

“Fear vs Hope”

Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
1 Samuel 8:1, 4-18
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Before I begin the sermon, I want to acknowledge the heartbreak this week of watching the wildfires in the Boundary Waters, a place beloved to most of us for its beauty and tranquility.

My family was just in Ely three days before the fire situation exploded, the wilderness was closed, and evacuations were started. It was so strange to see photos of fire and smoke in locations we had just been. Or to hear about evacuations on the radio of areas we had visited.

Our prayers are with the thousands who have evacuated and the many dedicated professionals who are fighting the fires and rescuing people.

And I'm sure we are also experiencing some worry and grief. Will these excessive temperatures become more common, even Up North? Will fires destroy one of the most wonderful places in the country? Will smoke become a common feature of our lives, marring the grand vistas of the North Shore and affecting our health and well-being?

Theologians have been aware for some years that the changes to our climate and our landscapes are causing and will cause new forms of loss, heartbreak, and grief.

Developing our emotional capacities is vital for resilient and hopeful living as we experience this time of polycrisis. This afternoon, the great theologian Rita Nakashima Brock will be here to speak on moral injury during Operation Metro Surge. Such experiences wound us emotionally, spiritually, morally, and we need opportunities for healing. How to handle well and faithfully all the grief, heartbreak, anger, uncertainty, and fear generated by the times in which we live is one of our most important challenges. And how to remain focused on faith, hope, love, joy, and peace.

Today's scripture lesson affords us an opportunity to talk about fear and hope as its antidote. Listen to this ancient story from the Book of First Samuel:

[Scripture lesson]

“There's a lot of fear around in the US today, and this fear is often mingled with anger, blame, and envy.” So writes the philosopher Martha Nussbaum in her book *The Monarchy of Fear*. She continues, “Fear all too often blocks rational deliberation, poisons hope, and impedes constructive cooperation for a better future.”

Why are Americans so afraid, she wonders? Her analysis is that they “feel powerless, out of control of their own lives.” They also fear the future for themselves and those they care about. Plus, they fear that the American dream as they've understood it no longer works.

This fear, she concludes, is the source of so many of our political and social problems. It breeds envy and resentment. People panic and exaggerate the dangers. Fearful people look for scapegoats to blame. Fear leads to polarization and to violence. Fear is ultimately damaging to the democratic project, which rests upon a basic trust in one another that fear corrodes. She writes, “In a democracy we need . . . love of the good, hope for the future, a determination to combat the corrosive forces of hatred, disgust, and rage—all fed . . . by fear.”

Nussbaum has spent the bulk of her career studying the emotions, including how they relate to our social and political lives. Core to her approach is that we cannot achieve our goals of justice, freedom, and equality without also learning how to handle our emotions in healthy, constructive ways.

Fear, she claims, is our earliest emotion. The first emotion that a newborn experiences, because the world around them is strange and they are vulnerable to it. As newborns, we are helpless to do anything about the world and helpless to meet our own most urgent needs. But we begin to learn how to

handle our fears because of the love, care, and affection we receive as infants. When our needs are met, our fears are soothed.

Fear is our most primitive emotion. Part of our reptilian brain, reacting to perceived dangers. And that newborn propensity to fear lingers, always able to be reactivated. Fear, Nussbaum writes, “is intensely narcissistic.” Because of that it is an “asocial” emotion that causes challenges for our politics. When we are afraid, we become like that newborn again, demanding that others meet our needs.

And here is where her philosophical analysis relates to today’s scripture lesson. When people are afraid, they are more open to politics like monarchy. They desire leaders who will fix their problems for them and meet their narcissistic needs.

The people of early Iron Age Palestine were living through an era of technological change and growing violence, as iron replaced bronze as the weapons of war. The localized, agricultural societies they had formed in a previous era seemed no longer capable of defending them from the growing imperial powers that surrounded them. And in their own society they were angry about corruption and exploitation. They began to demand a king.

The older understanding of the Hebrew people was that their king was God and that they did not need a human king. Instead, they would rely upon God to call forth the leaders they needed.

And, at its best, that’s what had happened, in the stories they told. Leaders like Joshua, Deborah, Gideon, and Samuel had received the spirit of God and led the people to respond to the crises around them, including leading them in battle. Samuel, the last of these leaders, represented the paragon. He was a priest, a prophet, and a judge, all rolled into one identity, the only person in the Biblical story to occupy all of these offices at once. And he seems to have led with skill and wisdom, as his mother Hannah had hoped in her prayers for him even before he was born.

But now Samuel is old and his sons seem not to have inherited their father’s virtue. But, of course, this was not supposed to be a hereditary leadership model. Rather than wait to see what leader God might raise up, the people demand a monarchy.

Yet, notice the ambiguity which with the Bible tells this story. This is not some triumphal story of the rise of the monarchy. Even as they establish a king, the story includes skepticism and criticism. Samuel himself will do as they people ask, begrudgingly. But as he does it he warns them of what a king will mean—taxes, building projects, armies, war, the ego and ambitions and selfishness of kings.

