

Today we end our Bold and Untold Stories' sermon series with the Queen of Sheba. Like Rhoda from a few weeks ago, I doubt many of you have ever heard of her before. Yet, I'm sure most of you have heard of King Solomon. A quick refresher of who King Solomon was. He was technically the third King of Israel. Remember that the Israelites kept hounding God for a king? So Saul becomes king until Samuel informs Saul that God has appointed David, the shepherd, to be Israel's new king. David trusts God but is far from perfect. Remember God's promise that through David's line would come a messianic king who would establish God's kingdom over the nations and fulfill the promises to Abraham. Remember Bathsheba- the woman bathing on a rooftop that David saw, whose husband was killed in battle- David made sure of that. Well, David and Bathsheba's affair resulted in a son. His name was Solomon. When David was on his deathbed, Bathsheba lobbied for Solomon to become king, though David had many other older sons who wanted the throne, Solomon became king. David's last words to Solomon were similar of those of Moses- a call to remain faithful to the commands of the covenant and to give allegiance to the God of Israel alone. Solomon's brightest moment comes when he asks God for wisdom to lead Israel, and he even completes David's dream to build a beautiful temple for God to dwell with God's people. But no sooner is the temple finished than Solomon makes choices that indicate he has forgotten what faithfulness to God looks like. Let's just say that even though Solomon had quite the reputation for his God-given wisdom and wealth, legend has it that he had over 700 wives and 300 concubines, and he began to worship other gods and introduces these gods to Israel. He then

institutes slave labor for his building projects and on and on. By the time he dies, Solomon's kingship resembles the Pharaoh in Egypt more so than his father, David. But I digress. It's like a soap opera....really. But let us move on to Queen Sheba. We first meet her in 1 Kings, chapter 10, where she makes her appearance with King Solomon. But then there is a repeat- almost word for word- of her story in 2 Chronicles 9. The traditions surrounding the Queen of Sheba are rich, legendary, and varied but for the most part, we're going to stick with what we know about her from Scripture. So let's turn to readings from both the Old and New Testaments to hear God's word for us this day. **PRAY. READ.**

The Queen of Sheba is a powerful woman. "Although the goal of this text is to demonstrate the height of Solomon's reign, it also reflects the power of this unnamed woman who travels from a distant land" (*The Women's Lectionary*, Ashley M. Wilcox). Sheba (sometimes called Seba) was a large and wealthy place that scholars think may have been in modern-day Yemen (in Southern Arabia) or possibly in ancient Ethiopia. Therefore, most likely the Queen of Sheba was a woman of color. She is mentioned in the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament and in the Qur'an. While she isn't named in Scripture, she is given a few names in other writings. We know of her from the place where she ruled. Sheba. Sheba was known for its spices, gold and precious stones; however it was over 1200 miles away from Jerusalem. It was a whole 'nother world away. Yet, through trade routes and other methods of telephone gossip, the word had gotten to her of the man, the myth, the legend...King Solomon and his God-given wisdom in Israel. These reports had stirred

something deep within her. News of this extraordinary wisdom of Solomon drew her 1200+ miles one-way. Back in the day, there were no cars or trains or planes. These types of trips required not only resources but also lots of planning. Let's say that the queen and her entourage with camels could travel upwards of 15-20 miles per day, it still would take them at least three months to complete the trip. That's a lot of effort to check up on rumors. Yet, the Queen of Sheba had to experience it for herself. She had to find out and to glean from all this wisdom, if it were true. Her arrival shook Jerusalem in more ways than just her caravan. Come to find out though, her visit wasn't just about politics nor satisfying her curiosity. The visit was also about spirituality. She had heard reports of a king who had such wisdom that even neighboring monarchs recognized divine hands upon him. We can presume that the Queen of Sheba controlled trade routes, etc, so we can gather that Solomon was interested in her visit as well. As a matter of fact, he seems to treat her as his equal, which I doubt he did for his many wives. I admire that the Queen of Sheba would go to all these efforts to ask hard, important questions. Some scholars think these questions may have been riddles. Regardless, "this is a woman who doesn't hold back. When she has questions, she asks them. When she is skeptical of reports, she goes straight to the source- and she goes in peace, with deliberate gestures of good will and openness. She speaks directly to the person involved. She takes the time to ask and to listen. She draws her own conclusions, and she doesn't keep them to herself: when she's wrong, she says so; when she's impressed, she offers praise. She isn't threatened by the intelligence or gifts of another. To the contrary, she

