

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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And now, O Lord my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David, although I am only a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. And your servant is in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a great people, so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted. Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil.

I had a bad interview once. Well, I probably had more than one, but one really sticks out. I mean, it was terrible. I was applying to be a chaplain intern at a retirement community in Chicago. I was 23. I walked into that interview, frankly, how I had walked into every other interview I had ever had. I beamed a big smile on the interviewer and spent the next few minutes trying furiously to charm him into hiring me. I told humorous anecdotes and layered in my professional and academic achievements. I kept my bright eyes open and a tiny bit aggressive. I had a resume and sparkling cover letter ready to go.

And I will tell you, you have never seen someone less impressed. The man hiring for the job was a tiny little Canadian Anglican priest, and he was in no way buying what I was selling. The more he was unimpressed, the more I was scrambling to say anything that would stick. I was like one of those stewards rearranging the deck furniture as the Titanic slid down into the deep. At one point, he was yawning and even looking out the window a little. About 30 minutes into my increasingly desperate monologue, he said, "how do you think this interview is going?" And I just fessed up and said, "terribly." And all of a sudden, he transformed. He told me it was one of the only true or interesting things I had said in the previous 30 minutes. And I got the job. He told me later that, because I was able to tell the truth and, for even one minute, be an authentic person, he figured I was teachable.

I thought of that story when I read the Old Testament reading appointed for today. In it, Solomon has buried his father King David and is trying to forge his own, new relationship with the God of Israel, the land of which he is newly king. In one of the scenes, God asks Solomon what he wants, and Solomon answers that he really does not know what he is doing and that he wants God to give him an understanding mind so that he might be a good king. And, not for nothing, Solomon is remembered as the greatest king of Israel during the height of its power and influence.

But his greatness started by sober self-assessment of what he didn't know and a reliance on God for wisdom. This continues to be a pretty good recipe for moving through this world. In my

interview, I was presenting an image of what I thought a good leader, a good human, ought to be — brash, self-involved, self-aggrandizing, and forceful. Instead, I think that little priest was trying to teach me that humility, vulnerability, tenderness, and rigorous self-inventory were better ways to be. In that moment, I was being taught a different kind of royalty — one more closely aligned with the will of God. Imagine a world of leaders who are comfortable saying out loud what it is they don't know. And imagine the leaders of the world looking for ways to be of service to the people for whom they have responsibility through prayer and sacrifice.

Solomon is often credited with being the wisest man king of his time. His wisdom came only after he was able to name what he did not know and to open himself in humility to God. Imagine Solomon, kneeling before the priests, many hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus, receiving oil on his head as a sign that he belongs to God and that he is now God's royalty.

And this is, of course, exactly what we are going to do to little Laurel in a few minutes. After we bless the water and then baptize her according to the formula that Jesus gave us, we will put a small dab of oil on her head. This is a call back to the time of the kings of Israel, when anointing was a sign of royalty. Jesus subverts that symbol by being a poor outcast and still being recognized as the Messiah, which in Hebrew means the anointed one. Or as the Christ, which in Greek means the same thing.

This fragrant oil on the head is an ancient way to set apart and claim someone for the work of God — from the days of Solomon until now. And when people Christian people die, which we all do at some time, we bring out the oil again to put in on the forehead as a reminder that this person, this life, was one that was lived under the special auspices of God. It does not matter if you are a famous king from the old testament, or a tiny baby new to this world. This oil is a sign of the way you are sealed to God.

And may Laurel's life be filled with the kind of humility, self-awareness, fidelity, and wisdom that Solomon showed. May she never go into an interview and really bomb it. But if she does, may she have the wisdom to know it and the will to do better in the future.

But whatever her path, may she be surrounded by all of you — who are yourselves royal priests of God, baptized and sealed into this faith and into service to glory greater than we could imagine. You are chosen — high and low, rich and poor, faithful and unsure. Yes, you. You are sealed by God's grace from the day you come screaming into the world until the time when the final sleep is upon us all. Never forget that you are chosen every bit as much as Solomon. Every bit as much as Laurel.

The Christian life is a strange mix of humility in the things we do not know, and pride in the grace and the glory of God. I can't say that I've always threaded that needle particularly well,

and maybe you haven't either. And probably Laurel will make some mistakes along the way. But once that oil goes on, my friends, it never comes off. God loves for keeps. Amen.