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

My sermon this morning is about young King Solomon and his prayer for wisdom. He says that he is but a boy, but he is mindful of the great responsibilities he bears as king. My sermon, then, begins with this passage:

6And Solomon said... 7O LORD my God, thou hast made thy servant king in place of David my father, although I am but a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. 8And thy servant is in the midst of thy people whom thou hast chosen, a great people, that cannot be numbered or counted for multitude. 9Give thy servant therefore an understanding mind to govern thy people, that I may discern between good and evil... (1 Kings 3:6-9, RSV)

For some of us, we were at our best when we were young. So it was with Solomon. The man was never better than when he prayed this prayer. His future brought him great fame and great wealth, but it did not make him a better man. Indeed, the idealism and innocence and faith that marked his youth gave way to unfaithfulness as a mature man, and he angered the Lord. He so angered the Lord that he endangered the monarchy, leaving Israel divided into two kingdoms – what was called the Northern Kingdom, or Israel, and the Southern Kingdom, or Judah.

Let me repeat my opening idea: some of us were at our best when we were young. Back then we were capable of Christian nobility. Back then we were capable of loving Jesus with a more pure and wholehearted love. If we were persuaded that Jesus wanted us to do something or to refrain from something, we up and did so, or refrained from doing so, even if it meant bucking the crowd. We were capable of self-sacrifice for the sake of Jesus.

Here, in our Bible story, young Solomon is like that. He is able to forsake the ordinary things the heart often covets, in order to try to please the Lord and to take care of the people entrusted to him. When the Lord gives him a chance to ask whatever he will, he does not mention wealth, he neglects to speak of fame, he forsakes popularity, he sets aside all glitter and gold and instead asks for something important: he asks for wisdom to rule the people the Lord has entrusted to him. He was a wise young man.

Young people are capable of such spiritual nobility. It does not surprise me, then, that Jesus had such affection for the children. He wanted the little
children to come unto him. Indeed Jesus pointed to the children as a model for those of us who would follow him:

2And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them, 3and said, “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. 4Whoever humbles himself like this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 18:2-4, RSV)

Therefore I say to the young people of our congregation, do not let the world despise your youth. Do not let yourself become discouraged because you think you are too young to have important thoughts and convictions. It is precisely because you are young and are trying to love Jesus that your thoughts and convictions and impulses should be considered and even honored. Do not let this world beat your innocence and love of Jesus out of you.

And when I speak of the young, I do not mean simply children. Innocence and idealism and willingness to sacrifice yourself for the love of Jesus can linger on into young adulthood. You high school students and college students: you do not need to let a hard world render you a hard heart and a cynical mind. Try to preserve some childishness in you. Try to save in yourself a childlike nature.

Well, let’s return to Solomon. The story of Solomon teaches us that wisdom is not self-perpetuating. It is possible to be wise when young, but an old fool later in life. This is not obvious. You would think that if we were wise when we were young, that we would continue so – that it would be part of our wisdom that we would continue in wisdom. Not so Solomon. And not so his father, David. David was a great man when he was a youth. It was as a youth that he boldly went forth to do battle with the great giant Goliath. It was as a young soldier being hunted by King Saul that David was able to display such nobility of soul, so that even when he had the chance to take the life of the man who was hunting him, he did not lay a hand upon the man, but let him go in peace (1 Samuel 24). These things David did as a young man. But as a grown man accustomed to wearing the crown, then he left all wisdom and all faithfulness behind and committed his great sin against Bathsheba and her husband, Uriah. He repented, and in his repentance he regained wisdom, but his sin was so great that the remaining years of his life and of his kingship were years of conflict and weariness. No, for both of these men, their wisdom was not self-perpetuating. For both King David and King Solomon, the fact that they were wise in their youth did not guarantee wisdom in their maturity. In fact an increase of years brought a decrease of wisdom in these men.
Why is this so? Why is it possible to be wise when young and a fool when old? In answer, let me lift up an old rule of moral theology. It goes this way: the virtues are one. The virtues form a unity such that the loss of one threatens the loss of others. It is not possible, for example, to be both courageous and unjust. The notion of the brave pirate is an illusion—at least according to classical morality. The pirate is not brave, no matter how swashbuckling he might be. His courage is defective because he is unjust. If he were really brave he would face this world as an honest and just man. He would never stoop to robbery and violence and taking away the legitimate claims and interest of others. If he were really brave he would face this world with the integrity of other good people.

