1 Kings 3:5-12

At Gibeon God appeared in a dream to the ruler during a dream in the night, saying, "Ask what you would like me to give you."

Solomon replied, "You have shown great kindness to your servant, David, who was faithful, faithful, righteous, and obedient to you. And you have generously maintained this constant love toward us and now you have appointed a successor to sit on the judgment seat this very day. Now, YHWH my God, you have continued this kindness to David's successor to sit on the judgment seat this very day. Here I am in the midst of your chosen people, a people so numerous they cannot be counted. Give me, your servant, a discerning heart, so that I may distinguish good from evil govern your people with wisdom."

YHWH was very pleased that Solomon requested what he said. So God said to Solomon, "Because this is what you asked for and not for a long life, or for wealth, or for the lives of your foes, but asked for discernment in administering justice, I grant your request. And I give you a heart so wise and so understanding that there has been no one like you before your time, nor will there be after your time."

Psalm 119:129-136

129 Your decrees are wonderful; * therefore I obey them with all my heart.
130 When your word goes forth it gives light; * it gives understanding to the simple.
131 I open my mouth and pant; * I long for your commandments.
132 Turn to me in mercy, * as you always do to those who love your Name.
133 Steady my footsteps in your word; * let no iniquity have dominion over me.
134 Rescue me from those who oppress me, * and I will keep your commandments.
135 Let your countenance shine upon your servant * and teach me your statutes.
136 My eyes shed streams of tears, * because people do not keep your law.

Romans 8:26-39

The Spirit, too, comes to help us in our weakness. For we don't know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit expresses our plea with groanings too deep for words. And God, who knows everything in our hearts, knows perfectly well what the Spirit is saying, because her intercessions for God's holy people are made according to the mind of God.

We know that God makes everything work together for the good of those who love God and have been called according to God's purpose. They are the ones God chose long ago, predestined to share the image of the Only Begotten, in order that Christ might be the firstborn of many. Those God predestined have likewise been called; those God called have also been justified; and those God justified have, in turn, been glorified.

What should be our response? Simply this: "If God is for us, who can be against us?" Since God did not spare the Only Begotten, but gave Christ up for the sake of us all, we may be certain, after such a gift, that God will freely give us everything. Who will bring a charge against God's chosen ones? Since God is the One who justifies, who has the power to condemn? Only Christ Jesus, who died—or rather, was raised—and sits at the right hand of God, and who now intercedes for us!

What will separate us from the love of Christ? Trouble? Calamity? Persecution? Hunger? Nakedness? Danger? Violence? As scripture says, "For your sake, we're being killed all day long; we're looked upon as sheep to be slaughtered." Yet in all this we are more than conquerors because of God who has loved us. For I am certain that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, neither heights nor depths—nor anything else in all creation—will be able to separate us from the love of God that comes to us in Christ Jesus, our Savior.
Matthew 13:31-33,44-52

Jesus presented another parable to the crowds: “The kingdom of heaven is like the mustard seed which a farmer sowed in a field. It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is the biggest shrub of all—it becomes a tree so that the birds of the air come to perch in its branches.”

Jesus offered them still another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like the yeast a baker took and mixed in with three measures of flour until it was leavened all through.”

“The kingdom of heaven is like a buried treasure found in a field. The ones who discovered it hid it again, and, rejoicing at the discovery, went and sold all their possessions and bought that field. "Or again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant’s search for fine pearls. When one pearl of great value was found, the merchant went back and sold everything else and bought it. "Or again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net thrown into the sea, which collected all kinds of fish. When it was full, the fishers hauled it ashore. Then, sitting down, they collected the good ones in a basket and threw away those that were of no use. This is how it will be at the end of time. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the just and throw the wicked into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and the gnashing of teeth.

“Have you understood all this?” “Yes,” they answered. To this Jesus replied, "Every religious scholar who has become a student of the kingdom of heaven is like the head of a household who can bring from the storeroom both the new and the old.”
The Apostle Paul is one of the most fascinating figures in the Bible. He was so very human, as he himself put it, “treasure in a clay jar”; and yet so in tune with the Divine. He was brilliant. Irascible. Passionate. Judgmental. Tireless. Faithful. He did not do anything by half measure and he did not suffer fools gladly, or really in any way at all.

