

Transition and the Dangers of Over- Simplification



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Rev. Emily Joye McGaughy

First Congregational Church
United Church of Christ
145 Capital Ave., NE
Battle Creek, MI 49017
269·965·1225
www.fccb.org

1 SAMUEL 8:4-21

On December 7th of 1941, Japan led an attack upon a U.S. naval base known as Pearl Harbor in Hawaii.

Not this December, but next December 7th 2011 will mark 70 years since the date that continues to live in infamy. The destruction at Pearl Harbor galvanized our countries' participation in the WWII. The generation of veterans who participated in that conflict are slowly becoming smaller in number, leaving text books to tell the stories of a time when countries and continents the world over emerged to put on display—like never before in history--the unquantifiable amount of cruelty and bravery of the human race. Crisis has a way of doing that: showing us the best and the worst in ourselves. My biological father was a medic in WWII. His experience in Malthusian, his experience facing the realities of concentration camps in northern Austria turned him into a theologian. As soon as he came home, he began studying “war and peace, the nature of man and the need for religion.” I wish I could tell you that my father died having figured those things out, but as sure as his blood flows through my veins, his questions linger on through my life. His exposure to deep suffering prompted him to go deeper and deeper into complex questions and from his exposure to pure evil, he became a voice for morality. Crisis has a way of doing that to some people: crisis has a way of taking people deeper into the struggle. Crisis has a way of developing people's sense of responsibility for justice.

On December 7th of 1941, Japan led an attack upon a U.S. naval base known as Pearl Harbor in Hawaii.

A little over a year later on February 19th 1942, FDR signed an executive order 9066, giving military personnel free reign to place Japanese-Americans in internment camps (mostly located on the West Coast). 120,000 Japanese-Americans were interned between 1942 and 1945—over 60 percent of them documented citizens--when finally in 1945 the Supreme Court passed down Ex Parte

Endo which denied officials the right to incarcerate anyone based on ethnicity alone. A clergy kid from that era confesses that his father took a completely different direction than my own when faced with evil in humanity. This pastor, living in California during the 1940s, watched silently while a Japanese-American neighbor and personal friend of his was stripped from his home and taken to an internment camp. He watched silently while this friend's business and home were both seized by the government. He did nothing. He froze. And he regretted it for the rest of his life. Crisis has a way of doing that to some people. Crisis has a way of shutting us down, making us silent, stripping us of our supposed moral convictions. It's striking to me that racial profiling and incarceration were happening in both places, yet these were opposing sides of the war. And it's striking to me that when faced with the same manifestation of evil in war, two men of the same spiritual persuasion would have such completely opposing reactions: one fighting and the other freezing.

Crisis reveals a thing or two about the complexities of people and groups and nations and religions. Crisis often throws our picture of perfect theories of how life should be and how people should behave and, often throws those ideas on their heads. Crisis is crisis. Crisis is the experience of outside stimulation becoming so intense that the body—whether the individual body or the nation state or the body politic—kicks into high stress mode. When the body is in high stress, it tends to act differently than it acts during normal time. And stress does different things to different people. Some people get hyper, others get numb. Some people ride the waves of adrenaline getting lots of work done, other people quit and go to bed. Some people fight and some people freeze. Crisis comes with different faces, but most often the crisis that galvanize people's stress levels have to do with impending danger, impending transition and impending loss.

Our scripture reading this morning tells a story about a crisis of all three characteristics. And danger lurks because Israel over-simplifies what's required of them during this crisis period. They have seen enough of their young people die in war. They've seen enough dividing and conquering of their families and businesses and cultural

systems. They are weary of tragedy after tragedy. They locate the fault for these tragedies in their social structure. The people of Israel were a tribal confederacy, meaning they traveled in twelve groups with several locations for commerce and worship. Ever since their release from Pharaoh in Egypt, they'd been living this way in Canaan. But with foreign armies growing stronger all around, they felt a sense of urgency to get their act together. They wanted to be less vulnerable, less afraid all the time. They look around at models of Pagan kingship that seem to be working better in preserving life and cry out: "Give us a king!" These prophets and priests and judges are no longer enough: give us centralized military, give us an authority figure. Save us!"

Now if you ever want a human model for faithfulness in the Hebrew Bible, check Samuel out. At first Samuel takes this request personally. He gets mopey, interpreting the people's rejection of tribal formation as a rejection of him. Samuel feels rejected when the people name their desire for change--that's human. (Pause) But he doesn't stay in self-pity for long.

