

Hannover International Worship
16 August 2015

Preacher: Gretchen Schoon Tanis

1 Kings 3: 3-14
Ephesians 5:15-20

It's my privilege to be your preacher this morning at English language worship. My family and I moved here just over a year ago and we have been grateful to worship with you on a regular basis over the past year. I am grateful for English speakers who desire to worship God with one another! Don't be deceived by my name Gretchen though! It might sound German, and I am grateful to be in a land where people can pronounce my name, but my ancestors are actually from the Netherlands! When you are traveling or living abroad you always have unique pronunciations of your name so I'm glad to be here in Hannover.

And actually, today, I would like to invite you into a memory of travel. I have had the privilege of traveling to many places around the world, but this particular trip has left a distinct memory in my mind and heart. Four years ago I had the privilege of traveling to Mexico with the women of my family to celebrate my cousin's 40th birthday and clear cancer scans after a year of treatments. From Chicago's O'Hare International airport we were flying to Houston, Texas and then on to Puerto Vallarta, Mexico. Of course O'Hare airport is one of the busiest airports in the United States and on the day that we traveled it was just as busy as usual. If you have had travel experience you will know that you have to be VERY determined NOT to eavesdrop if you are in a long queue weaving back and forth for long lengths of time. On this particular day, not surprisingly because of our final destination in Mexico, we had a Hispanic family just ahead of us in line. A mother and father were traveling with a young child maybe 1.5 or 2 years old. When we finally made it close to the ticket counter to check in I couldn't help but overhear the airline personnel say to this Hispanic family that the connection time to their final destination would be too short so they would have to re-book on a later flight and they would also have to pay for that re-booking. There was a bit of strong discussion between the family and the airline staff over the issue of connection time and if they would REALLY have to pay for rebooked seats that weren't even necessary at that moment, but the staff insisted that they pay for seats before boarding the first flight. Of course my ears perked up because they were traveling to the same place as we were. In my mind I was making calculations and wondering what we would do in case we missed our flight, etc. I even did an internal "uh-oh" because when there are travel issues in Chicago your entire trip can be upset.

However, much to my utter shock, when our group went to check in for the same exact flight, the airline staff did not say anything about re-booking, at the very least only mentioned that our connection would be tight so please make sure you hurry to your connecting flight once in Texas. I was so confused, and at that moment

happily relieved, but something didn't settle with me very well. After we were through security and all set for our flight I was discussing the issue with my sister: did the airline just unethically make that Hispanic family change flights and pay extra money for a flight that they may or may not actually be able to catch? Why were they forced to rebook when we were not? The injustice of the situation did not sit well with me and I was left stewing in inner turmoil.

Now I'm going to let us sit there at the gate in O'Hare airport and we'll come back to the story later on. Come with me now to ancient Israel and the ascension of King Solomon to the throne.

From today's Old Testament passage in 1 Kings we are given an insight into the early days of King Solomon's reign over the people of Israel. As you will remember Solomon is the son of King David and Bathsheba and is remembered in history as having immense wealth, holding great wisdom, and building the temple for God. Our story today reads a bit like many adventure stories of people searching for the Holy Grail or the magical genie's lamp for Solomon has a dream and God appears to him saying, "Ask what I should give you." It's a situation that so many people have dreamed about - riches, health, fame - and Solomon finds himself in a position to make such requests. But instead he asks God, "give your servant an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil." Perhaps God was as shocked as we are with Solomon's request so God replied, "Indeed I give you a wise and discerning mind..." and as an extra bonus God decides to throw in riches and honor.

During Solomon's time in history, there was a distinct move towards wisdom being held in conjunction with justice, as the appointed king was asked to make judgments on behalf of the people. And indeed, in the verses that follow our bible passage for today, Solomon is asked to provide judgment and justice for two women arguing over who was the true birth mother of a baby. I couldn't help but notice the similarities between Solomon's request for an understanding mind able to discern between good and evil and the story of Adam and Eve from Genesis. Adam and Eve grasped for the fruit of the tree of Good and Evil, but Solomon simply requests discernment as a gift from God. To me it's a subtle shift from grasping for something tight fisted in a move of power and control to the opening of hands to receive a gift given to you. I think we, today, are invited to open our hands and minds to the gift of wisdom and discernment in light of justice that is offered to us from God.

