The Best of Us
1 Kings 2:1-4, 10-12, 3:3-14

So, the Olympics have come to an end, and as with every Olympics, they were full of moments of triumph and moments of bitter disappointment.

We saw Simone Biles make her triumphant return after pulling out of the Tokyo Olympics.

Summer McIntosh won our hearts with her incredible and historical multiple golds in swimming.

The Canadian men pulled off a surprise gold in the 4x100 relay.

But there was also the scandal and then the disappointment of the Canadian women not advancing in soccer.

Damian Warner withdrew from the Decathlon after a pole-vaulting disaster.

Noah Lyles didn't win all the medals he was pretty confident he was going to win because Covid still comes for Olympic athlethes.

It doesn't matter how good you are, how much you train, or how long you've been the best in the world. One wrong foot, one moment's hesitation, one illness, one cocky mistake, or just one better athlete, and the best of you is no longer good enough. Our Olympians are, after all, still just human. No matter how much we hold them up as shining examples of hard work and dedication, no matter how many cereal boxes they adorn or commercials they star in, every Olympian can only be on the pedestal for so long.

It's interesting to consider Solomon in the light of Olympians. There's a lot in our text today that would have us put Solomon on a pedestal. But

there are also hints in this text and in the verses surrounding our text of Solomon's humanity.

Solomon's story really begins with David's death. After forty years on the throne, David is old and weak, and it's clear the throne must pass to someone else. And that cause a bit of a scuffle. Adonijah, David's son by a woman named Haggith, claims the throne for himself, prompting Bathsheba to go to the dying king and remind him that he had promised her that her son, Solomon, would be king. So, David brings in Zadok the priest and Nathan the Prophet, and they crown Solomon king. And in a rather remarkable turn of events given the saga we've seen unfolding all summer, Adonijah just says, "Okay."

David gives Solomon a charge – these last words of David, last words reflecting on his life before God. "Be strong and courageous," he says, "and keep the charge of the Lord your God, walking in his ways and keeping his statutes, his commandments, his ordinances, and his testimonies, as it is written in the law of Moses, so that you may prosper in all that you do and wherever you turn."

And then David dies. It's been a long journey, a full and crazy story, with many ups and many downs, but eventually, as he tells Solomon, "He goes the way of all the earth." After forty years of David's rule, Solomon now ascends the throne.

And his first order of business is to establish himself well. He takes out any last threat to the throne, including Adonijah. He then makes an alliance with Egypt by marrying the Pharaoh's daughter – this is what happens in the first verses of chapter three. He houses her in the City of David while he goes about his own thirteen-year palace-building project.

But before building his palace, he'll build a temple. Solomon starts building in the fourth year of his reign, and it will take him seven years to complete this project. In the meantime, he does what the rest of Israel is doing – he worships Yahweh at the high places.

These high places are sites all across the kingdom which were formerly places of pagan worship but which were then "redeemed" when Israel captured each town and city, turning these pagan worship sites into a place to worship Yahweh. Which sounds okay…but also smacks a bit of syncretism, the blending of Christian worship with some other religion. God knows that it's just a little too easy for Yahweh-worship to slip into something else when a place is still connected to some other people's religious practices. So, he's commanded his people to *not* offer ritual worship to him anywhere other than in the tabernacle, and later the temple.

But this is exactly what Solomon does. He heads up to Gideon, home of the grandest high place in the kingdom, and an important city for Solomon to build a connection with so as to be recognized as their rightful king.

Presumably Solomon also has some good motivations for going to Gibeon. He's heard his father's words and wants to receive Yahweh's blessing and revelation. So he goes to worship, to offer burnt offerings on the altar at Gibeon, waiting to hear from God.

And God does show up, appearing in a dream, saying, "Ask for whatever you want me to give you."

And this is where Solomon shines in our story – really in his whole life. This is his pedestal moment. He doesn't ask for wealth, he doesn't ask for power, he doesn't ask for military success – he asks for wisdom.

“You have shown steadfast love to my father, David,” he says. “And now here I am – not knowing what I’m doing but put in charge of a great and numerous people. So continue in your steadfast love, and give me wisdom, the ability to discern between good and evil, so I can rule this people well.”

Solomon knows two things. He knows that it is the job of the king to seek the well-being of his people, to care for and protect his people, to lead them with justice and righteousness.

And he knows that he can’t do this without God’s blessing and provision. Without a special gift of grace and wisdom from Yahweh.

“Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” the psalmist says. And that “fear of the Lord” simply means that we place ourselves rightly before him. We situate ourselves properly in the pecking order, in the grand scheme of things, acknowledging our own finitude and inability and helplessness, and recognize God’s sovereignty and perfect knowledge and holy justice.

Doing this – fearing God – situating ourselves properly, is what leads us to a place where we can receive wisdom.

