

Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC
June 10, 2018

“Faith Fit for a Time of Crisis”

“The people refused to listen to the voice
of Samuel; they said, ‘No! but we are determined
to have a king.’”
I Samuel 8:19

Prelude:

The church office was working with great efficiency this week, such that the order for worship was printed and ready to fold early on Friday afternoon; when I brought forth a change in sermon title, I reprimanded myself – **“too late, tough luck!”** So take note – “Lament, Repent, and Repair” is the sermon title listed in bulletin – but the title on my sermon draft is “Faith Fit for a Time of Crisis.” I don’t know if the latter improves upon the former or not.

The theme of “crisis” has been on my mind of late – for a whole host of reasons, really.

Let’s work with a definition:

A crisis is unfolding when there is a heightened sense of awareness – of a condition producing instability – due to an impending change that is soon to take place.

And let’s draw a distinction:

a difference between a time of crisis
and a time of transition.

I’m working through the classic text on transitions by William Bridges, who made

a career of helping people understanding the changes they were experiencing in life, coping and adjusting to changes taking place.

In Bridges' system – transition consists of three phases: (1) letting go of the past; working through uncertainty and awkwardness of all that lies between the past that is gone and the new that isn't evident; for Bridges this was a “neutral zone;” which precedes the making of a new beginning. And Bridges is clear: there is never a beginning without an end. And there is never an end without required time processing in the neutral zone.

In Plymouth Church, we are in a transition period; we are immersed, in the thick of a “neutral zone.” But we are not in a crisis. We are managing.

In a crisis – the ability to manage what challenge is present is questioned and uncertain. This is an important distinction, that magnifies the level of anxiety that is present (whether owned, acknowledged or not).

We might say a crisis occurs when a transition is being mismanaged. Or, a crisis occurs when there is no captain to steer through the shoals that are seemingly everywhere.

A crisis can arise anywhere, anytime, for anyone. The crises that mark our lives can be intensely personal – existential some might say.

A crisis can be familial; there comes a turn of fortune, some change, foreseen or unforeseen, impacting the family system of which we may be a part, threatening emotional health and well-being, both that of each part, and as well as the whole.

A crisis can be institutional. Unexpected changes can arise, “rocking the ship,” via mistakes, or malfeasance, causing constituents to question their allegiance, the investment love, the giving of their heart. You are in a bona fide crisis when you say: I don’t know how I can continue; I can’t see my way out of this.

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Has any generation ever escaped
the looming clouds of “a crisis”
portending danger and threat
to the future of all we hold most
near and dear
in our hearts?

Has there ever been a time when
powers were not loose, sowing seeds
of discord, creating mischief and strife,
foiling the peace and order
designed and desired by God?

In the early years of our country,
before the rule of
government by constitution,
when America was still a map of colonies,
Thomas Paine wrote a series of essays
under the title: *The Crisis*.
The first such essay so inspired George Washington
that he ordered that it be read to the soldiers
wintering and withering at Valley Forge.
Possibly you recall the opening words:

December 23, 1776

*THESE are the times that try men's souls.
The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will,
in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country;
but he that stands by it now, deserves the love and*

*thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like hell,
is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us,
that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph.
What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly:
it is dearness only that gives every thing its value.*

The crisis for Paine – foreign rule, military occupation, imperial oppression, impinging upon life and liberty.

The generation that succeeded the founders, lived with issues the founders could not resolve, notably the peculiar institution of slavery. In 1844, James Russell Lowell composed the poem, “The Present Crisis,” which includes (partial) verse we still sing on occasion:

*New occasions teach new duties;
Time makes ancient good uncouth;
They must upward still, and onward,
who would keep abreast of Truth;
Lo, before us gleam her camp-fires!
we ourselves must Pilgrims be,
Launch our Mayflower, and steer boldly
through the desperate winter sea,
Nor attempt the Future's portal
with the Past's blood-rusted key.*

Yet another generation engaged in civil war, which was a crisis of whether or not the union could survive the sin of the slavery it harbored both in legal code and human heart. The union endured, but so too the crisis, the stains of the sin that morphed into the segregation of an unreconstructed south, and the bigotry of racial supremacy in the victorious north; “crisis” was passed on as inheritance for another generation. In 1910, Mary White Ovington, a white suffragette and co-founder of the NAACP, suggested calling

the organizations magazine, *The Crisis*, based upon Lowell's earlier mentioned poem. *The Crisis* is still being published, still bearing the name.

