

1 Kings 3:4-28

The Facebook group on the Narrative Lectionary was noting this week that we've had several texts in a row that might call for trigger warnings. Last week it was David's rape of Bathsheba; today it's the crib death of this woman's baby. One person cracked that the Bible is like a Disney movie directed by Quentin Tarantino. I'll tell you another way this story, at least, is like a Disney movie as interpreted to me by Josh: it affirms imperfection and says that good enough is good enough.

Here's why I say that. Solomon takes the throne after a messy interval during which the brothers who were in line before him are eliminated in various complex ways that are always somebody's fault. Including David, this vaunted servant of God. And we already know about David's dark side. This rather appealing initial portrait of Solomon also foreshadows his less appealing characteristics as a mature king. He has already married one foreign wife, and we all know how that will work out. Although he has not yet built the temple, the Ark of the Covenant has been brought to Jerusalem, and that is the preferred location for going to be in God's presence. But Solomon in this story has gone first to Gibeon, the principal high place. High places are also frowned on—well, condemned—by the Deuteronomic Historian. In his dream, Solomon speaks with humility about his unpreparedness to be king, and his need for wisdom, and God is so pleased with him that God grants not only wisdom but also tremendous wealth . . . and I can only think ahead to the Queen of Sheba's visit, how Solomon shows off his spectacular affluence such that she is rendered speechless, and how very un-humble he has become at that point. So it is with some reservations that I approach this initial story of the young king Solomon, as yet uncorrupted.

Ancient Israelite “wisdom” was not abstract philosophy, but deeply practical. The Book of Proverbs is wisdom. And the dilemma with which Solomon is faced shows how practical his approach is. These two women live together because they are sex workers. They don’t have anybody like a husband or father to be advocates, so they have to advocate for themselves. They both have newborn sons, and one of the babies died during the night. Either the mother switched his body out for the other baby, or she didn’t, and that’s just the story that the other woman is telling. We don’t know, and Solomon doesn’t either.

So Solomon does not even try to figure out whose story is right. We would, because we can figure out DNA evidence, and we’d have the babies’ footprints recorded at the hospital. But that’s not an option for Solomon, so the practically wise thing to do is to figure out what will be best for the remaining child going forward. He uses this ruse of pretending (I hope he was pretending) to want to split the baby, and the woman who protests, who gives up her claim so that the child can live, is adjudged to be the fittest one to care for him. She may be his mother, she may not be, but she wants him to live so she gets him.

Many problems are left unsolved in this episode, but it is important that the baby has a future with the person best suited to care for him. I would note also, in the category of problems left unsolved but better, that after Solomon sacrificed to God at the high place and had that very affirming dream, he went to Jerusalem and made a second offering in front of the Ark of the Covenant, the correct place—as if having had his first, less exemplary move affirmed, he was drawn to do even better.

An article on practical justice in New Guinea discusses how human rights legislation is often ineffective, but it is still possible to address social inequalities at a ground level. It’s a

technical article, so I probably missed a lot of nuance, but what I took away from it was that providing specific services to individuals who didn't have a codified right to those services created a pathway to codifying the right.ⁱ [The pursuit of practical justice may be particularly useful in contexts where there exists an absence of human rights legislation to protect those most in need, or worse, laws that directly and explicitly undermine such rights.... . the term [practical justice] to imply an emphasis on fairness and equality, and at a practical level to include also a focus on accountability and actions to ensure that all populations, even those who are traditionally marginalised and discriminated against, are equally supported, engaged and counted]

For me, that connected to the way people often offer informal support to each other when their two communities are not structurally set up to support each other, and how that “practical justice” can be a prelude to more institutionalized justice. For instance, Laurie Patton, the president of Middlebury College, has an interest in what I'll call the question of who owns religion. One little piece of that is the question of who gets to represent religion, a question that erupts when scholars write incredibly well-informed, well thought-out pieces about a religion that erupts in controversy in the religious community they wrote about. Where there is little relationship, there is little ability to achieve a workable pluralism, in which people disagree but find room for each other in their world anyway. The workable pluralism is defined by each group *needing* the other in order to be itself. It's not a resolution, it's not a solution, but it's a relationship in which both parties have staked their hopes on things getting better without a clear idea of what that looks like.

