

Hopes and Fears
First Reading: John 10:11-16
Second Reading: 2 Samuel 5:1-5, 9-10

We as humans are a notably fickle bunch. A weekly listing of our hope and fears would consistently be in flux, maybe even more so than the weather forecasts. Sometimes our hopes and fears are related; sometimes they overlap; and sometimes they clash. In a dry season such as this, we hope, even pray for rain, and yet, at the same time, we fear that it will rain upon the parade, the wedding, the concert, the game. Dear Lord, let it rain, but not between the hours of 8:00pm and 11:00pm because I spent \$300 on these tickets.

We hope for peace, but we fear what we may have to sacrifice for it. We hope for a happy home, but we fear not always getting our way. And for folks my age who will know exactly what I'm talking about — We hope to get the procedure over with, but we fear the preparation required for it. We hope for children, but we fear what world they will inherit. We hope for the promotion, but we fear the added responsibilities. We hope for electoral votes, but we fear electoral results.

So often, our hopes and fears are intertwined like vines on a trellis — hopes and fears about our health, our loved ones (particularly our children); hopes and fears about acceptance, vocation, the economy, life together in community or as a nation. What are the hopes and fears that dominate your daydreams or wake you in the night?

We live in an age of heightened anxiety, not having found a healthy way to adapt to the explosion of information and misinformation that is constantly on our feed and in our faces, incessantly reminding us of all the things we need to be afraid of, all the things we should want and own right now!, all the people, groups, and issues that make our blood boil, all the fraud of friends and celebrities presenting photos, news, and selfies of the perfect lives that don't actually exist, but nevertheless, depress us with thoughts of what we want but don't have, what we aspire to but know we'll never reach. Constant ... ceaseless ... sustained ... around-the-clock ... relentless.

When I am out running (*and Lord, console all who are forced to witness that ghastly sight*), but when I am out running, I am regularly crossing paths with people out walking, their faces plastered to a screen, and I want to say

(but don't) — You know, you're missing at least 60-70% of the benefit of a walk. Is what you are glued to actually all that fulfilling? Is it cleansing you of your anxieties? Granting you "the peace which passes all understanding" or the inside scoop for which you could not wait an hour to be in the loop? Is it allowing you to see the world and the people in whose path you are actually walking at that moment; to take in the sights and sounds all around you? Is it making for a stronger community? A healthier perspective? Is it actually managing your hopes and fears?

We all have hopes. We all have fears. To what or in whom do we entrust our hopes? To what or in whom do we give custody of our fears? These are the basic questions our text serves up for us today.

As we discussed last week, when news reached David that King Saul and Saul's son, Jonathan, had died, rather than rejoicing in the death of the king who had sought to kill him — the very king he had been anointed to supplant — and rather than plotting his campaign strategy, calling donors, kissing babies, and hitting the county fair circuit, David mourned the death of Saul and his dearest friend Jonathan, honoring them with a poetic tribute that all Israel was called upon to learn.

So, as Saul had been anointed by Samuel to be Israel's first king, David had been anointed by Samuel to be Israel's next king. Thus, one might assume a smooth transition. When the David narrative is told, we often don't have time to recount any disruptions in the transition, but let me tell you, the transition between Saul's kingship and David's kingship is like a mash-up of *Survivor*, *Succession*, *Game of Thrones*, and the current Presidential campaign. Israel was definitely not united, in fact, Israel wasn't even Israel yet. The tribes were spread out and loyalties were divided. Saul's son Ishbosheth, and Abner, the son of Saul's general Ner, seized the northern territories while the people of Judah in the south anointed David as king.

This development was followed by poolside smackdowns, beheadings, concubines, wife swapping, deception, switching sides, murder, and assassination. The chaos was such that David said of his own loyal leaders, *"Today I am powerless, even though anointed king; these men, the sons of Zeruiah, are too violent for me."*

Following the surprising and unsanctioned assassination of Ishbosheth, son of Saul, and the king of the northern territory, the narrative

calms down just long enough for all the tribes to gather at Hebron, where David was stationed. With a mysteriously unified voice, the tribes entreated David to be their leader, saying, *“Look, we are your bone and flesh. For some time, while Saul was king over us, it was you who led out Israel and brought it in. The Lord said to you: It is you who shall be shepherd of my people Israel, you who shall be ruler over Israel.”*

Though David had been a refugee, escaping Saul’s fury, and even finding refuge amongst their enemies, David’s home, his heart, his spirit had always been with Israel. They were his people, and he was their kin — *“Look, we are your bone and flesh.”* Turning to David the people recognized that even when Saul was their king, it was actually David who functioned as a king would in leading them against and protecting them from their enemies. Yet, it is important to note that when the people call/recruit David, they don’t choose the word for king (*in Hebrew - melek*), but instead choose the Hebrew word *nagid*, which can be translated as — *prince, captain, ruler, or leader*. It’s like a fleeting acknowledgment of their historical covenant with God — *I will be your God, and you shall be my people* — a covenant in which it is understood that the Lord is king. And yet, when it comes time for

David's anointing and installation, they have reverted to the regal nomenclature of *king*.

