

Ivory, Apes and Peacocks
I Kings 4, 9, 10, 11 (selected verses)
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"Ivory, Apes and Peacocks" — I know, you think the "rent-a-rev" has clearly lost it, or perhaps exhausted all reasonable sermon topics. Others of you may just recall that I have a penchant for weird or creative sermon titles. But none of those possible explanations account for today's sermon.

No, the truth is that today's sermon like its title is both biblical and relevant. You may know the source of the title if you listen carefully to our lengthy readings from, *I Kings* this morning. However, the title was not my idea initially. A few years ago, I was reading the fascinating autobiography of Dr. George M. Docherty, the Scottish minister who succeeded the iconic Peter Marshall at the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C. I read that he would have liked to preach a sermon someday entitled, "Ivory, Apes and Peacocks" and focus on the sad but profound lessons from the life and reign of King Solomon. I don't know if Dr. Docherty ever fulfilled his wish, but it seems a pertinent topic for many churches in America and perhaps our church here in particular.

"Ivory, Apes and Peacocks" not only reminds us of the extraordinary blessings and benefits that Solomon enjoyed during his reign as the King of Israel but also could be metaphors describing the gifts and privileges and talents conferred by God upon many churches like us in America today, and upon this congregation specifically.

Solomon was a man blessed by God far beyond what anyone then or now could possibly have imagined. Today's lesson touched on many of these benefits that he experienced and which others could only dream of. If ever there was a man who had it all, so to speak, then Solomon would be the leading candidate.

To begin with, God gave him that thing he most desired when in chapter three the Lord said in a dream, he would grant him whatever he desired. Solomon chose wisdom to rule rightly. And God was so pleased with this humble and appropriate request that God responded in 3:12, *"I will do what you have asked. I will give you more wisdom and understanding than anyone has ever had or will ever have again."* And so great and so renown was the wisdom of Solomon that rules like the Queen of Sheba and others travelled great distances just to sit at his

feet, ask him difficult questions and marvel at what he knew and what he had accumulated and accomplished in his reign.

What is more, God was so pleased with Solomon's lone request for wisdom that he also decided to give him every other thing a person could have desired beyond wisdom. He was given fame that spread far and wide. He knew the love and devotion of his subjects and the respect of his royal peers. He enjoyed the affection and companionship of his Lord. And not just the affection of God because he knew the pleasures of seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines. Under Solomon the nation was at the peak of its military power, at the zenith of its wealth, and at the extent of its geographical borders. We read this morning that Solomon had vast fleets of cargo ships that would arrive periodically, bringing him all the treasures from the farthest reaches of the earth — gold, silver, ivory, apes and peacocks!

The gold and silver you understand but the amounts received annually are too enormous to comprehend. And the ivory. Among other things he used it to fashion one of the most elaborate and regal thrones upon which royalty has ever sat.

But why the apes and peacocks you may be wondering. Well, Jerusalem in Solomon's day did not have movie theaters, television, theme parks and golf courses. But one of the greatest sources of entertainment in ancient times was apes and baboons. They were a great source of amusement, not only for Solomon, but for his wives and concubines, his officials and many of his subjects. Apes were luxurious entertainment and peacocks? Peacocks were prized for their vibrant beauty in a region of the world desperately lacking in color. In Solomon's day if there had been a Neiman Marcus with a Christmas catalogue offering unique and exorbitant gifts for the person who had everything — well, there might have been an ape or a peacock on the cover!

No doubt about it, the Lord in his mercy allowed Solomon to enjoy it all, every blessing conceivable, all that anyone could have reasonably hoped for or imagined or desired — even ivory, apes and peacocks.

And friends, I would suggest to you this morning that this congregation and the majority of its congregants have it all as well. In truth, you and I and we as a community of faith have blessings far beyond what the vast majority of people around the world could even imagine or hope for.