Likewise, let us not underestimate the virtue of hope. Traditional church morality affirms the four classical virtues: courage, justice, self-control, and wisdom. To these four classical virtues the church adds three more—what are called the theological virtues. They are faith, hope, and love. So I’m speaking of one of these theological virtues now—the virtue of hope. Again, the old rule says that the virtues are one. This means that in the end, such good things as courage and justice and self-control and wisdom might escape us if we yield to despair. It is a sad thing to ponder that some courage, justice, self-discipline, and wisdom were lost to our world because the people who had these virtues, finally lost hope, yielded to despair, and fell out of the human battle.

In the case of young King Solomon, he seems to have lost his wisdom because he lost his faith. At the start of his kingship he had prayed for the ability to take care of Israel, the people entrusted to him. But by the end of his kingship, he left that kingdom in disarray. Along the way he neglected his faith. Along the way he came to neglect the Lord to whom he had prayed so earnestly as a youth. The problem for Solomon as he matured is that he seems to have come to love foreign women and their gods more than he loved the Lord. Solomon started off well, and the momentum of his early faith and piety carried him a good long ways, including the building of the temple in Jerusalem. But in the end that momentum died out under the pressure of other things that had captured Solomon’s attention. And so in First Kings chapter 11, we read of this turn in Solomon’s life:

1Now King Solomon loved many foreign women: the daughter of Pharaoh, and Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite women, 2from the nations concerning which the LORD had said to the people of Israel, “You shall not enter into marriage with them, neither shall they with you, for surely they will turn away your heart after their gods”; Solomon clung to these in love. 3He had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three
hundred concubines; and his wives turned away his heart. 
4For when Solomon was old his wives turned away his heart after other gods; and his heart was not wholly true to the LORD his God, as was the heart of David his father. 
5For Solomon went after Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and after Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites. 6So Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, and did not wholly follow the LORD, as David his father had done. (1 Kings 11:1-6, RSV)

What had started so well ended in disaster. What had begun as wisdom ended in foolishness. Young, wise Solomon had prayed for wisdom to govern his people. But by the end of his reign he was responsible for the collapse of his kingdom. Solomon began well but he did not end well. Solomon’s wisdom bit by bit deserted him because he became distracted and preoccupied with other things. Wisdom, I say, is not self-perpetuating. Wisdom takes work, as does every good thing in this fallen world.

Now, let us shift the focus away from Solomon to ourselves. If we be Christians then we follow Someone who never lost his wisdom, never lost his courage, never lost his love, and never lost his faith. We are followers of Jesus, who was tempted and stressed and exhausted in every manner such as we are, yet without sin. As a youth and as a grown man dying on the cross, Jesus was about his heavenly Father’s business. He was about the salvation of the world. He was about saving you, saving me. He never lost sight of his goal. He did not dabble in sin, he did not dip his toe into the waters of vice. He did not engage in those practices that have the capacity bit by bit, day by day, slowly to weaken our faith.

Earlier in this sermon I encouraged you young people in our congregation to try to preserve your innocence and your idealism and your joy in life and in loving Jesus. Now I speak to us older ones, who might have lost some of our innocence and idealism and joy in life as the years have gone by. Solomon, bless him, is credited with the book of Proverbs. All those wise and practical sayings: they are credited to him. And the chief line among all those Proverbs – a line that is repeated in the Proverbs – goes like this:

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge:
(Proverbs 1:7, KJV)

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom:
(Proverbs 9:10, KJV)

If we have lost some wisdom along the way, and if we have lost some of our innocence and idealism, then I think it is time for a renewed earnestness
about God. To be a grownup means that we are subject to many pressures and to many pleasures and temptations. It is possible for us to look up and suddenly notice about ourselves that we have lost the piety of our youth. It is possible to raise up our heads and to notice that we no longer love Jesus as we did when we were younger.

If this should be so in some measure in the life of any of us, let us not be overly discouraged. When the Bible says, “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,” it does not restrict this saying to the young. It is a saying that is good for all ages. It speaks of “the beginning of wisdom,” and any of us is capable of making a beginning. Young or old, we can all learn again what the Bible calls “the fear of the Lord.” That is, young or old, we can renew our devotion to the Lord. We can turn again to the Bible, the good book. We can continue in worship, as you dear folks are doing now. We can pray more. We can treat our neighbors, even strangers, with more love, with love that reflects the love that Jesus has for us and for those neighbors. If we are not yet baptized then we can give our lives to Christ, and he give his life to us, in Holy Baptism. And in doing these things, in renewing our devotion, we will thereby be drawing closer to the God who is devoted to us, the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, to whom belongs the glory now and forever. Amen