

Proper 15B: 1 Kings 2.10-12; 3.3-14

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The Rev. Scott Walters

A few weeks ago, in a nod to the Olympic platform divers, I assume, the New York Times reposted one of my favorite films of all time. Not a review of the film or an interview with its directors. They posted the entire 16 minutes of a documentary titled *Ten Meter Tower*. Did any of you happen to see it?

I first saw the video seven years ago, when the Times first shared it. I took the clickbait that day, thinking I'd watch for a few minutes and then get on with my life. But I couldn't look away. And I'm just as convinced now as then that if I watched *Ten Meter Tower* every day for the rest of my days, I'd be a little wiser, a little kinder, a little more fully alive for it.

The concept was simple. Two Swedish filmmakers recruited people who had never stood on a ten meter diving platform. That's 33 feet to you and me, by the way. I brought a tape measure in here Friday and confirmed that that's about twice as high as the tops of these stained glass windows. Each volunteer was given the equivalent of 30 bucks to climb the tower, walk to the edge, and try to jump. Just try. That's all. With cameras rolling, of course.

One after another, ordinary people climb onto the platform, creep to the edge, catch their breath, step back. A heavyset woman in a bikini fans her face with both hands after looking down. She mutters what the caption says is Swedish for, "Uh oh," and fans some more. A 60something woman with curly blonde hair steps up cautiously. She's wearing a modest blue swimsuit with long sleeves. She walks to the edge and shrinks back. She bends over, puts her hands on her knees and her head down until her breath returns. Which, I realize, is when mine does too.

A thin young man in striped orange trunks does a lot of waving, toe touching, torso twists, flapping of arms in an elaborate preparation rite. In other words, he does a lot of not jumping off the platform. Then the screen splits. On the left side, a handsome, muscular guy with a dark, close-cropped beard appears, standing very still at the end of the board. In the other frame is a girl. A girl who's maybe 10 or 11-years-old. She's several paces back from the edge, but she's gathering something within herself. The man just keeps standing. But the little girl finally cocks back her arms in her best starting line stance. She says quietly to herself, "All-righty. Let's do this." Inhales, grabs her nose, and runs off the end of the tower.

As you can see, I'm fighting an urge to narrate the entire sixteen minutes to you. I want you to meet Linus and Frida. I want you to hear their gentle, nervous encouragements and cheer them when they each finally take their plunges. I want you to watch the two young men, one Black, one white, who throw a round of rock, paper, scissors atop the tower, the loser pacing back and forth until he finally smiles, touches his heart, says, "Love you." And steps off.

I want you to meet these people I've never met. These people I know almost nothing about except this: I've seen them when they were afraid. I've seen them when they were trying to be a little bit brave. And, whether they jumped or whether they cursed and climbed the long ladder back down to safer ground, I wanted nothing but the best for each one of them. Neither would you. I guarantee it. Whoever you are, neither would you.

In a time when fear is used so pervasively as a way to control, intimidate, manipulate us into angry and frightening coalitions, watching the little film again made me wonder, is there a form of fear, or a relationship with our fears, that really is the beginning of wisdom? I know fear can

make us dangerous and cruel. I now know fear can also make us tender and kind. How it can actually fill us up with care.

The old story of how Solomon became wise might have been a familiar trope already by the time the ancient Hebrews wrote it down. It begins with the question of what you would ask for if you were granted one wish. It's Aladdin's lamp and a hundred terrible jokes and thought experiments that are so universal we know by the time we're second graders that the fine print in all the stories says you can't wish for three more wishes.

But this telling is a little different in a way I've always overlooked. Solomon is afraid, isn't he? The great and complicated King David slept with his ancestors and was buried. Solomon is next in line for the throne. We're told Solomon loved his father's God, Yahweh. But he also made sacrifices at the high places. Which is to say he hedged his bets and prayed to other gods as well. Curiously, he's not condemned for this here. God comes to him at Gibeon, one of those high places, where he offered a thousand burnt offerings, we're told. God comes to Solomon in a dream and says, "Ask what I should give you." And the fine old game we love is on.

