yet he also repented and grieved his sin. No one can replace King David.

Our text describes how "Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the ways of his father David; only, he sacrificed and offered incense at the high places.”(I Kings 3:3). In other words, for all his love and devotion, Solomon has a deeply offensive religious habit. The law forbids offering sacrifices to Canaanite gods. Solomon does it regularly. This is Scripture’s way of saying that Solomon is a mess! He truly is in the deep end, way over his head. He loves the Lord and walks in the ways of his father; only, well, he doesn’t.
Sometimes we do things to buy time. Solomon does this when he goes to Gibeon, to worship at these altars to other gods. It takes a while to offer a thousand burnt sacrifices. A few days, maybe even weeks. When we are stuck or afraid, we do something familiar or habitual, to let time go by. Solomon hangs out at the high places. He postpones the difficult work of following in his father's footsteps. He avoids facing his new reality. Solomon looks like he’s running to the gods for help, but really he’s running away; he brings his fear with him to Gibeon.

Here comes the first worthy question:

It’s from God. When Solomon was at a high place, God finds him in a dream. Advisors and priests leave the room. In sleep, we all fall fast and deep into the securing hands of God. Sleep is the great equalizer. In the dream we see Solomon’s faith and fear, his humility and his need. In Solomon’s most vulnerable place of deep rest and complete surrender, God said, What should I give you? Ask.” ² (NRSV: Ask what I should give you.)

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² Eugene Petersen, The Message.
In his sleep the new king unburdens his heart. It’s as if Solomon is saying:

_I don’t feel up to this, God. I’m in the place of my father, but I’m not my father. I can’t take his place. Help me do some things differently than my dad. God, you know better than anyone what trouble he had with boundaries of any kind. And now I’m king and I don’t know what I’m doing._

The second worthy question comes from Solomon. He asks for what he wants from God:

_Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil… For who can govern this your great people? (I Kings 3:9)_

His words sound like a prayer. God, give me what I need to overcome what I’m facing; but if I don’t receive that, give me what I need to endure it.

God praises Solomon for asking for the right thing and gives him what he asks for, the gift of “a wise and discerning
mind; no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you.” (1 Kings 3:12).

The new king’s future looks bright. He will adjudicate many disputes, he will forever be known for building the Temple in Jerusalem. The massive structures he constructs will astonish the world.

Solomon’s 2 a.m. conversation with God at Gibeon won’t be the last one. As Solomon amasses wealth and power we get the sense that he doesn’t return to that place of openness and vulnerability very often. He consistently overlooks God’s commands to care for the vulnerable in his own country. He invests in foreign gods. He forces workers into unfair labor practices, he holds available 300 wives and 700 lady friends for his pleasure. His forty years on the throne after David result in misery and unrest for the people he governs and the fall of Israel.

King Solomon is known for his wisdom. The four letter word for “Like Solomon” in the crossword puzzle is WISE. Our text points out that he wasn’t born with such wisdom.
He asks for an understanding mind and receives that gift. In Hebrew, another way to translate “understanding mind” is “listening heart.” This history of Solomon makes us really wonder what wisdom is supposed to be.

“Over time does the king’s vast wealth have a stronger voice than that holy?” Another worthy question. It’s fine that “money talks” but not when it’s the only voice in the room.

Like Solomon so many centuries ago, I wonder what worthy questions God asks at night to those in our country who seek political office? For those seeking to govern? What is the question that comes to them in the night? What is the worthy question that God asks of any of the dozen or so candidates running for president of the United States? For Mayor? For city council?

I wonder what worthy question they may ask in return. And I wonder about the worthy questions that God asks of us?
Emily, can you just have a little more faith on this one? Emily, can you let go just a little bit and let me enter in?

**What are the worthy questions that we ask of God?** We all have them.

Am I doing what you want me to do?
God, can you cure this horrible cancer?
God, why is life so complicated?
God, am I good enough?

We trust that when we ask these sorts of questions, God listens. You ask. You listen. You wait.

When discerning my call to ministry, a wise and trusted council said to me, “Is your heart in it? Because you’ll need it to get through.” It was like a bright flash that made everything clearer---once my heart readjusted. That question was pointing me to an understanding mind and a listening heart.

It was a worthy question. It’s one that shapes my life today. There are worthy questions that shape our life together as a community of faith.
Our Christian life is rooted in the questions of baptism. They are the questions that we asked of Caleb’s parents. And they are the questions that we ask of you. They are worthy questions that connect our lives together—and connect our lives to God. It happens in the water. In the water when we think we are “in too deep” or don’t know how to tread water. When we are dog paddling just as fast as we can to find shallow ground to feel secure again….God calls us to rest in the waters of baptism. To trust in the abundant grace of God.

Worthy questions.

Do you promise to be Christ’s disciple?
Do you promise to grow in Christian faith?
Do you as a congregation promise your love, support and care as this child lives and grows?

Today, Caleb goes in deep. Sprinkled and immersed (even) in the deep end,….in the sacrament of baptism, we set him on the course of his Christian life. He’s supported by others from this day forward. Family, friends, this congregation
and God. In Baptism, we don’t ask the question, “am I good enough?” We affirm that in this act of the Holy Spirit, God calls us enough and God supports us in our journey. Together, as a community of faith we continue to ask worthy questions of our life together. We ask our baptismal questions over and over again. Are we Christ’s disciples? Are we growing in our Christian faith? Are we furthering God’s mission of peace and justice in the world?

I would challenge us to continue to review these questions spoken in our own baptism, individually and as a congregation. Are we asking for understanding minds? Do we come to each and every event, meeting, fellowship gathering with listening hearts to discern what God’s worthy questions are for us?

As Solomon wrestled living into the job responsibilities of king, wondering if he was enough, so too do we wrestle with the worthy questions of our lives. Falling down and faltering, tripping up and frantically treading water in the deep, we can trust in this.
God meets us. God claims us. God saves us-In the waters of Baptism.

As we discern the worthy questions of our lives, let’s make sure we come with understanding minds and listening hearts and know that God calls us enough.

Amen.

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