He was likely born somewhere around the year 5 of the Common Era in the city of Tarsus, a center for Greek culture and a hub of trade on the Mediterranean coast. Growing up, Saul, as he was then known, would have heard philosophers preaching in the street, especially Stoic philosophers with their gospel of self-control and fortitude, of clear and unbiased thinking and all this influenced the style he used to present the Gospel of Jesus Christ to Greek speakers and thinkers, enabling him to be the Apostle to the Gentiles. Saul himself was raised in a devout Jewish household—steeped in Orthodox Pharisaic Judaism. As a child he was sent to Jerusalem to study with one of the most prominent rabbis in history—Gamaliel. There he was educated in the law and the prophets, knowledge he would use, particularly in his letter to the Romans, to convince his Jewish siblings of the unity of the Old Testament covenant and prophecies with Jesus Christ.

It is likely that Saul first encountered Christianity, followers of the Way, in Jerusalem. And he was offended by them and their claim of Jesus as Messiah. He knew the Law and the Prophets, and he knew that the Messiah would not have suffered Jesus’ fate. So he jumped into shutting down Christianity with both feet. In fact, we first meet Saul in Scripture as he is participating in the martyrdom of St. Stephen. Saul was one of the ones throwing rocks and egging others on.

But then, as he was traveling on the Damascus Road, on his way to go after more Christians, he had an encounter with the Risen Christ, knocking him off his donkey. And he heard Jesus saying, “Saul, why do you persecute me?”. In that instant his life changed—as he put it “the scales fell from his eyes” and he could see the truth clearly. He was baptized, renamed Paul, and with his typical zeal, quickly became an Apostle—one who spreads the Good News of the Kin-dom of God in Jesus Christ. Paul’s conversion experience profoundly shaped how he saw and taught the Gospel. He knew deep in his bones how one could be completely convinced of something, convinced you were on God’s side, then in an instant be shown just how wrong you were.

And, while Paul was the greatest teacher of Christianity, its first brilliant theologian, at heart he was, as I like to say, a big ole mystic. One who seeks union with the divine. Seeks to see with Christ’s eyes, hear with Christ’s ears, speak with Christ’s mouth, and love with Christ’s heart. This is why he makes pronouncements that sound like the height of egotism to us—about how those to whom he is writing should imitate him, should listen to him and learn from him. But Paul was not doing this from a place of hubris but of humility—of union with Christ—of being, as he wrote so often, “in Christ”. And he felt deep in his bones that what he taught, this Gospel of God who became human, joining the human with the divine, this opening up of what it meant to be human, this enlargement of the world to encompass everyone and everything in Christ, was a matter of urgency, of life and death. So there was nothing he wouldn’t risk or do to teach, or to reinforce to those who had heard it but strayed, the Way of Christ. And he paid a price for being an Apostle—he was harassed, ostracized, imprisoned, beaten, and ultimately beheaded. Paul knew what it was to have your life turned upside down for Christ, suffer for the sake of the Gospel. To be faithful to Christ no matter the cost.

Suffering is something that has been on my mind a lot in the last few months. There is the obvious suffering of so many with the pandemic—the sick and those who died. The suffering of health care workers. Of all who have lost their job and face an uncertain future. There is the suffering of black and brown Americans—a suffering that has gone on for centuries, but that has been made more visible recently to those of us who have had the privilege of not seeing—whose eyes have been blinded by white supremacy. We have experienced a sort of dropping of scales from our eyes. There is the suffering of loneliness and isolation. Of anxiety. Of grief. So much suffering. And, as we have seen in the last week, there is the suffering of those who are protesting injustice, brutality, and who are being tear gassed and abducted by shadowy federal troops. All in service of preserving a status quo of inequality and injustice—in preserving the suffering of many.

I have watched events in Portland with increasing horror, and now this president is threatening to send federal troops into Chicago, New York, Philadelphia. It is a gut punch. And it feels to me like we are at a crucial moment in history—that the soul of the nation is at stake. I am aware that this nation has never been perfect, that we are a work in progress, but this feels like a tipping point. And I am not typically one for using battle language, but, in a very real sense, this moment feels like a cosmic war between good and evil.