The biblical story interesting reveals that kingship isn’t a divinely inspired idea. As scholar Jacob L. Wright tells us, “Kingship is a purely human institution. It is not the ideal, but as a pragmatic political option, it is reluctantly accepted.” Wright continues, “What was once a glorious office . . . is now little more than a concession to human foibles and [the] nation’s weakness.” That’s the way the Bible narrates the rise of the monarchy.

Wright then points out how the Biblical kings are “the most human of all biblical characters.” We get all their weaknesses and shortcomings narrated along with their strengths. These are not noble, self-sufficient, all-powerful sovereigns.

According to Wright, this is a key point of the Biblical narrative. The Bible is not interested in individual heroes. He finds it quite fascinating that in all of the Old Testament, there is never one example of a heroic death in battle. Which is quite common in most human cultures.

The Bible, Jacob Wright argues, is not interested in promoting individual heroes because the Bible is most interested in the formation of a people. The purpose of all these stories, this collection that becomes the Bible, is to create a narrative that form and shape a people.

And not a people who will become a great power, a noble empire. The Biblical ambitions are more modest and ordinary. Like in the book of the prophet Zechariah, where the glorious future that the prophet imagines is one where people have joyful weddings, where kids can play safely in the streets, and where elderly folks live long lives able to enjoy watching those kids play.

Wright argues that the Bible, taken as a whole, “repudiates machismo, a bootstrap mentality, and martyrdom” and instead “promotes such survival skills as solidarity, shrewdness, and a willingness to compromise.”

The Biblical agenda is to make life better for ordinary people and families. Safety and security, enough to satisfy life's needs, and a quality of life that is enjoyable for everyone.

For a brief time the nation experiments with kingship as a way of achieving those goals, but ultimately experiences kings as not effective. What's most important is forming a people who together can develop the needed skills to create this just, flourishing, happy society.

Let's return to philosopher Martha Nussbaum and her thoughts on how we address our nation's current fears. What attitudes, practices, and skills do we need to counter fear and build something better? Nussbaum focuses upon hope.

Hope, she writes, requires action. It doesn't just come to us passively. And she advises that the best actions are "small daily things" rather than "large abstractions." She says two things are central to a politics of hope—imaginative vision and a spirit of deliberation and rational critique.

In moments of uncertainty, fear narrows our vision and causes us to "shrink back." But hope, she writes, "swells outward." We develop a broader vision of the good world we are working for. This vision animates our action.

Nussbaum writes, "The spirit of hope . . . is . . . linked to a spirit of respect for the independence of others, to a renunciation of monarchical ambition, a kind of relaxation and expansion of the heart."

She draws upon the writings of Paul and emphasizes that hope is intricately related to faith and love. We need to develop a faith that is realistic while also seeing the beauty in the world around us. We must cultivate our faith in other people—basically that they have an inner life of their own and emotions similar to ours.

From this flows love—respect and compassion for other people. A love which animates our ethical demands.

These attitudes of faith and love feed hope, make it possible for us to hope.

Nussbaum then goes on to explore how we school ourselves in hope and identifies six ways. First is through the arts, second is critical thinking, then being part of a religious community. Next are solidarity and protest groups working together for justice. She thinks the fifth way we strengthen our hope is in the philosophical work of developing our account of justice and what makes for a better society. The final school of hope is the practice of citizenship, in the ways we commit to service of one another.

Nussbaum's schools of hope are ways that we form a people—the kind of people we need to develop a more democratic and just future. For that project to work, we must develop our emotional health and well-being. In these schools of hope, we can assuage our fears, calm our anger, overcome our disgust and develop the bonds of connection required for democracy to flourish.

No surprise, I feel a resonance with the work we are doing here at House of Hope. We are cultivating opportunities for connection and belonging. Think of our new summer in the park series. That very first concert in June, of Brazilian music, drew a diverse, fun crowd. Neighbors wandered by to see what was happening. A group of young boys rode up on their bicycles to check things out. A group of high school aged young men rode up on skateboards and then stayed for at least a half hour. They were even dancing to the music.

It's not just that these sorts of activities are pleasant ways to spend a summer evening. These events cultivate community and well-being and, if an analysis like Martha Nussbaum's is correct, these events also help with our broader mission of a more just and better world.

When people are afraid and lack emotional health and well-being, they have, throughout history, sought comfort in bad politics, as today's scripture lesson reminds us. But we are better than that. We are capable of more.

The project of the Bible was to form a people who claimed their own sovereignty and sought a better life for everyone, without resorting to false ideas like strong men and monarchy.

In the contemporary world, we've developed and enriched this biblical vision with our visions of democratic life. Fear and its antecedent emotions are a threat to that way of life.

But hope, and its antecedent emotions, is the antidote. And we, as people of faith, have vital tools the world requires. Let us continue the good work we are doing, reminded that we are part of an ancient tradition, with a bold vision. Reminded that all of those little things we do from bringing a casserole to a sick friend, knitting a prayer shawl, singing in the choir, volunteering for the jazz night—all of that is necessary and vital work in crafting a better future.