Now I would like to return to O'Hare airport and the encounter with the Hispanic family. The reason I shared this story with you today is I don't think many of us will find ourselves in the position of King Solomon having to govern and discern wisdom and justice for a nation of people. I believe we will have to have discerning eyes and minds to see issues of justice and injustice on a daily basis and in small ways. At the time I was sitting at the departure gate encountering a questionable situation, I felt very strongly that the Hispanic family was not treated fairly by the airline personnel. I finally garnered enough courage to speak to the family about it while we were

waiting for our flight to take off. When I asked them to clarify their situation they confirmed what I had overheard – they had to pay extra money for a flight they had not yet missed. So in my small and most likely bumbling fashion I offered some money to this family to offset the cost of their travel. They accepted graciously and that was that. Or so I thought.

Ephesians chapter 5 implores us to, “Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time...” if we are to live as wise people in an age of such glaring injustice the task seems suffocatingly impossible. Think about our daily news headlines:

- thousands of migrants drowning at sea
- hundreds of African-Americans killed by police brutality this year alone
- thousands of migrants camped at the border of Calais desperately trying to get into the United Kingdom
- hundreds of thousands of women and children trafficked into modern day slavery

So what does the Apostle Paul say to the church of Ephesus in order to live as wise people? **Be filled with the Spirit as you sing.** Singing? Really? In light of people suffering in war torn areas, seeking safety and security to such an extent that they are willing to sacrifice almost everything to attain it, and the mandate is to sing? But as I thought about it, it made sense – for generations people have sung songs of deliverance in the face of injustice. Because of where I am from I am familiar with African-American spirituals like “Swing Low Sweet Chariot” and “We Will Overcome.” The music of Pete Seger from the 60’s and more currently the song “Pride” by U2. And even now there may be songs of hope and praise raised in very difficult circumstances: I read a headline from the BBC this week that they will be airing their Songs of Praise from the worship site of those migrants at Calais. The song “Swing Low Sweet Chariot” was written by a Native American man named Wallas Willis in 1862 but was spread throughout the American south as it was sung by African-Americans traveling to freedom through the Underground Railroad network. “We Will Overcome” was a song composed for and utilized by union workers in the state of Tennessee but as folk singers like Pete Seger and Joan Baez took up the song during their concert tours the song quickly became popular as a song of protest worldwide. When we are left voiceless in the face of injustice, unable to articulate the pain and anger we witness we are left to sing songs of God’s unfailing and liberating love.

There was actually an article published in Australia in 2008 that revealed on average choral singers rated their satisfaction with life higher than the public – even when the actual problems faced by those singers were more difficult than those faced by the general public. Singing releases endorphins in our bodies and has a natural ability in reducing anxiety and depression in those that sing. Singing leaves us with the feeling of being lifted and reduces our stress levels. Songs have a way of taking us back: have you ever heard a song and said something along the lines of, “I remember when that song came out!” or “I can picture the exact moment when I

heard that song with you.” But **Christian** songs and hymns also have a way of pointing us to the future, forming our understanding of what is to come. I couldn’t help but sing Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing while preparing for today. Come thou fount of every blessing tune my heart to sing thy grace, streams of mercy never ceasing call for songs of loudest praise. Singing hymns, songs and spiritual psalms tunes our hearts and forms our understanding of God’s redeeming love.

But I am very aware of my privileged and comfortable life and I am left asking the question, “What can I do?” How are we supposed to live as wise women and men of God here in Hannover? And I of course thought of one of my favorite songs: “The Melody of You” by the Christian band Sixpence None the Richer. Allow me to share the chorus with you.

This is my song I belong to You
This is my call to sing the melodies of you
This is my call I can do nothing else
I can do nothing else

I don’t think I will ever be in a position of King Solomon with the task of governing a nation. And I doubt I will ever be out front to lead a movement of justice on the scale of Martin Luther King, Jr or other great leaders of social justice. But, in our own small ways, we are called to be filled by the Spirit, to sing the melodies of God in the places where we find ourselves. At work or at home or while traveling - in our neighborhoods and communities – sing the melodies of God for by singing we are able to remind ourselves we belong to the Creator and Redeemer, the one who helps us discern between good and evil, living as wisdom people.

And, by the way, our journey to Mexico ends well. While standing in line at passport control in Puerto Vallarta I feel a tap on my shoulder and turn around – it is the family from Chicago and the mother said to me, “We made it! We were able to get on the connecting flight with no problem. Thank you,” and she proceeded to hand me the money back that I had given to them. Every day, in small ways, let us have the discernment of God to see where we can contribute to the movement of justice in this, God’s world.

AMEN.