Having been through some political and domestic drama in his day, Samuel knew to get with God instead of just listening to the voices in his head or the voices of the people. Upon getting with God, Samuel figures out that this request for new leadership has little to do with him. God says, "No faithful servant. This isn't about you." Then God lays it out for Samuel: it's not about you; it's about their rejection of me. Like any good prophet is likened to do, Samuel tells the people God's word. It's not a word they want to hear. In fact, they could care less what this old wise man has to say. They want change and they want it now. Pressure is building and they want to fix things, fix them quickly.

Crisis has a way of doing that. Crisis has a way of making us dismiss those lone voices of wisdom crying out in the wilderness. Crisis has a way of making us grab the closest thing to a solution, even if we forfeit our long-term integrity in the process. How many of us in crisis or stress or transition don't opt for quick fixes? Who doesn't go to the bar after being laid off? Who doesn't—from time to time—lash out in haste when the kids are

misbehaving? Who doesn't think about discarding old ways of doing things when life seems predictably scary all the time? And what people don't hope for a change in leadership when they are faced with despair all around? I don't think it's much of a stretch to see the parallels between our 2008 election season here in the U.S. and the story we heard from 1 Sam this morning. When the morale of any country is low, or the hope of any people is getting more and more dismal by the day, it's easy to think that a "change" in governance is going to solve everything. But it just never works out that way.

Israel's fears were perfectly warranted. Israel's hope for change make sense to me. But their approach to change is wrong on two fronts: 1) Outsourcing: They want someone to fight their battles for them & 2) Mimicry: They think being like other nations is the solution. They think that by investing their collective power into one individual, they will be safe. They think that becoming like other nations will ensure their security.

You pay me to be your theologian in residence. So I want to tell you about the God who is made so upset by these moves to outsource and mimic. This is a God who feels rejected. Okay, did you notice that I said the word "feels." Yes, this is a God who is capable of feeling. And God feels rejected because God has created Israel on purpose. God has created you and me and us and them and we—God has created us specifically, each of us with our own unique gifts and integrity. When we start looking to outsource, or we start trying to be like some other person who is uniquely gifted with his/her own integrity—we forsake the divine gift at work in our lives. This is a God who wants Israel to be Israel, because Israel is special. This is a God who wants you to be you because you are special, and this church to be this church, because we are special. We are not better than or less than, but special in our uniqueness. We cannot forget the divine gift at work in our uniqueness. We must remember...

(PAUSE)

I started out with WWII stories. And I did that because it's been my

experience that veterans of combat do a better job than any other population of helping society to remember. In fact, veterans are a lot like bible stories. They do similar things: they show us the role memory can play in connecting us to the realities of who we are as human beings. They remind us that while we possess incredible potential for bravery and heroism, we are also capable of becoming the “enemy we deplore.” They remind us that in order to avoid repeating the mistakes of history, we must look at history. Our living legends—both among us and in our text—cry out in those times of crisis, times of heightened possibility: **remember God and remember who you are.**

So here’s the deal. Here’s how all of this translates to everyday life. Here’s how this translates to you, you the person sitting in the pew this morning. And this also applies to our church as we face major transition in our structure and leadership.

Remember God. Remember those times when you never thought you were going to make it and God had a hand on you. Remember times of life-saving peace, or the time when God sent you an undeniable message through an earthly companion. Remember the miracles of your life, the blessings, the wonder of wonders. Remember God.

And go back to those formative experiences of your life—those times that stand out as character defining—and be reminded. Go back to the voices of authority and remember what they said, how they dared to name you. Remember the things your mom and dad or your baseball coach or choir director used to tell you: you are my daughter; smart and strong, you are my brother; capable and inspiring, you are my mother; the person who reminds me of God’s grace. You are my beloved in whom I am well pleased. Who are those voices for you? What did they say?

Do it right now: close your eyes and remember. Remember God and remember who you are.

(PAUSE)

Never forsake your God or history or your own capability by thinking something outside of you is going to fix everything. Never forsake who God intended you to be by trying to live like someone else. Remember, you are a child of the living God. You have been created and called, you are equipped and always held in the everlasting arms of the one who will never let you go.

Let me say that again: You are always held in the everlasting arms of the one who will never let you go. And that, you can take to the bank.

Amen