World wars soon followed;
a global crisis, following global crisis.
and with every crisis, there came a question,
can we survive our vanity;
our self-destructive tendencies;
our fascist bullies, our tyrants who rule
with fear and iron fists, building up a culture
on the ashes of those they don't like and
don't tolerate. And given the severity of
the given crisis - how will we
determine our course of action - which is what
is asked of us at any crisis point in our lives.

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I mention "crisis" for two reasons;
First, we have as our scripture lesson this morning
a crisis of grand proportion, causing considerable
upset for just about everyone involved.

I want us to pay close attention to this story,
for it has a lot of instruction to offer us.

Our reading comes from a transitional age -
that has morphed into a crisis, a muddied
period of history on the verge of paradigm shift,
something new under the sun. So there is a lot of uncertainty,
and with uncertainty, anxiety, and with anxiety,
frustration, and with frustration, anger, and with
anger, impaired vision, a groping in darkness.

We are at the end of a period known for its judges
who road circuit, we might say, administering justice
in keeping with the Word of the Lord, as the Word
was then embraced, but prior to the rise of the

great kings, and prior to the prophets, whose role was to corral and control royal excess.

The last of the judges was Samuel, much revered and honored. As we pick up the story, Samuel is said to be old.

This happens. Some folks age out of office. Sometimes we wish it so, sometimes we wish it not, but there comes upon us chronological circumstances that are a part of life and life's transitions.

Samuel became old, the text reads. This is no tragedy, no crisis. It just happened. And then, Samuel did something that he should have known better than to do.

A little bio background.
Samuel was a child of the church,
son of Elkanah (father) and Hannah (mother).
Hannah, you may recall, was desperate for a child;
She had a spousal rival, Peninnah who apparently
couldn't sneeze without getting pregnant, and who
found delight in tormenting Hannah for her infertility.
So Hannah bore the shame
of a culturally conditioned
biological stigma.
Something was wrong with her,
she wasn't right.
She prayed about this - and made a vow -
God, give me child, and child
I give you till the time of his death
(I Samuel 1:11).

You know how these biblical birth stories often unfold. Lots of crisis, procreative drama. Till a child is born for us. And a child eventually came to Hannah, and she delivered. Sang a song in praise of God, song that served

as template for another Mother we reverence, Mary and her magnificat.

Hannah's child was Samuel, and when weaned, he was handed over to the priest at the Shiloh shrine – where the senior cleric in charge of administration was Eli.

Eli was Samuel's mentor. Teacher. Guide. He was a good teacher and guide. He played a critical role in helping Samuel discern the call of God in his life.

When Eli grew old – he set up a family dynasty, wanted his sons to carry on his work. But his sons were profligates. They liked the office, but shunned the responsibilities. They liked the gain but not the people. They corrupted the temple, dishonored God, and brought disrepute upon social and religious enterprise of the time.

Samuel knew this about Eli. He saw it. Experienced it. Yet when he was old, with sons of his own, he mimicked Eli. Samuel couldn't see beyond what parenting pattern he observed from Eli. So like Eli, Samuel set his sons up to assist, to learn, so as to inherit, the office.

Samuel's sons were as degenerate as Eli's. They were known for their greed, graft, and their contempt of justice, which was auctioned to bidders who could afford to pay for it.

It is not a pleasant picture; not a good end to many years of honorable public service. And the crisis peaks when elders of

Israel confront Samuel, and demand a plan of succession that includes a deviation from all past practice. **“Give us a king,”** the elders ask. **We are determined to have a king, so that we may be like other nations** (I Samuel 8:9, 20).

Pause with me here. This is where Bible study becomes quite fascinating – if we can get our heads around it.

Samuel is scandalized by the request. **“Don’t you know the Lord your God is Sovereign?”** Don’t you know what comes when you enthrone monarch and vest them with power to rule your lives? Don’t you know what havoc comes when the divine is dethroned?

