

In Over Your Head

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On February 11, 1861 the newly elected President of the United States Abraham Lincoln gathered with his friends and family and fellow citizens at the Springfield train station to bid farewell as he prepared to make the long train trip from Springfield to Washington to assume office. The country was on the brink of collapse. The wave of secession had begun. The union was at risk. The question of slavery seemed unanswerable. The cloud of war hovered above Washington. But there Lincoln stood before his hometown crowd – all of them eager to hear a last word from this son of Springfield and now leader of their country. This is what Lincoln said:

My friends, no one, not in my situation, can appreciate my feeling of sadness at this parting. To this place, and the kindness of these people, I owe everything. Here I have lived a quarter of a century, and have passed from a young to an old man. Here my children have been born, and one is buried. I now leave, not knowing when, or whether ever, I may return, with a task before me greater than that which rested upon Washington. Without the assistance of the Divine Being who ever attended him, I cannot succeed. With that assistance I cannot fail. Trusting in Him who can go with me, and remain with you, and be everywhere for good, let us confidently hope that all will yet be well. To His care commending you, as I hope in your prayers you will commend me, I bid you an affectionate farewell.

If there is anything the Abraham Lincoln knew about himself as his train made its way across the plains of the Midwest and the mountains of the Allegheny's was that he was a man who was in over his head. Later that same day after saying farewell to his Springfield friends, Lincoln

disembarked from his train in Indianapolis and called himself an “accidental instrument” of the cause of the Union. An “accidental instrument”. When was the last time you ever heard a politician refer to himself or herself as an accidental instrument? Lincoln knew he was in over his head.

One wonders if this was not the mindset of the new king of Israel – King Solomon. Last week Bruce did a fine job of detailing the tragic events of his predecessor – his father King David. Never did a leader have so much going for him and never did a leader give so much of it away. David – a man, we are told, who was after God’s own heart – gives away the farm through acts of adultery, murder, cover-up and just plain arrogance – the result being one son who dies and another son who seeks to mount a coup against him. At the bottom of it all was a man who did not understand how in over his head he really was. He had led himself to believe that somehow he was above it all – and above it all is never a good place to be. He had not learned really from the king who had preceded him – King Saul – who almost from the start was in over his head, but not knowing he was in over his head he failed to hear and heed the voice of God and the result was a tragic end to his reign.

So Solomon takes to the throne – dare we say an “accidental instrument” – and the Lord appears to him in a dream and invites him to ask for anything he wants and it will be granted to him. Not a bad offer. Once in a lifetime offer. Imagine what you might do with that kind of offer. Kind of like that age old party question, “If someone gave you a million dollars what would you do with it?” And so if we take the question seriously we find ourselves in some kind of internal sorting out of ourselves – how selfish would I be? How altruistic would I be? You probably read last year of the Canadian lottery winner, Tom Crist, who donated his entire 40 million dollar prize to cancer research. Of course we would always imagine ourselves doing something like that -- we always want to think that we would we would do better than likely we would. But in most things our true nature comes through. So likely Solomon looks back at the unraveling of his father’s kingdom and of Saul’s kingdom – and now through a strange course of events he is thrust to the throne – and not just thrust to the throne but given an offer from God that no one could refuse. Have anything you want!!! And Solomon says, “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; for who can govern this your great people?"

Solomon was in over his head. And perhaps the wisest thing that Solomon ever did – was admit what little wisdom he had. The wisest thing Solomon ever did was admit what little wisdom he had. He was in over his head – and though he was King and though he had the power of the throne and though he had command of the armies and though he had a God who was willing to give him whatever he wanted – Solomon saw himself for who he was – a little child who did not know whether he was coming or going.

But can we be honest? That's not what we really want is it? We really don't want from ourselves and especially our leaders someone who truly thinks they are in over their head. That's just not how to play the game. What we want from our leaders, from our politicians – is someone who thinks he knows what he's doing. Someone with some sense of assurance. Someone who has a plan and enough confidence in himself that he can get it done. Of course we do. And every self-help book in the bookstore tells us the same about ourselves – we need to take control. We need to make decisions. We need to chart a course. We need to exude self-confidence. Now I have nothing against these things—and Lord knows how many times I have wished for leaders and for myself strong ideas and strong ways of getting them accomplished – and so this idea of being in over your head is not something we take kindly to. It's almost Un-American!

But here's the truth – we are in over our heads. To be human is to be in over your head. Because the truth is the world is too big and we are too small. The issues are too big and our minds are too little. The problems are too complex and we are too simple. And wasn't it Solomon who said, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." Which is to say that at the end of the day you and I are operating off of very little information – and that with each attempt we make to do the right thing – there comes this utter dependency on the presence and guidance of God. That maybe the first thing that should come to mind when we sense that we are so right – is the utter belief that

we may be so wrong. That the peep hole through which I survey the world may not be giving me the grand view that only the Creator possesses. That we work out our salvation with fear and trembling.

