Our passage from 1st Kings today is about as close as you get to a genie granting you a wish story in the Bible. However, here in 1st Kings there is not a genie rather God showing up in a dream and saying to Solomon, “Ask what I should give you.” Before we proceed, it might be worthwhile to offer a little background about Solomon, just in case you forgot who he was. Solomon was the son of David by Bathsheba. If you remember Bathsheba was the married woman David fell madly in love with. However, since David was a pious man, he did not want to commit adultery so he had Bathsheba’s husband Uriah killed in battle – problem solved. The first child Bathsheba bore from David died seven days after his birth. By the time Solomon was conceived Bathsheba’s husband was very dead and she was married to David making her the eighth of his named wives. He probably had more, plus a number of concubines. But whatever the exact number we can say with certainty that David had a big flower bill on Mother’s Day. So, with that out of the way let’s get to the rest of the narrative.

God had asked Solomon what he would like. Solomon responds with a sort of autobiography and then comes to his request saying, “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?” God likes the request and responds by saying, “Indeed I give you a wise and discerning mind; no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you.” And the wish seems to have worked. If you ever hear the expression the Wisdom of Solomon or of a wise decision being referred to as Solomonic this is where it begins. If you prefer it in Superhero terms today’s story from 1st Kings is equivalent to the moment Peter Parker is bitten by the radioactive spider. All of Solomon’s wisdom can be traced back to this point. But what of the request itself? To my mind wisdom is not the usual answer we would expect in our day and age if God gave an individual one wish. I think that we are more used to people asking for money or power. And if random surveys you find on the internet can be believed even when people ask for more altruistic things wisdom does not show up in the top ten. But regardless of the uniqueness of Solomon’s request it might be worthwhile to take a moment and see what exactly is meant by a wise and discerning mind. That is what is wisdom?

Wisdom is one of those things that is almost easier to identify when it is not present, like the guy who decides to go swimming with the polar bear at the zoo or whoever it was that greenlighted the making of another Indiana Jones movie. But what is it in a positive sense? That is what does wisdom look like? The Bible has many references to wisdom and there is even a book in the apocrypha known as the Book of Wisdom. But even with that, many of the Biblical references either extol the need for wisdom or tell of things that are labeled as wise. But I think it might be good, before we on, to get a working definition of wisdom and for that let’s go to the Oxford English dictionary. Here it is defined as “the quality of having experience, knowledge, and good judgment” as well as “the soundness of an action or decision with regard to the application of experience, knowledge, and good judgment.” Okay, hopefully that helps and now back to the Bible. As I said the Bible while not defining wisdom does spend a lot of time insisting on its importance. For example, in James we read, “If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you.” There is also something else about Wisdom as we see it in the Bible and that has to do with the nature of Wisdom itself. For example, a little later in the Book of Kings we read, “So the Lord gave Solomon wisdom, as he promised him.” Which sounds about right but it does imply something. If God gave wisdom, it means that it was his to give. Meaning that in the Biblical narrative there seems to be this idea that true wisdom is not something we cook up on our own rather is something that comes from God. And there is much in the Christian tradition that sees wisdom not just as something nice but rather as something that if not divine is at least a characteristic of the divine. Just as a quick aside, if you have ever heard of the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul its name means divine wisdom. So, there is something about wisdom and its relationship to God that makes it special. Meaning that when we act in ways that are wise, we are somehow channeling something of God through ourselves.

I talked for a minute about the definition of wisdom being a little illusive but let’s see if we can understand it not in terms of the Oxford English Dictionary but in more theological terms, because that is always fun. If you think about the nature of the world and the way, we understand it to work as Christians, I think it might help clarify. As Christians we believe that God created the world good and that through our disobedience the world fell, and as a result things became disordered and evil appeared. To my mind wisdom is something of a voice from the world in its pre-fallen state. It is the glimpse of the world the way in which God intended it to be. It is a calling back to the creation before it fell. A time when there was order and harmony. Which by most measures we are severely lacking today.

In Proverbs 9:10 we read, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” I think this verse might be a little jarring or is at least open to some kooky interpretations in our day and age, but properly understood it is quite lovely. When we talk about the fear of the Lord it is not in a haunted house or scary movie sense, rather it is something a bit different. Since we are busy looking up definitions in the dictionary today, we might as well continue that trend and take a look at the word fear. While there is a definition that deals with the anxiety produced by a dangerous situation there is another definition which gets listed under the category of Archaic/Biblical. In this definition fear is more closely associated with wonder and awe. To my mind this state of fear is something like the relationship Adam and Eve had with God before the fall. They viewed God with a healthy amount of wonder and amazement. For looking back, you may recall what the serpent says to Eve when she objects to eating the fruit, “You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God.” The moment Eve buys into that argument is the moment the fear of the Lord ceases because she and Adam start to place themselves on the same rung as God. And as Proverb tells us when we lose this fear, we lose wisdom.

I do not know if God is going to appear to you in any dreams and ask what he can do for you, but if he does may I suggest that you go the route of Solomon. Wisdom is grand, beautiful and life affirming. It hearkens back to the goodness of original creation. It helps restore some of the order and beauty that was present when we looked upon God with wonder and awe rather than supposing ourselves to be God. Wisdom is about bringing some of that beautiful world back. As Christians we are called to live our lives in accordance with God’s will, looking to his wisdom so that we may be God’s own this day and forevermore.