And yet... and yet I would warn us as the Lord warned Solomon, if we forget the source of our blessings, if our blessings turn our hearts away from the Lord or prove to be a distraction from or a substitute for our God, if they cause us to ignore or forget the requirements of God or forsake God's commandments, then our blessings, like Solomon's will rise up to haunt and curse us.

In time, the Lord's complaint against Solomon was that "his heart was not true to the Lord his God, as was the heart of his father, David." (I Kings 11:4)

I believe that the life of Solomon confronts us with the question of life's priorities and its commitments. It is time we ask of ourselves if our hearts are really true to the Lord, or if our blessings in abundance, our gifts beyond deserving, our resources and pleasures beyond measure have in fact distracted our eyes, corroded our values, usurped our commitments, and in essence turned our hearts away from the Lord. No one can answer that question for anyone else, but each of us should ask it of ourselves.

Now you may well be thinking that your blessings or our blessings together as a community and a church cannot possibly rival Solomon's. I am not so sure of that quite candidly. I have only lived in Greensboro or been a part of this congregation for a mere nine months but as an outsider still I am aware of some things you may have taken for granted or else simply overlooked.

The region's terrain and its landscapes surpass any visits Solomon may have enjoyed from the palace or Temple on Mt. Zion. I absolutely love the mountain greenery and the majestic trees of Greensboro. I can hardly wait for the vibrant colors of the fall when Mother Nature has all of her autumn finery on. Here you get to enjoy four distinct seasons, each with its own glory and wonder.

Greensboro has excellent public and private schools with concerned citizens including our own members here working to see that each high school graduate is afforded an opportunity for continuing their education. Not every city of comparable size is so blessed.

The economy may not be as robust as some would prefer but even with the loss in recent decades of textile and furniture production, the economy seems to be stable if not thriving.

Here we enjoy easy access to superior healthcare, the likes of which Solomon never knew. "How Healthy Are We" the front page on the *News and Record* asked on August 20th. The accompanying data reveals that Greensboro has made great strides in healthy living. The death rate is declining for chronic diseases like lung cancer and heart disease. There are still unacceptable rates of infant mortality, premature births and low weight births but the numbers are far better still than in Solomon's day.

Ninety per cent of all residents live near parks and recreation areas, both of which contribute to good health and enjoyable lifestyles. Yet, there are some "food deserts" as they

are called, in high poverty sections of the city with limited access to full-service grocery stores where better food at cheaper prices can ordinarily be found. And yet, few if any of us live in one of these areas.

And the entertainment opportunities abound here beyond anything available to the King or his subjects in Jerusalem of old. We have excellent stage productions, symphonies, concerts, museums, sports facilities, historical sites, festivals in abundance — it beats the heck out of watching apes and baboons frolicking around. If you are bored in Greensboro, my friends, then you must prefer that state because there are countless opportunities to be entertained and amused each and every week of the year.

And wealth? Okay, I concede that to you. None of us has considerable wealth like that accumulated by Solomon with his tons of gold, silver and ivory. But don't compare your wealth to one of the wealthiest men who ever lived. Compare yourself rather with all the other residents of planet earth. If you do that you may just realize that the poorest person among us is still far wealthier than the vast majority of people around the globe.

And physical pleasures? Okay, none of us has the love of seven hundred wives or three hundred concubines — but would that be more of a blessing or a curse? Who could remember all those birthdays or anniversaries? And in fact, the Bible is clear that they proved to be Achilles heel, his chief affront to God because he built shrines and altars for the worship of his wives' gods and turned Solomon's heart from serving the God who had blessed him in countless ways beyond belief.

So, don't lose site of the abundance of God's blessings in your own life and in this community where you reside.

And beyond the personal and community blessings, just consider your blessings as church. I don't know of any church anywhere that has superior or more beautiful, or more functional facilities. This church is further blessed with an exceptional staff, a solid core of gifted and committed members, outreach ministries in which to serve from outside these walls to outside the borders of this country. Educational opportunities to grow and develop as disciples, a music ministry that combines excellence and ability and surpasses any I have encountered in over fifty years on a church staff, many of which also had superb musicians and gifted choristers.

