

...and God said, “Ask what I should give you.” (1 Kings 3:5)

There was a movie out several years ago titled “Bruce Almighty” where Jim Carrey played a skeptic and Morgan Freeman played God. Bruce (the skeptic) was given the chance to see what a single day in the life of God was really like. One thing I poignantly recall from the movie was how Bruce was overwhelmed with all the prayers—all the many voices in his head asking for so many things: healing, peace, courage, wealth, success, shelter, food, forgiveness, reconciliation, revenge. All these voices were swirling around at once—beseeching, pleading, asking. Have you ever thought about this? What prayer must sound like from *God’s* perspective? By nightfall, Bruce was more than ready to give up his one-day stint as God.

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In today’s Old Testament lesson, God appears to Solomon in a dream and gives the young king the green light: *Ask what I should give you*. Solomon is new at all this. He’s in the early days of his reign and seems a bit overwhelmed with his new job, don’t you think? “I’m only a little child,” he says. “I do not know how to go out or come in.” Rough Hebrew translation: “I have no idea what I’m doing in this job.” Maybe you can relate to Solomon’s anxiety and nervousness in starting something new—something for which you feel vastly underequipped and unprepared; exposed.

Preachers are notorious for having anxiety dreams where we are standing in the pulpit unprepared, or hopelessly late to a wedding, or guilty of saying the wrong name for the deceased at a funeral. I often don’t sleep well on Saturday nights because I’ve been dreaming about standing before you in my underwear, exposed as a fraud, a pretender.

Solomon says to God today: “Your servant is in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a great people, so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted.” We can be counted here at Ebenezer. We’re a finite people—in flux, ebbing and flowing, yes, but finite. We count heads and report the numbers each year to the synod office. Even so, I can relate to Solomon. The job just seems overwhelming to him. He can’t keep up with everybody. He acknowledges his limitations before God. I suspect this is one key to leadership: confessing candidly and regularly that you cannot do it all.

Ask what I should give you, God says. What an invitation this is! It’s almost like the genie has emerged from the lamp and granted the young king a wish. If God appeared to you in a dream and gave you a similar green-light, what would you ask for? Ever think about this? Please don’t be quick in answering this question. It’s a lot to think about.

Several centuries after Solomon, Jesus will stand before his disciples and say, “Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you.”¹ *Ask, search, knock*. “It will be given,” says Jesus. To be honest, I’ve asked for many things in prayer that have not been granted.

I prayed like anything several years ago that my good friend, Bill, would be healed. His brain cancer became more aggressive. This past week, our dear family cat (Pippin) went missing and I prayed for his safe return. (Maybe that seems rather mundane to you, but he's become a family member to us). Each day passes and it seems more certain that Pippin is gone. I pray for peace in a certain marriage, peace in this or that country—peace in her heart, or his future. And sometimes it seems like offering prayers to the wind. “*Ask what I should give you,*” says God to Solomon. Does God invite his people to do this still? What have you been asking for lately? Does prayer really work?

I've always loved author David James Duncan's take on certain types of prayer. He writes: “As for the time I asked Jesus for a base hit at a ball game, when I stepped to the plate and struck out on three pitches I was relieved: if every kid in America could get a hit just by asking Jesus, we'd all bat a thousand and ruin baseball in a day.”²

Says Paul in today's second lesson: “We do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.” I think Paul has this just about right. I don't know how to pray as I ought. And so the Spirit intercedes for me with sighs beyond words. Maybe all you can muster some days in prayer is a sigh. It's enough. For nothing—death, life, things present, or things to come—can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Quite a promise.

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Ask what I should give you, says God to Solomon. The young king, you may have noticed, does not launch directly in to a specific request. Solomon begins his prayer not with *asking*, but instead with *remembering*.³ He recalls God's great love to his father, in spite of David's rather seamy mistakes with Solomon's mother, Bathsheba. He gives thanks for God's steadfast love and mercy. Solomon offers praise for God's direction and guidance in leading him to this moment in time. It's not a bad way to begin a prayer: giving thanks for what God has done rather than suggesting what God should do. *Grounding our prayers in a certain history gives us an idea of what to ask for in the future.*

And so Solomon prays for wisdom, the ability to “discern between good and evil.” His prayer surely hearkens back to a certain tree of “the knowledge of good and evil” where his forebears in the faith stumbled. Solomon, notably, does not pray for himself. He prays for the health of the people. The health of the community. An understanding mind with which to lead the people. The ability to tell good and evil apart in a world filled with both.

As we prepare to make decisions this fall in electing a new president, it might behoove us to pray for a leader with the spirit of Solomon—a leader with true humility who does not pretend to know everything; a leader who recognizes the overwhelming size of the job and is not afraid of collaboration; a leader who recognizes his place in an ongoing history; a leader who is awed by the call to “govern a great people.”

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I love verse 10 of our story today. “It *pleased* the Lord that Solomon had asked this.” We may not be able to fully explain the theological intricacies of prayer—why some prayers go unanswered, others seem as agonizing as a sigh.

After Jesus shares a series of parables today with his disciples, he asks: “Have you understood all this?” They quickly answer, “Yes.” I have to conclude they were either over-confident or lying. Complete understanding often eludes us.

But our prayers are capable of pleasing God who seeks to give us the gifts we need. *Ask what I should give you.*

What are your prayers like these days? Where are they centered? With this old prayer as our guide—rooted in history, concerned with the community, confident in a God who truly listens—we too are given a green light:

So go ahead.

Go ahead and ask.

¹ Luke 11:9.

² David James Duncan, *God Laughs and Plays* (Great Barrington: Triad, 2006), p. 91.

³ I am indebted to Walter Brueggemann for this insight.