So for instance, Laurie Patton tells a story of a Muslim who goes to a Catholic choir in

Bosnia during the war and sings in the Catholic choir, then slips away afterwards. The choir director at one point says, “I don’t know you at all. You just come, you sing, and you leave. Why do you do this?” The Muslim says, “Your Catholic choir helps me be a better Muslim.” In this story people are entirely themselves, they’re expressing their identity, and they’re in relationship with each other and they need each other.ⁱⁱ They haven’t stopped the war or resolved justice issues between Muslims and Catholics, but they’ve acted on the possibility of better things happening.

Or another one, and I’ll tell it in her words:

Like the Orthodox rabbi and the reformed rabbi, and the Orthodox rabbi’s synagogue burns down. It’s not like I’m telling a joke. The reformed rabbi comes with a check and they hate each other. Everyone knows they hate each other, and the reformed rabbi appears at the door with a check and the Orthodox rabbi says, “What are you doing?”

He says, “Look, we can’t be reformed if you can’t be Orthodox, so you got to rebuild, there’s no other way.” It’s not an affectionate relationship, and it is still one of profound interdependence and care.

And one more—in Victoria Texas, in 2017 the mosque burned down. So the synagogue gave them their keys so they could worship in the synagogue while they rebuilt. The Jews were expressing their identity as God’s people who are called to be compassionate and do justice; the Muslims expressed their identity as people who will make sure they have prayer time regardless of externalities. They helped each other be each other in a very limited way, but with the hopeful expectation that things would improve by their relationship.

But, I hear you ask, what does this have to do with Solomon? Well, work with me here. I prefaced all of this by pointing out the messiness of the process of Solomon coming to the throne, and his going to the high place first before he went to the Ark of the Covenant in Jerusalem. I pointed out that he already had a foreign wife, and that we know about a lot of the

flaws that developed and matured over his reign. But in the moment, in the freshness of his kingship, Solomon asked for wisdom and then was asked *for* wisdom, for his judgment, and in that moment, having turned so recently to God, he drew on his best qualities. He enacted a practical wisdom based on empathy and a knowledge of human nature.

There is so much that's inadequate about his response—he doesn't deal with the grief of the bereaved mother, or the issue of both women's vulnerability. He doesn't refer them to social services, let alone enact helpful legislation. But that's silly, he wouldn't have. Solomon is an Ancient Near Eastern king, and his story is being told by a historian traumatized by exile who wants to hold up some models of faithfulness for his readers. What comes through in this story, and lays the ground work for better solutions in the future, is that Solomon the king takes seriously the plight of two humble women. He is faced with a riddle he can't solve—whose baby is this?—and he wastes no time on the riddle but moves to the most practical issue, which is who will take the best care of this baby.

Solomon is in many ways *not* wise, *not* exemplary, *not* a model we want to hold too close. But he's good enough. Empathy and practicality are really good first steps. A Muslim who sings in a Catholic choir while religious war rages—nobody there is solving the structural problem. But what they are doing is making a space in which peace and mutual appreciation exists, such that more can be imagined. Grace abounds when we turn toward God, because God amplifies our limited efforts.

Let us pray: Generous God, you gave your servant Solomon wisdom so that he might govern your people well. Grant us your wisdom, so that we might perform our life's duties with gratitude and wisdom. We pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

ⁱ Kelly-Hanku, A., Aggleton, P., & Boli-Neo, R. (2020). Practical justice as an innovative approach to addressing inequalities facing gender and sexually diverse people: a case example from Papua New Guinea. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 22(7), 822–837. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2020.1736633>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.interfaithamerica.org/eboo-patel-podcast-patton/>