Samuel issues a warning to the elders of what is coming down the pike if they pursue this quest for a monarch. Taxes are going up. A military industrial complex is going to emerge. Your children will be sacrificed to sustain and grow the king’s coffers at the expense of public health. You will sign your life and the life of your descendants into political servitude and spiritual bondage.

If you read your footnotes – you may find a comment that Samuel isn’t predicting what will come. He is really reading from a report of what actually happened when Solomon was king, and the abuses that occurred during his term of office.

Samuel was reluctant to proceed.
Yet God was consenting.

My people are determined to live under
the rule of a king?
Listen and heed. This be their judgment:
Give them their hearts desire.

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Which brings us to our lives, today.
Who is ruling us, and to what end?
Who is leading us? And where?
And what faith is fit, suitable,
for the time of crisis that is ours?

Earlier this year, Ash Wednesday to be exact,
a group of church elders issued a document
under the title: “Reclaiming Jesus: A Confession of
Faith in a Time of Crisis” (reclaimingjesus.org).

The elders: a broad band of mainline Christians,
Evangelical Christians, black and white Christians,
Speaking with one voice – and deep conviction.

**“We are living through perilous and polarizing
times as a nation, with a dangerous crisis of
moral and political leadership at the highest levels
of our government and in our church. We believe
the soul of the nation and the integrity of faith
are now at stake.”**

**“In times of crisis, the church has historically
learned to return to Jesus Christ. Jesus is Lord.”**

The document includes six affirmations,
Six, “we believe” sections, balanced by six rejections.
I appeal – track this down, ponder and reflect;
Lament, repent, and pray to be so engaged as to repair.

We need be clear about the depth of the crisis:

- (1) White nationalism and racism is an offense to the belief that each human being is made in the image of God;
- (2) The mistreatment, abuse, and sexual denigration of women is an offense standing in stark contrast to church teaching in the body of Christ, there is one standard and only one standard, regardless of gender, race, or class, all are reconciled to God by way of the love of Jesus.
- (3) The treatment of the poor and vulnerable, the stranger, and the sick is indicative of how we treat Christ; contempt of immigrants, rude welcome for strangers at the gate; the sin of putting rich over poor is an offense against the common good, good government is constituted to defend and promote.
- (4) Speaking the truth in love is a gospel responsibility and prophetic tradition; truth telling is a moral imperative, a top ten command; Jesus is our truth and our light.
- (5) Leadership is servanthood, not domination;
- (6) Jesus bids us follow, making disciples of all nations; any putting of American first is a theological heresy.

A lot of weird and bizarre religions have been concocted over the years in our country. Typically they don't pose a threat. But today part of our crisis is a corruption of faith, a gross mischaracterization of Christian virtue, that Jesus wouldn't be caught dead professing. The adherents of the fraud actually look for and anticipate the end of the world.

We need be part of a holy resistance,
equipped with faith that honors and adheres
to the word of Jesus, and to do so with prayer,
service, and generosity of heart, helping especially
those who find the hour dire and riddled with fear.

In our UCC, we don't accent dogma or
the nuances of doctrine to define our faith.
We accent the Lordship of Jesus Christ,
 the beauty of holiness,
 and the peace and joy
 of being reconciled to God
as we experience what transitions
 we are blessed to see.

We believe well
when we serve well,
as we simplify and intensify this tie.
We trust such faith sufficient
to see us through whatever challenges
 we face in life.

A number of years ago -
Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr. once said:
**"Always anticipate that God will
 make a move
that we cannot see or understand."**

This is where I'm banking my faith -
 Anticipation!
God will make a move
 to help defend and protect,
 to lead and guide;
God will make a move,
 sending hope to rescue;
God will make a move,
 giving rise to life even in the face of death.
God will make a move,
 glorious, surprising, to bring about peace.

God will make a move – through you –
as blessing for you – and others.

Live in such a faith.
Keep such a faith.
Trust such a faith.

The crisis of the present hour
will soon slither way.

Until then, let us be seen as the wise,
the responsible, the trustworthy,
equipped with the love that
endures and inspires,
now and forever.

Amen.

*(Sermons are typically composed in haste,
for the demands of the day are many;
so be charitable as you read; and remember:
the contents of this sermon have not been edited
and may or may not have been a part of its public presentation)*