And those of us who follow Christ in this moment face a choice. The truth, of course, is that we face choices on a
My beloved siblings in Christ, we are at a moment to decide, as individuals, as a church, as a nation. Which side are we on? Now, I am acutely aware of the human tendency to assume that whichever side we are on is the good one. So generally I avoid making a broad pronouncement that this side is good and this side is bad. But Scripture, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, make absolutely clear what is right and good: love, compassion, Biblical justice (love in public policy, in the public square), standing with the oppressed, recognizing the value of every single human life. And through this lens it is clear that oppressing, abusing, and dehumanizing black people for centuries, is evil. It is clear that allowing people to suffer and die because of a lack of access to health care or food or shelter is evil. That keeping children in cages at our borders is evil. That a president denying a pandemic then obstructing efforts to address it and alleviate suffering is evil. That the Empire deploying troops to attack and detain peaceful citizens is evil. This is not difficult moral calculus, it is Christianity 101, it is clear and straightforward.

Those of us who are followers of Christ, then, face an essential choice. Which side are we on and what are we going to do about it? No need to start yelling out answers or freaking out because you don't have one yet. I am experiencing a great deal of inner turmoil—wrestling, not with deciding what is good and evil—that is crystal clear right now—but wrestling with what exactly am I called to do about it? What am I willing to do? The struggle between comfort and discomfort. Clarity and confusion. Safety and danger. Self-preservation and selflessness. I cannot yet clearly resolve this dilemma for myself, so I am not in a great position to be handing out advice.

But I have observed a few things in my own life and in the Biblical witness. And the first is that this internal struggle, the stress of weighing, the difficulty of deciding, is OK—it is the wrestling of the Spirit within. Following Christ means struggling and moving onwards without clarity—it always has.

The second is that suffering, while never to be pursued for its own sake (there is no God merit badge for suffering) is not to be avoided at all costs either. There are things for which, as Christians, we are called to put ourselves, our bodies, on the line. Each of us has to decide when and where that is, but the call is there. Am I called to be one of the Moms standing between protestors and police? Am I called to plan and coordinate protests? Am I called to care for those who are protesting, providing food, water, and other support for them? Am I called to chain myself to the White House fence? What do I put on the line and how?

Paul put his entire life on the line. He suffered all the things he listed in Romans—all the things that he insists will not, cannot separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ: trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, and the sword. For Paul being in Christ meant identifying with all of life, with every human being. It meant loving all of life, every human being. It meant standing in solidarity with those who suffer from injustice, no matter the cost. Putting his body on the line. We saw the same witness in the life of Blessed John Lewis who died this week—beaten, bloodied time and time again.

And if, with me, you are wondering how in the world they did that, where they got the courage and strength to do that, Paul spells it out. “Can any of these sufferings triumph over us? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38 For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons,[k] neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, 39 neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (NIV)

I believe that, I really do. And at times it seems enough. At times, frankly, my fear takes over and I am paralyzed, or I waffle and want to argue the finer points to let myself off the hook, and, after all, I am not Paul.

But, the choice goes by...I do not know what I will have the courage and strength to do as an individual. I do not know what we, the church, will have the courage to do. I do know that being silent and doing nothing is not an option.

So, I ask you to pray for me as I struggle, and I will pray for you as you struggle. And I will trust that we will move with the Spirit. And I will trust that as I, as we, try—whether tentatively or boldly, to follow in the footsteps of Christ, that nothing, nothing will separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The last verse of the hymn that has been haunting me is this:

daily basis. Christian life is a series of small decisions about how and who we are in the world, from the dramatic to the trivial. The choice right now is dramatic. There is an old hymn that has popped into my mind unbidden many times in the last few weeks (I have tweaked the language a bit to make it non-gendered): “Once to every one and nation comes the moment to decide, in the strife of truth with falsehood for the good or evil side. Some great cause, God’s new Messiah, offering each the bloom or blight, and the choice goes by forever, twixt that darkness and that light.”
“Though the cause of Evil prosper, yet tis Truth alone is strong; though her portion be the scaffold, and upon the throne is wrong; yet that scaffold sways the future, and behind the dim unknown, standeth God within the shadow, keeping watch above God's own.”

Amen.

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