

Those of us of a certain age will remember the days when "research" involved heading down to the local library, scouring the card catalog (which had actual paper cards), and searching by topic, author or title. We might have also needed to pull a reference book off the shelf to find the answer to a particular question or problem. Perhaps we even had to ask a librarian for some help to get the information we needed.

But with the advent of the personal computer, and the Internet, things changed for us dramatically, and now "Googling" a question is a quick way to get an answer. In fact, it's the first step for most of us. But even that involves physically typing some words on a keyboard and, well, in an age when information comes at us fast and furious, who has time for that?

These days, all we need to do is to punch one button and ask the robotic assistant in our pocket-sized smartphones to probe the questions of the universe, and we can generally get the information we're looking for right in the palm of our hands. And even though your digital assistant can help you with a lot of information -like the weather forecast, the score of last night's ball game, or remedies for the common cold- it's a lot less helpful with questions that are ambiguous or open-ended. Ask a question like, "What's the meaning of life?" and your phone is more likely to act like a politician and duck the question. Here are some examples I tried with my Amazon Echo; a portable speaker that features a digital assistant named Alexa.

Question 1: Which came first, the chicken or the egg? Alexa's answer: "Hmm...I just can't seem to crack that one."

Question 2: How much wood would a woodchuck chuck if a woodchuck could chuck wood? Alexa's answer: "A woodchuck would chuck all the wood that a woodchuck could chuck if a woodchuck could chuck wood."

Question 3: Why am I here? Alexa's response: There are lots of theories about this question, you are here on earth because you are alive. I like to think life is like a story that you get to live every day."

See what I mean? Cute, but not terribly helpful! Sure, these are the kinds of questions you might try to fire off at your digital assistant if you're really bored. It's clear, though, that Alexa or Siri, or Google Assistant, are not privy to all the answers in the universe, and certainly not answers for some of the questions that keep us up at night -- questions like, "Why is there suffering?" or "What's the purpose of my life in this world?" For answers to these kinds of questions, we need to go with a voice that has a lot more bandwidth than our phones can access.

We need to ask Yahweh! And I am calling God by the name Yahweh, because this morning we will be exploring our first lesson featuring a story about Solomon in the Old Testament, and you might say I'm trying to be cute. Obviously, Solomon didn't have a digital assistant at his disposal to muse on the big questions of life, but he did have a relationship with God -- a relationship that was promised to his father, King David, when God said that David's heir "will be a son to me."

Solomon was a young man when his dad died, and suddenly the weight of ruling Israel fell to him. It was at that point, however, that God made an offer to the young king that makes Siri's "What can I help you with?" offer seem exceptionally lame by comparison. The God of the whole universe says to Solomon, "Ask what I should give you."

Wow, holy jumpin' Jehoshaphat! Can you imagine God coming to you tonight and saying to you, "Ask for whatever you wish, and I'll give it to you"? And if that actually did happen, what do you think you would ask for? Some might ask for wealth, no doubt, others for better health. Some may ask to find the love of their life, others for talent, still others might ask for more wishes!

The question, however, is whether we'd know what to do if we actually got what we wished for! Lottery winners, for example, see their wishes come true when they hit the big jackpot, but most lottery winners wind up miserable because they don't have a good plan for the money. So, we could ask God for good health, but we may not have the ability to maintain it. We may have a special talent or ability, but perhaps we squander it in the wrong places. Maybe that is why this incident from Scripture stands out to us! After all, God doesn't seem to make that kind of proposal very often!

Thankfully, however, Solomon asked for wisdom, which is a really great response to God's gracious and generous offer. Instead of asking for something temporary to benefit himself, Solomon wanted a framework for managing his life and his leadership as the king of Israel. He recognized that, on his own, he was young and inexperienced and "did not know how to go out or come in." Now, how many young people these days would admit that? He needed help and a background from which to make decisions, so he asked for wisdom. "Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people?"

I think I should point out that earlier this week during Bible Study we talked about how wisdom was also offered to the very first humans God created, but they chose to take a shortcut to get it. Discernment between good and evil was something that Adam and Eve wanted when they ate the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. They listened to some bad advice, hoping to "be like God." They forgot that true wisdom only comes from God and is only cultivated in humans through a long-term relationship with God.

Adam and Eve had wanted to make themselves the source of wisdom. And apparently, we humans have been making the same mistake ever since, which is why the difference between good and evil is often misconstrued in our fallen

world. You can't get real wisdom from a human source, especially from a digital one created by humans. For real wisdom, we have to lean into the best and only source available to us and that source is -- God and God alone.

Solomon understood this truth, which he had no doubt learned by watching his father, David. He didn't treat God's offer like that of a magic genie, offering wishes that would benefit only him, but understood that real wisdom is given to God's people so that it might be exercised on behalf of others. In fact, Solomon's actions in today's narrative demonstrate that he was more concerned about his people than he was about himself. He wanted to do right by them and to do right by God, thus his full attention was on asking God for the one thing that would bring real peace and prosperity to the kingdom.

And Solomon's request for wisdom pleased God so much, that God also offered him the things he didn't ask for: riches and honor, an incomparable royal reputation and long life. But there was also a caveat. All these things would be added to Solomon if according to God, he you walked in God's ways, keeping the Lord's statutes and commandments, as his father David walked. After all, for God, wisdom wasn't a one-time offer but the product of a lifelong relationship -- a constant asking and a constant conversation between God and the king.

Those of us who have studied our Bibles in depth know how this eventually turned out, however. Solomon became known for his wisdom and his riches, but he gradually began turning his attention away from God, and away from wisdom, toward the lesser things God had given him. He turned to his gold, to building up military might, and to alliances via marriage to foreign princesses. Those were the very things that God had warned the kings of Israel to avoid.

Back then, even before the monarchy existed, God had told the potential kings of Israel to spend time every day reading the law, "so they would learn to fear the Lord their God, diligently observing all the words of His law and statutes,

neither exalting themselves above other members of the community nor turning aside from the commandments." In other words, the kings of Israel were to cultivate wisdom every day by connecting with God and remembering that God alone was the source. And unfortunately, Solomon eventually became ineffective and unwise because he stopped asking the right questions.

Which begs the question, what can we learn from Solomon's example? What is our take home for today? Solomon's story is a cautionary tale for us, the people of God. We need wisdom, to be able to discern good and evil, but are we truly asking for it? Are we cultivating it daily in our relationship with God? The Apostle James in the New Testament warns us to ask the right questions. "You do not have because you do not ask," he says. "You ask and do not receive because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures."

You see, without wisdom, our desires become twisted, as Solomon's eventually did, and we fail to ask for what we really need. James, in a manner of speaking, invites us to follow the example of the young Solomon. "Submit yourselves therefore to God ... Draw near to God and he will draw near to you ... Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will exalt you."

Our approach to the questions of life, both big and small, will be altered if we ask for a daily dose of wisdom, drawing near to the Lord in prayer and by regularly reading and studying Scripture, God's Word. When we take the time to intentionally cultivate a lifelong relationship with God, we will learn to ask the right questions and perhaps we will even be ready for the answers God gives us with no need to ask an inanimate object or the artificial intelligence contained within it! And Thanks be to God for that. Amen.