Sitting on the desk of President John F. Kennedy was a small plaque given to him by one of his Admirals, Admiral Hyman Rickover – and it contained the words of the Breton Fisherman’s Prayer – and the prayer goes like this – “O God, thy sea is so great and my boat is so small.” O God, thy sea is so great and my boat is so small. The leader of the free world stared at those words every day.

And so as to prove the point – Solomon is approached by two prostitutes who are fighting over one baby – one says it’s hers and the other says it’s hers. And they have come to the king for resolution. Adjudicate the case, King. Whose baby is this? Who has rights to the child? Let’s see how wise you really are. And as the story unfolds we learn something from the young King – we learn something about wisdom. And what we learn about wisdom is not so much the cleverness of the king’s response – the offer to sever the baby in two – but in what the king saw that no one yet had seen. And what the king saw was a soul. What the king saw in that baby was a soul. And when the king offered to cut in half what the women saw as a possession – what it helped at least one of them to see – was that in the end what they were talking about was a soul. Better the injustice of going to the wrong mother – than the tragedy of no soul at all.

Wisdom always sees the soul.

It explains so much of what Jesus was up to in his ministry. What people saw as possessions, what people saw as issues, what people saw as law – Jesus saw as souls.

You remember when they brought the lame man before Jesus on the Sabbath – and what they wanted was for the issue to be about the Sabbath. What is legal on the Sabbath? Can you heal on the Sabbath? Who has control over the interpretation of the Sabbath? What can you do and what can’t you do on the Sabbath? And so Jesus looked at the man who laid before them who was being tugged about because of the Sabbath – what Jesus saw was a soul. Hey people, he said, we

got a soul here. We got a man who can't walk here. You're in a little over your heads here. And Jesus – to the chagrin of the law keepers treated the one before him as if he had a soul.

You remember the man who came to Jesus and asked him to be an arbiter over how much of the family fortune should his brother get and how much should he get. And Jesus doesn't take the bait. And he doesn't take the bait because wisdom doesn't see the issue, wisdom sees the soul. And so he tells the story of the rich man who keeps getting more and more and more and he builds bigger and bigger and bigger barns to store all his stuff – and then before he knows it the Lord comes and says, "Fool ... tonight your SOUL is being required of you." You thought it was about the money – but wisdom sees the soul.

Or when that woman gets dragged before Jesus having committed adultery – and the church council is ready to do what the law says they can do – stone her to death. And they want Jesus' wisdom on this. They want him to weigh in on the law. But Jesus doesn't say anything about the law – because what wisdom sees in the woman is a soul. And he says, "Hey people, we got a soul here." And he asks the men – how's it going with your souls, brothers? How goes the sin in your life? Let's make this less about her and more about you. And now all of a sudden the stage empties and standing before him is only one. One soul. One person. Has no one condemned you? Well, neither do I. Go and do better.

The truth is we can line up around all sorts of issues – all sorts of positions – all sorts of opinions – but it all boils down to the souls before us.

I love the story Jim Hirsch tells in his biography of Willie Mays. Willie Mays when he was signed by the New York Giants got sent first to the Giants Double A team in Trenton, the Black Barons. It was, of course, an all-white team – Mays the first black player to join that entire minor league conference. After their first game – a game the Mays did not play in – they boarded the bus in Hagerstown, Maryland and made for the hotel. First though they drove to the "colored" side of town to a hotel for colored people and told Mays that this was where he and only he would stay for the night. That's just

the way it was back then. Nobody was going to argue the issue. Mays got off the bus, a young 19 year old kid, his first night away from home and now he was having to spend the night by himself. The bus sped away. A few hours later as he got ready for bed, Mays heard a knock on the door. He opened it. It was three of his fellow Giants who had made their way back across town – “Hey,” they said, “we thought we’d check up on you.” They did more than that. They slept on the floor that night while the young kid slept soundly in his bed. Who knows what they thought about the “issue” of segregation – but hey people – we got a soul here.

Wisdom always sees the soul.

Maybe that’s what Atticus Finch was thinking. You remember Atticus Finch of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, perhaps one of the wisest characters in all of literature, as he is trying to teach his young children how to navigate a world that includes the wrongly accused Tom Robinson and the strange neighbor Boo Radley. Says Atticus to his young daughter, Scout, “You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view, until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.”

Wisdom sees the soul.

So the world is pretty complex place. Lord knows there’s lots of things I sure don’t understand. How about you? The sea is so great, and my boat, at least is so small. We are in over our heads and there isn’t much that is going to change that. Except perhaps to admit it. To do the first wise thing – to realize like Solomon how little wisdom we really have. Little children not knowing whether we’re coming or going. What’s right, what’s wrong? We do our very best to understand. All along begging the Lord’s guidance ... and seeing with his eyes the precious souls before us.