So Solomon’s in a good place. He genuinely wants to lead his people well, and to follow after God’s own heart. And God is delighted with this. He gives Solomon what he wants – gives him wisdom in spades - and soon Solomon becomes known for it. As Frederick Buechner puts it, “There wasn’t a riddle Solomon couldn’t crack with one hand tied behind him, and he tossed off so many *bon mots* [witty remarks] in the course of a day that it reached the point where people figured that if anything clever was said anywhere, it must have been Solomon who originally said it, and the whole book of Proverbs was ascribed to his hand.”

Solomon gets wisdom. *And* because he asked for this instead of riches and honor and military success, God gives him riches and honor and military success. He is blessed by God. He is given much. The people will see his wisdom and praise him for it. He will rule the people with justice and discernment.

This is one of those stories that we tell over and over again, this is the shining example we hold up for our children, this is what we paste on our cereal boxes as a reminder of what we should strive after. "Seek God!" is the moral of the story. "Ask for wisdom. Pray like Solomon."

And that is a good story. It's not a bad lesson.

But that's a story about Solomon.

We need a story about God.

Because even with his pedestal moment Solomon is, after all, only human. And the rest of his life will show just how human he is.

Remember that Egyptian wife of his? Well, says Buechner, "she was not his only wife. Perhaps the reason they preferred separate bedrooms was that he had six hundred and ninety-nine more. Just in case they all happened to be busy at the same time some evening, he also had three hundred other ladies who were ready to drop everything for him at a moment's notice."

And these wives and concubines were Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians, Hittites, Egyptians…all of whom led Solomon to worship at high places…and, you guessed it, to worship *their* gods at said high places. And not only worship these gods, but build beautiful, expensive altars for these gods.

Even while he's building the temple. And his palace. Which requires quite a bit of work. So he presses the people into forced labor, bleeds them dry with taxes and tolls, makes them foot the bill for his projects.

Remember all the way back to the beginning of this series, when the people demand a king, and Samuel warns them that a king will force them into labor, taking sons from the family farm, conscripting them into a work force? That comes true in a big way under King Solomon.

So is Solomon wise and discerning in his judgments? Has he been blessed by God in this way? Yes.

And is Solomon very much still human? Yes.

Solomon needs more than his wisdom. Solomon needs more than his spiritual or moral abilities.

Because those things will fail him.

As they fail us.

No matter how much we seek after God, no matter how good we try to be, no matter if we pray the best prayers and are the most devoted and put our hardest work ethic behind our faith life.

Our best won't be good enough.

We'll fall short.

We'll come tumbling off the pedestal.

We'll make a mistake, we'll choose the wrong path, we'll fall into a pit, and all of the good behavior we've done previously, all the Sundays we've spent in church, all our efforts to be good, kind people, won't be able to pull us out of that pit again.

As the preacher Stan Mast puts it, “even the wisdom of Solomon, though vast, was limited in its ability to save him from his sins. Only Jesus can do that.”

Solomon needs God’s covenant faithfulness. Needs his grace and love and constant mercy.

And he receives it. Even in Solomon’s darkest moments, God sticks by his covenant. Doesn’t totally tear the throne away from Solomon, or away from the line of David. But sees that that line continues, down through the ages, until the true Son of David comes to do what the best of us could not. Dies for us. And saves us from our sins.

“It’s because of God,” says the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 1, “that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God – that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.”

Christ is our wisdom – and so wisdom, for us, is choosing Christ. It’s situating ourselves properly in relationship to him, acknowledging our own weakness, our own inability to save ourselves, our own propensity to choose the wrong thing, our desperate need for him.

Wisdom is recognizing the power of the cross. That which is foolish to the rest of the world, but which promises salvation for those who believe.

Wisdom is relying on Jesus.

Wisdom is leaning on his everlasting arms.

You know, of all the videos I’ve seen from the Olympics – all the dramatic and feel-good moments – I want to show you one that might be my favorite. It’s a classic from the 1992 Barcelona summer games, in which everything goes wrong for British sprinter Derek Redmond. But more importantly, this is a video about a father who fights his way

through the crowd – and breaks all the rules - to pick up his son and do with him what he could not do alone. It's a video about a relationship – a child and a father – and the love that will rescue that child even when he falls off his pedestal.

Watch video

Would you pray with me?

God our Father,
We need you.
We try so hard to make it on our own, but even our best falls short.
We stumble and fall, and get ourselves into terrible messes,
and only you can pull us up again.
So help us to rely on you.
Give us the wisdom to situate ourselves properly in relationship to you,
to rely on you and your grace in all things.
To this we hold, our hope is only Jesus.
May we forever lean on him.
It is in Christ's name we pray,
and through the power of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.