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You've probably heard the familiar story of someone finding a magic lamp and the genie granting three wishes. Well, imagine you were given the opportunity to have one wish—what would ask for? ...

That opportunity for one wish happened one day when

an angel appears at a faculty meeting and tells the dean that in return for his unselfish and exemplary behavior, the Lord will reward him with his choice of infinite wealth, wisdom or beauty. Without hesitating, the dean selects infinite wisdom. [Wise choice, right?]

"Done!" says the angel, and disappears in a cloud of smoke and a bolt of lightning. Now, all heads turn toward the dean, who sits surrounded by a faint halo of light. At length, one of his colleagues whispers, "Say something."

The dean looks at them and says, "I should have taken the money."<sup>1</sup>

I imagine something similar has happened to you—without the angel offering a wish, of course—but in making a decision and then in hindsight wondering if you made the right choice. Sure, it's easy when choosing something that's obviously better than the other, but often it's difficult to choose when all the options are good—or all the options are bad.

In the story from the book of 1 Kings, Solomon became the new king when his father died. His father was the well-loved King David, one who made mistakes, and yet one who still trusted in God's guidance. The story of Solomon opens with the narrator telling us that even Solomon had a bad habit of going places that were not good for him, and yet, that didn't prevent God from calling him to serve as a leader.

Just imagine how overwhelming it would feel to inherit the task of ruling an entire kingdom of people. If I was in such a position, I would be tossing and turning all night long, worrying about

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how to make the best decisions and what would happen if I made bad choices.

Solomon may have had a restless night as well, for he had a dream—not a nightmare—but one that seemed to indicate he was concerned about his new leadership role. Solomon dreamed of God offering him anything he wanted. Solomon explained to God that he felt like a child who didn't know where to go, and that the number of people in his kingdom seemed overwhelming. So Solomon asked for wisdom in governing the people, for an understanding mind, or in the Hebrew language of the Bible, the literal translation means "a listening heart."

Often we use our heads to help us think through decisions. We may look at the financial implications of our choices. Or we may examine how a decision will impact our time commitments. We often try to collect as much information as we can to make informed decisions. But sometimes, even with all that information, the decision is still difficult to make.

Often we depend on an intuitive sense of what's the right thing to do, what we might also call that a listening heart that hears the still small voice of God gently tugging at us. Some may call it common sense, though the biblical writers called it wisdom. Theologian and writer Frederick Buechner says about wisdom:

"Wisdom is a matter not only of the mind but of the intuition and heart." It is like "a woman's wisdom born out of suffering as a woman bears a child." It is no surprise to Buechner that wisdom is described as a woman in Proverbs, a book traditionally attributed to Solomon. Wisdom was present when God made the heavens, the sea and the earth. "It was as if he needed a woman's imagination to help him make them, a woman's eye to tell him if he'd made them right, a woman's spirit to measure their beauty by."<sup>2</sup>

Even when filled with wisdom, sometimes making a choice feels as though we are approaching an exit ramp with two exits, one to the

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left and one to the right. The sign seems to point in both directions without any guidance about what happens when we take either path. Often we don't know the consequence of our choices until it's too late, as was the case with

a burglar who broke into a house one night. He shined his flashlight around, looking for valuables, and when he picked up a CD player to place in his sack, a strange, disembodied voice echoed from the dark, saying, "Jesus is watching you."

He nearly jumped out of his skin, clicked his flashlight off and froze. When he heard nothing more, after a bit he shook his head, promised himself a vacation after the next big score, then clicked the light back on and began searching for more valuables. Just as he pulled the stereo out so he could disconnect the wires, clear as a bell he heard, "Jesus is watching you."

Freaked out, he shined his light around frantically, looking for the source of the voice. Finally, in the corner of the room, his flashlight

beam came to rest on a parrot. "Did you say that?" he hissed at the parrot.

"Yep," the parrot confessed, then squawked, "I am just trying to warn you."

The burglar relaxed. "Warn me, huh? Who the heck are you?"

"Moses," replied the bird.

"Moses?" the burglar laughed. "What kind of stupid people would name a parrot Moses?"

The bird promptly answered, "Probably the same kind of people that would name a Rottweiler Jesus."

We don't always know what will happen, do we? Even when we use our wisdom to decide, we may still not know the outcome. I think most of us make the best choice we can, but unfortunately there are those in the world who make the wrong choice, evaluated from any standard, such as the man who made a choice two weeks ago that I would call plain wrong. While we were gathered here in worship, 360 miles north of us on the edge of Lake Michigan in Oak Park, WI, a man walked into a gurdwara,

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which is the place of worship for those of the Sikh religion, and opened fire. Six people were killed before police shot the gunman, who was known to have had extreme racist views. His action was not merely a mistake or bad choice, but just plain wrong and the result of uninformed ignorance about this religions tradition.

The 500-year-old religion of Sikhism emphasizes peace as it promotes worship of One God, who Sikhs consider is revealed in all religions. The religion recognizes the equality of men and women, recognizes all people as the same in the eyes of God, and teaches the virtue of living a peaceful and compassionate life. With 27 million members, Sikhism is the fifth largest religion in the world, with 300,000 here in the U.S.

Not soon after that event the media informed us of the burning of a mosque in Joplin, and although

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<sup>1</sup> Betsy Devine and Joel E. Cohen, *Absolute Zero Gravity*, Simon & Schuster from [www.sermonillustrations.com](http://www.sermonillustrations.com).

the exact cause is yet undetermined, officials suspect arson since a video surveillance camera caught someone trying to light the building on fire earlier this summer.

God offered Solomon wisdom, reminding him that part of wisdom includes following God's teachings, which includes treating others with compassion and respect. That same wisdom is offered to each of us today, which we have come to know through the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. That wisdom includes striving to understand the similarities and differences of those who live around us, and although we may worship God in different ways, God's wisdom teaches us to treat one another with kindness and respect.

May you seek God's wisdom this week, trusting that God's teachings will still help you make wise choices.

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted from Buechner, Frederick. Whistling in the Dark. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988, 112 in *Homiletics*, August 17, 2003.