rejoices in them. And when she departs, she leaves her blessings in her wake” (*A is For Alabaster*, Anna Carter Florence). Wouldn’t it be fantastic to have the trust and skills to initiate conversation, rather than avoiding it? Wouldn’t it be wonderful to live in a world where hard questions are allowed and respected, relevant and meaningful? You know- thoughtful, sincere, heartfelt questions that don’t put people on the defensive but invite them to a deeper, more introspective faith journey. What if questions were seen as a road to greater insight rather than the road to more conflict? I really do wonder what kinds of questions required such an elaborate effort to visit? Was there something in the Jerusalem kingdom that wasn’t in her own queendom? Was there something that Solomon knew or Jerusalem had that she wanted? Bottom line- the Queen of Sheba was a seeker of wisdom. And she was prepared to soak it all up like a sponge. To marinate in it. To not waste one single minute or dime of her investment. And when she saw workers happy, did she interpret that to mean that everything in Jerusalem was just and righteous?! Or did something or someone cause her to mention specifically Solomon’s call as king of Israel: to uphold justice and righteousness. I wonder if she asked if the King’s servants were being paid a fair, living wage?! I’ve got to tell you how refreshing it is to read a story in the Bible about a woman in leadership who doesn’t have to seduce a man to be influential or to practice equity or to be given the intellectual respect or time. So what if she was attractive or unattractive! We aren’t told either way; therefore, it’s not important. Unfortunately, some ancient interpreters pounced on verse 13 where we’re told that Solomon gives the queen “every desire she expressed.”

Now this was a verse they choose to hear as suggestive- give me a break- and of course, they ran with it, “to predictable ends. What started out as a state visit to a neighboring monarch is now a blockbuster love affair on the big screen, starring the latest heartthrobs of your choice” (Carter Florence). Yes, there is folklore that persists about the Queen of Sheba, despite what Scripture says on that subject, which is nothing, really. And if we had more time, we’d take a deep dive because it’s all fascinating. “Had these been two men, their summit might not have attracted so much attention from anxious interpreters. Regardless of the legends, the Queen of Sheba is more than King Solomon’s soul mate (as romantic as that may be), and she’s more than someone high-and-mighty who needs to be taken down a notch. She’s a person to seek, a person to emulate, for the balanced way she approaches life and her relationships with her peers” (Carter Florence). If only we had more leaders like her today, but I digress. The text never says that the queen refutes or challenges Solomon’s answers. But we’re told that Solomon answered all of her questions and gave her the full palace and temple tour. After the tour, we’re told that there was no spirit left in her. She was astonished. Overwhelmed. It all took her breath away. A queen accustomed to luxury and sophistication was now saturated by the presence of a wise and powerful God. It was not merely Solomon’s wisdom that stood out; it was the way that wisdom shaped Israel’s spiritual life. She recognizes God’s work through Solomon. Her declaration is not merely emotional but spiritual. She declares that all of this exists because God delights in Israel. Although we’re told nothing of her beliefs or of a conversion, the Queen of Sheba openly acknowledges

the God of Israel. “Blessed be the Lord, Thy God...” No, Divine intervention, not political skill, explained Solomon’s wisdom. She declared her understanding of who the true God is. Whether from Arabia or Ethiopia. None of her gods, no structure of power- no religious system- nothing she knew could touch what is revealed through the God of Israel. She openly recognizes the sovereignty of the Lord over the throne of Israel, and she reminds Solomon of who and whose he is (though he continues to be unfaithful to God). She understands that only a righteous God could establish a king who judges with equity, governs with wisdom, and leads a people with such order. That is why her confession carries such weight. She witnesses the evidence and concludes that the God of Israel is real. This also describes why Jesus mentions the Queen of Sheba on the day of judgement in both the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, but we read it this morning from Matthew. This statement said by Jesus places the queen in a unique theological position. Even coming from a distant land, she responded to divine revelation with more willingness than many who grew up surrounded by Scripture. What a sincere acknowledgement. But her story does not end here. Her name echoed through later centuries- Various traditions arose attempting to fill in the gaps left by Scripture. Scripture focuses only on the visit itself- no mention of a relationship between them or a royal offspring. There was something about this woman- her authority, her charisma, her insights-or the way that her story intersects with Israel’s- that left deep marks that crossed continents and generations- becoming a symbol for the search for wisdom, truth, and understanding- it’s this symbolism and her

reputation that causes Jesus to mention her in Matthew and in Luke, but we read only from Matthew. Do you see and hear the weight of this? Jesus -by mentioning this foreign woman- shows that the queen's example crosses not only geographic borders but spiritual generations. The Lord's argument is simple and devastating. That the queen traveled long distances to hear Solomon's wisdom while many in Jesus' audience, who stood before someone much greater than Solomon, refused to believe. This reveals two things: 1. The queen of Sheba's sincere search was honored by God. 2. Her testimony remains a measure of faith and spiritual humility. She made a courageous decision to investigate whether the rumors or fragments she heard to see if they were true. And her recognition that the God of Israel is true places her among the most remarkable examples of proper response to divine revelation. Her intellectual courage and inquisitiveness as well as her spiritual sensitivity make her a very bold character, indeed. May we be as bold in our questioning and witness as the Queen of Sheba! Thanks be to God! Amen.