

August 19, 2018  
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church  
1 Kings 2:10-12, 3:3-14

### **Far From the Tree**

Summer's advancing. You can see it in the vegetation: our church's community garden is thick with produce, and if you look up into certain trees you can see them becoming heavy with the promise of harvest. I was taking my dog for a walk up the block the other day and as we passed a neighbor's tree we were startled by a thud. My dog is easily startled. The tree was a fruit tree, I saw as I peered beneath to see what had made the sound. As you may guess, it was an apple, which, as you may also guess, didn't fall far from the tree.

That's the most literal experience I have ever had of that proverb, but I have observed it metaphorically, as perhaps have you: that the fruit of one's loins is often like one's self, children resemble their parents. That saying applies to today's Old Testament reading. We've been progressing this summer through the stories of Israel's first kings with a special emphasis on David. In today's reading we come to the end of David's rule, to the end of his life. David "slept with his ancestors," as scripture puts it, poetically. We hear today about the son that takes the throne after, Solomon, and the apple doesn't fall far from the tree.

David, according to today's reading, was a magnificent ruler. Today's scriptural excerpt speaks of David in absolutely glowing terms. Or to be more precise, in today's reading, in a prayer to God Solomon speaks of David in absolutely glowing terms. It is how David is remembered in much of the Bible: heralded as a hero, a high point in Israel's monarchy, dear to God's heart, "the apple of his eye," you might say, using a phrase that comes from Psalm 17, which David is said to have written.

Like his father, Solomon receives many fine commendations in scripture, and, like his father, Solomon is also considered a writer of scripture. According to tradition, Solomon is the author of the Biblical book of Proverbs, which, as you may guess, is replete with sound advice, and also the book of Ecclesiastes, from which comes yet deeper and darker insight, such as "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity..." and "To everything there is a season... A time to be born, a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted..." Solomon is said to have written yet one more book of the Bible, and it's easy to guess which one by the title: Song of Solomon—which is hands down the steamiest book in the Bible. Not only was Solomon a writer, like his father, he also negotiated internal conflicts, and was into building projects. He also amassed great wealth and became known for his wisdom—the wisdom for which he prayed in the reading we just heard, wisdom which, judging from his literary output, is both proverbial, and existential, and erotic.

But, as with David, a glowing portrait is not all the Bible has to say about Solomon. Admission of this is right there at the beginning of today's reading, it is one of the very first things said about Solomon, how, though he loved the Lord, and walked in his statutes, he also "sacrificed and offered incense in the high places." When the Bible says that, when it mentions acts of worship in "the high places," that's code for idolatry. That is, Solomon broke the first commandment, the very first thing God wants us to get right. When I was a child I thought the first commandment was the easiest one to keep, because I didn't worship other gods, I didn't have any little statues, I didn't think there was any more gods than one, at most. But as I have grown I have realized how much more there is to it, how easy it is to break the first commandment, to be drawn to, to give oneself over to, things not worthy, things unworthy of one's commitment, one's time, one's fidelity. I now think it so very hard to get that right, having no other gods but God. Solomon didn't get that right. And if you read other Bible stories about

him you'll hear how he got other things wrong, too: Solomon was no stranger to violence, he was acquisitive, not only of wealth, but of women, he married hundreds, and had other women besides. Like his father. The apple didn't fall far from the tree.

Some say it was an apple that Eve plucked from the tree in that old, old story from the Old Testament, much older than the story of Solomon praying for wisdom. Some say it was an apple that Eve plucked from the tree of knowledge, an act that led to expulsion out of Eden, an act that sent our ancestors far, far away from the good garden God had made. In theological terms, that story is often referred to as "The Fall." It may not have been an apple that led to The Fall, it likely did not happen like that, literally. The truth of that story is larger, and older, and more current than that, unavoidably current. That story speaks of the human condition. It speaks of our sense of lack, that sense of lack that leads to recurring actions for the worse. It speaks of human estrangement, of the gnawing need to find something to fill a felt void. One of my seminary professors used to say that The Fall happened, Adam and Eve did what they did, reached for and ate of the fruit of that tree, not because their stomachs were empty, but because they thought that their hearts had an apple-shaped hole in them. Adam and Eve thought that if only they had an apple, their hearts would be complete, full, at rest.

We could scoff at their story—if we didn't repeat it with objects that are slightly more sophisticated than fruit. Instead of an apple-shaped hole in our hearts, perhaps we think our hearts have an iPhone-shaped hole (so perhaps it's still an apple-shaped hole), or a house-shaped hole. Or perhaps that empty outline in our hearts is of the perfect job, or the perfect spouse. We can picture that thing we think we need in outline—tellingly, the thing itself is a void, but we think if we had it, it would fill that hole, fill us, put an end to the restlessness of our hearts. Our old Adam reaches for it, and it is not the apple but we ourselves who are falling, far, far from the good that God has intended from the beginning of time, falling, and as we fall, grabbing after, grasping everyone we can, so that they are falling along with us, everyone after.

The Bible often speaks of sin in generational terms, says that the sins of the father will be visited upon generations to come, that sin is something passed along and punishment inherited. This is hard, feels unpleasant to repeat, is not how I want things to be—but is often how things are. I can see myself doing things my parents did that I swore I would not—things that hurt me I now do, things that continue and pass on hurt, extend estrangement, perpetuate pain. We can see this in our world, how the littlest bit of digging reveals how very generational human brokenness is, how old and deep its roots.

There is yet another tree, a tree that was planted on a hill far away, far outside the city walls, far from the constructs of humanity. This tree was planted long ago, but is living still. It is a tree that speaks of the folly of this world, and of the foolishness of God, the foolishness of God which is wiser than men. It is a tree that blooms with human brokenness and whose fruit is God's relentless love. It is the tree that is the cross. In the cross we are freed from the curse of perpetual alienation. In the cross we are freed to emulate the love of God, who is Father of all. In the cross we are given a new garden, seeds of the gospel to plant and tend, a plentiful harvest promised for all.

We still will repeat our parent's mistakes. We still live in a world of sin—but it is also a world that has been redeemed. Though much influenced by parents, children, ineluctably, are their own people. We grow up, and can continue to grow. Cycles can be broken. Bad patterns may be put behind. A hurt received may be not repeated, but replaced with love and understanding. Every time that happens, every time you do that, every time you experience that, receive that, that is the power of the cross, in you, for you. This is the beginning of wisdom, as the proverb says, this is the beginning of wisdom: to know our need, to know our Lord. This is the wisdom of the tree that is the cross: that we who were far off have been brought near.