But Solomon is in a very particular situation. His father is dead, and the Hebrew people are now his to rule. The young king is quite sensibly afraid. "I am only a little child," he says. "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." Solomon is afraid, but his fear is not the self-protecting, fight or flight form of the emotion. It might be more like the fear of those people atop that tower. The kind of fear in whose presence things get suddenly real. A fear that brings a kind of focused clarity in which everything unnecessary, like our false and posturing selves, falls away, and nothing but the truth of us is left.

We may be honestly afraid that we're not up to the task set before us. But in this true, transparent self, fear can become a humble tenderness and kindness, especially when the task involves tending to people we care about, just as Solomon so clearly did in the story. When our fear arises from a worry, not that we won't be perceived as strong or in control, but that we won't be able to actually help people who've come to matter to us, that fear can be the beginning of wisdom, this wise old story seems to say.

Surely a blindness of our present age is the notion that we only need sufficient information and better processing power to live well. Wisdom says otherwise. Wisdom is more than shrewdness or raw intelligence. The ancients knew all about these useful human capacities as well. But, as the Greeks would come to put it, wisdom is love of the good, the beautiful, and the true, in equal measure, and its end is a flourishing human life with other people. In the Proverbs attributed to our friend Solomon, wisdom is personified as Sophia, a woman who cries out to us from the bustling city street, who raises her voice in the square so we'll hear what she has to say, and come more fully alive together.

If church is somehow still of use to lives like yours and like mine, surely it must be as a place where whatever we're afraid of doesn't send us away from each another or set us at odds, but breaks us open to the God given humanity we all share. And this is beginning of wisdom, is it not? Heeding Sophia's call to be transparent to the good, the beautiful, the true, even and maybe especially when she finds us a little afraid.

As you may know, this weekend we're in conversation with people from JIMA, one of the design firms that might help us attend to the site on our block where fellow human beings were bought and sold in the 1850s, even as our spiritual forbears came and went to church in this very room. Some might say this kind of work is an unnecessary and unhelpful attempt to settle a historical score or displace a little white guilt, driven by a fear that we might not make the most politically correct response.

I'm not saying I or any of us are entirely free of such motives. We humans are flawed and complex creatures. But the other night, Ardelle happened to pull up on her phone the short video about the service of remembrance and reconciliation we held here six years ago, and we watched it for the umpteenth time as we walked along the busy, Friday night sidewalk on Cooper Street. Even on that tiny screen, as the names and ages of the women and men, of the children and even infants who'd been trafficked here were read, I was moved all over again. But this time it was the faces of the crowd in the church that day — people I know and strangers I've never met — that moved me most. Because they were so obviously not the faces of people who'd been manipulated by a clever show. These were the faces of people who'd been broken open. The truthful faces of unprotected selves. Transparent selves. Selves with the humanity and the wisdom to simply pause, be present to the painful and frightening truth, and grieve before deciding what wisdom might be calling us next to do.

What in your life has broken you open in such a way that your false selves fell cleanly away in a moment? Maybe it was looking down on the world from ten meters up, suddenly realizing that whenever we step to the lip of our lives — the old and the young, the confident and the worried ones — the true self in each of us is courageous and afraid at once about what might be to come. Maybe it was seeing clearly the cruelties we humans are capable of when we do not tend to our fears with sufficient wisdom and care. Maybe it was simply remembering that we belong to one another. All of us. Realizing that while we may not be monarchs or rulers of great nations, we really are the keepers of our sisters and brothers in this human family. Or maybe you were once broken open by joy, or gratitude, or wonder stop the self you truly are.

Whatever brought you to that place, perhaps the reason we need other people when our lives do break open is to bear witness to something we sometimes cannot see for ourselves. To bear witness to the place in each one of God's children that really was made to love what is good and beautiful and true. That place within every human heart, down beneath our falser selves, where wisdom and courage are still to be found. Could it be that God has drawn us here, to this place on this day, to help each other bring that courage and wisdom forth?