

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Alive in the Adventure of Jesus: Finding Wisdom”
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1 Kings 3:1-9; Luke 2:39-52

So what are we supposed to do? What are we supposed to do in less than two weeks when we have a new president inaugurated who has never held office, never passed a bill, and never created policy? What are we supposed to do with our new congress in which the majority party cannot agree within itself what to do about some of the most important issues of our day: trade, immigration and health care among them? What are we supposed to do with a state legislature that continues to try to figure out how to fund infrastructure and education? What do we do when we have new elders being ordained and installed today who are going to be leading the church into a religious world that is rapidly changing and highly unpredictable? What are we supposed to do? The answer? Pray for wisdom...for their wisdom.

Wisdom is one of those interesting concepts in scripture that almost defies definition. It is not simply knowledge, though knowledge matters. It is not simply faith, but faith matters. It is not simply intuition, though intuition helps. One part of Wisdom is that ability to discern and implement the new reality that God desires in which all are blessed. It is the ability to cut through all of the warring ideas, concepts, belief systems and party politics and see the right choices that need to be made to enhance the lives of those who are governed. This morning then I want to offer you a prayer in three parts for all of our leaders, that I will encourage you to pray every day...all arising out of the only story we have of Jesus' childhood. So here we go.

Part number one is that our leaders look for wisdom. Our story in Luke picks up with Jesus and his parents headed for Jerusalem. Jesus, who at twelve is now considered an adult, evidently slips away from his parents either heads to, or remains at, the Temple after his parents make their obligatory sacrifices. Why would Jesus do this? He is after all, well, Jesus. I would argue that he does so because he is looking for wisdom. Somehow he already understands that he has been entrusted with a special mission. In order to accomplish this mission he will need wisdom, the ability to cut through religious tradition and worldly temptations to discern God's future for him; to discern what are the right choices. And the Temple is the place where the great teachers, the great rabbis, shared their wisdom by teaching the next generation of Jewish scholars. These were the people for whom Jesus was looking; from whom he could find wisdom. We need to pray this for our leaders because the temptation of all leaders is to assume that they, in an of themselves, have the right education, insight and intelligence to always make the right decision. Unfortunately, the systems into which they are being engulfed are powerful, and without wisdom, those leaders will simply repeat the words and deeds of those around them, and not necessarily those which lead to God's new creation.

Part number two is that our leaders listen to wisdom. What has always fascinated me about the use of this Jesus story is that people believe that Jesus was there, as a twelve-year-old, teaching the

teachers; that the divine Jesus child was in the midst of the scholars, teaching them a thing or two. But if we actually look at the text we see that Jesus is listening and asking questions. Jesus understands that he does not possess all wisdom. He understands that the only way to gain wisdom is to first listen to those who are wiser than he is and then to ask them questions. As an aside, this process of listening, asking and then answering questions from the wise teachers was the Jewish way of transmitting wisdom from one generation to the next. Yes, the scholars and people are amazed at his understanding and his answers to their questions to him, but before that, we have to hold fast to the fact that Jesus knew he did not have all of the answers but was in need of listening to others wiser than himself. We need to pray this for our leaders because they are going to be inundated with all sorts of people all wanting their time, their vote and their support. People and institutions with a single cause will dangle money and support in front of them...oh and elders, sorry this will not happen to you...and they will be tempted to listen to the highest bidder. And our leaders, just like most of us, will tend to listen to those people with whom they already agree, which simply reinforces their particular prejudices and priorities, rather than offering them new possibilities. Our leaders need the ability to listen to, and ask questions of, those who already possess wisdom. Who have a clearer vision of what God's future for this nation, this state, this church ought to look like. Our leaders need to be those who have walked the road before and learned what does and does not lead to a more decent and caring country.

Part number three is that they learn wisdom. As the old saying goes, you can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink, the same is true for wisdom. You can lead a person to wisdom but you cannot make them learn it. Jesus learned it. The final verse of the story is that Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor. Jesus learned wisdom. He learned it so that when he begins his ministry and is tempted in the wilderness, he is able to see through the temptations and choose the right path. He learned it so that he could teach it to his disciples and, through the Gospels, to countless generations. He learned it such that in the cross and not in violence he could see the salvation of the world. Jesus would spend the rest of his life learning wisdom in order to save the world. Our leaders need to learn wisdom because we live in a complex and complicated world; a world in which slogans and simplistic answers will not work; in which there are no silver bullets that will make everything better; in which there are competing claims and voices, all crying to be heard; in which there is injustice, greed and desperate need; but also in which there is much good, compassion and caring needing to be encouraged. In other words, all of our leaders have been asked to do the impossible; to help create a better world, nation, state and church for all. In this reality, only wisdom will do.

It is a simple prayer, that all of our leaders look for, listen to and learn wisdom. I have already begun to pray this prayer every day, because we will either rise or fall together, and I would rather we rise together in order to offer a better life and future to all. That then is my challenge, that you pray daily for all leaders, that they look for, listen to and learn wisdom.