Strength or Weakness?

Sermon by the Rev. Bernadette Hartsough

August 14, 2024

This summer we have learned about the monarchy in the Old Testament. We started with Saul, then David, now Solomon. Saul was crazy for power. He refused to give it up and tried to murder David. David was passionate to the point of committing adultery and murder. His daughter was raped by her brother and one brother murdered the other. Solomon is presented as someone who wants wisdom to help him make good choices for his people. What our lectionary skips over is that Solomon took a foreign wife, worshipped gods not just Yahweh, and caused the tribes to split into two kingdoms because of his oppressive rule.

What I love about our Old Testament is that people are not just presented with their good qualities. They are presented with their flaws. Saul’s greed for power. David’s uncontrolled passion, and Solomon’s oppressive leadership style. All three were flawed. And all three were called and anointed by Yahweh.

All the flaws written about them affected the future of the nation of Israel. The written history of the Israelites is unique in the way it presents the accomplishments and the flaws of the Israelites. Other histories of the same time period talk about military victories and leaders that are godlike. According to the Old Testament text, Yahweh did not want the 12 tribes of Israel to have a central king. The people insisted on a king and Yahweh gave in. Yahweh knew that the people would be swayed by power and passion. They took their allegiance to Yahweh and gave it to a human king. The stories about kings in the Old Testament are really stories about how we live with God. They are lessons about how we live with what God has given us in our talents and in our characteristics. Our character traits make us who we are. They can be weaknesses or strengths depending on how we use them. They are part of what it means to be human.

 Think of King David. He was a humble leader that loved Yahweh and could be corrected by Yahweh. Because of his passion, he felt deeply for the people and put the people first. His passion in the psalms is some of the most beautiful poetry ever written. In the beginning of King David’s reign, he was a good king. Then his strengths turned into his flaws. His passion became out of control with his desire for Bathsheba. He saw his out-of-control sexual passion passed onto his son, Amnon, who raped his daughter. His family splintered into death and destruction.

When we reflect on all these stories that we read this summer, we must remember *when* they were written down and *why t*hey were written down and circulated. These stories were written down 500-700 years after these events were said to have occurred. We know this by the style of Hebrew used, references made, and the material used to write them down. In King David’s time, written material didn’t exist. Stone tablets were etched. The stories of the monarchy that we have are on scrolls. They date from around 500-600BC when the Israelites were taken into exile.

These stories were written by a traumatized people. They were a people exiled from their homeland that needed to have their own identity. They needed stories of ancestors who were brave, strong and flawed. It gave them ancestors and a heritage that they could understand. It was how they survived exile and how they became a people serving one god. Until this point that had many gods AND Yahweh. But as they set themselves apart, they became monotheistic meaning they only served one god. Unlike their captors, they only worshipped Yahweh. It set them apart from the people and gods of Babylon and Assyria.

So today we are given the example of how our personalities can be used for good or bad. We are called to reflect how we have experienced our own personality traits as strengths and weaknesses.

Think about both sides of these emotions/ personality traits.

1. Greed- generally we think of greed as something that we do to exploit and take from others. It is when we want something for ourselves. Greed has facilitated self-preservation of humans during times of scarcity when our ancestor’s hoarded food. The first disciples of Jesus were greedy. They wanted Jesus to themselves and after he died, they were very protective of his body. Mother Teresa was greedy in her desire to serve the poor. Missionaries are greedy in their pursuit of spreading beliefs.
2. Arrogance-Being arrogant can make it difficult to work with others. Arrogant people have a sense of control and a high self-esteem. At times these characteristics are needed in leaders.
3. Fear-Jesus tells us not to be afraid. He was speaking about fear that is out of control. Fear that prevents you from living a full life is not healthy. However, some fear is healthy. It is a survival instinct to keep us safe. It is a warning. As I was preparing this sermon, I read that watching scary movies where we feel fear builds psychological resilience and courage.
4. Impulsive -People who are impulsive may make bad decisions. However, acting quickly, writing thoughts down, and making suggestions during a meeting enhances creativity. Creative ideas are embraced before there is time to explain them. Impulsive people also better tolerate risky situations.

So, this week think about your personality traits. If you do not know what they are, ask friends and family. Think about when they have helped you and when they have been harmful. Look around and see where God’s grace has helped to transform others.