And do you realize how fortunate, no, how blessed we are given the church's financial situation. I just learned recently that the total indebtedness of this church is \$979,000. Now that sounds like a lot, and it is, but it represents less than twenty-two percent of our annual church budget. A stewardship consultant told me years ago that a church's debt should never

exceed three times its annual budget. I wouldn't try to sell that idea to any Session I have served with but wouldn't your family love to have a total debt of only twenty-two percent of your annual income — including housing and transportation.

Of course, the point I am making is that in our own time and place we who are members of this church and this community are like, Solomon, are enjoying divine blessings and benefits which so many people past and present could hardly have imagined or hoped for. And like Solomon I believe we too need to be admonished and advised not to discount our blessings, not to forget their number or their source, lest they become a curse, a distraction; lest we glory in the gift and not the Giver; lest they turn our hearts away from God; lest we overlook or ignore the words of a descendant of Solomon a thousand years later when he taught, *“a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions, “or “to whom much is given much will be required.”*

As you must know by now, as we go through this time of transition in the church and begin to prepare for a new season in the life of the church under the ministry of a new pastor soon to be called, we need to be challenged and encouraged to take our own discipleship and our own church membership more seriously if this congregation (and others like us) are not just to survive but to thrive. Our attendance in worship our involvement in the educational and service ministries of the church, our giving to the church of time, talent and treasure, our support of fellowship and care for one another, reveal a lethargy and a lackadaisical attitude that cannot sustain a congregation into the future. Do you love this your church and how is that love being reflected in your actions and attitude? Surely, we know by now that the opposite of love is not hatred, but apathy.

Far too many church members and would-be-disciples today, here and elsewhere take the work of the church for granted and our spiritual privileges and duties are seen merely as options. Their worship and work thus become a matter of convenience rather than joyful commitment born of love and gratitude.

Currently I am reading a book that is both profound and provocative. So, I highly recommend to you *The Second Mountain* by David Brooks. He talks a lot about the commitments one makes in his or her life and how the commitments we consciously choose, determine our identity, our sense of purpose, our higher levels of freedom and our moral character.

Some of life's choices and commitments Brooks refers to as “transformational” because these commitments will actually change and shape who we are. And the four transformational commitments vocation, marriage, community and one's philosophy or faith.

Among our plans for this fall are a weekend of Revival the end of September. We are praying that these services will help us reverse some of our declining trends over the past several decades, revitalize this grand old congregation and revive and energize our members for the work God has given us.

Of course, we hope that there will be some visitors and guests from outside the church who may be called to faith and discipleship and thus decide to become a part of our church family. But even more we want to appeal to all of us members to re-commit to Christ and his church. Some may have intentionally dropped out or unconsciously drifted away but all of us need to be reminded that the church needs each of us and each of us needs the church, whether we know it or not.

Brooks argues that sometimes we need to re-commit to those transformational choices that once shaped and motivated us. Marriages grow stale and sometimes need a renewal. Our vocations become routine or unsatisfying and we need to re-tool and re-engage. We lose interest in the communities which have sustained and nurtured us and forget the philosophical or religious callings that inspired and thrilled us. Brooks questions a Unitarian pastor in New York, Galen Guengerich, who writes:

"...we need to learn the virtue of staying put and staying true, of choosing again what we chose before. In my view that's one of the main reasons we come to church. We're here not so much to make spiritual progress each week, though that's wonderful when it happens. Rather, we mostly come for the consistency —for what remains the same from week to week: the comfort of the liturgy, the solace of the music, the reassuring sight of familiar faces, the enduring presence of ancient rites and timeless symbols. We're here to remind ourselves of values that unite us and commitments that keep us heading in the right direction. We're here to choose again what we chose before."

If we ever made the commitment to trust in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord and to be a faithful disciple within his church, then perhaps this fall let us re-commit in our own way to that once again.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.