While this is a subtle distinction, it is nevertheless, significant, for when they briefly step back from the language of kingship (*melek*), and instead use *nagid* (*leader, captain, prince*), there is an acknowledgment of a higher authority, an acknowledgment that God alone is sovereign, that any human authority is limited and conditional. This understanding is huge, fundamental, essential, and yet, throughout history we have consistently forgotten, or worse, ignored it. Remember the Sinai covenant, the ten commandments — “*You shall have no other gods before me ... You shall not make for yourself an idol ... You shall not bow down to them or worship them...*” Remember the Shema, the liturgy from Deuteronomy that was to be offered at the opening and closing of every day — “*Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.*”

For a brief moment, the Israelites acknowledged that when you place too much power in the hands of any human without accountability; when you assign sovereignty to a sinner; when you vest too much unchecked

power in the hands of a few, or worse, one, you fall prey to the very consequences of which the prophet Samuel warned. A monarch, or anyone with unchecked power be they president, prime minister, potentate, preacher, or politician will take your sons and daughters, your crops and creations, your hopes and your dreams, to use them for his or her benefit. You will serve their ends as they neglect your needs, and the vulnerable will be at even greater risk.

Alas, the language quickly returns to the realm of kings, and as we shall see, even with David, the Lord's anointed, the results are at best mixed. David was introduced to the narrative as a shepherd boy out in the field, doing his chores, watching over, providing for, and protecting the sheep. Now, the nascent nation will look to David as their shepherd.

Well, there are good shepherds and bad shepherds, and since shepherds tend to be human, most shepherds will be a mixture of both ... good and bad. Scholar Walter Brueggemann points out that the good shepherd exists for the sake of the sheep and their well-being. The bad shepherd, thus, acts as though the sheep exist for the sake and well-being, enhancement, and profit of the shepherd. (Walter Brueggemann, *1&2 Samuel*) Though

you may never walk amidst the flock or take a shepherd's staff into your hand, the image here is timeless, and in these anxiety-riddled days, it is critical that we ponder this image thoughtfully — the good shepherd exists for the sake of the sheep and their well-being. The bad shepherd, thus, acts as though the sheep exist for the sake and well-being, enhancement and profit of the shepherd.

In his term as shepherd of Israel, David will embody both the good shepherd and the bad shepherd, sometimes looking out for the sheep, and sometimes exploiting them. As we shall see, David will act with courage to keep Israel safe, and David will at other times, put the lives of his own people at risk in order to keep himself safe. David will make decisions both just and unjust. David will act with reason and act with impunity. David will be an exemplar of humility and convicted of arrogance and pride. David is ... us, you and me ... a mixed bag ... flawed ... aspirational ... some days a mess and some days a saint. He will inspire and disappoint; he will grow and regress; he will succeed and he will fail.

Though the Lord's love will never leave David, his life witness reveals the recklessness and inadequacy of entrusting too much power to any human, a lesson we still fail to comprehend.

So, where shall we place our trust? The Proverb implores us to — *Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.* Leaders come and go, rise and fall, inspire and disappoint, at times act in our interest and at times consider only their own interests. If you assign all your hopes to any human, at some point they will disappoint you. If you rely on any human to protect you from every threat, to fight all your battles for you, at some point they will fail ... or disappoint ... or even betray you.

So, who will shepherd us? In whom can we entrust all our hopes and fears? Who will hold our hands when we suffer and temper the scourge of pride when we succeed? Who will always act in our interest and never abandon us? Who will be our shepherd? Jesus said, *"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The*

hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me.”

Well, there are a lot of hired hands out there who say they will shepherd us, though their promises hold no water. And yet, in the flesh and blood Jesus who walked among us, in the risen Christ whose living water fills us to overflowing, the Psalmist’s prayer is realized — *“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul ... Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff— they comfort me.”*

Yes, we live in an unsettled, anxiety-ridden world, flirting with authoritarianism, receding into cynicism, suspicion, and untempered anger, our fears drowning out our hopes, not to mention our common sense. Yet, is our era really all that different than any era before us? The folks whose lives spanned two world wars and a cataclysmic depression might offer us an answer worthy of our attention, as would the survivors of the Plague, civil war, persecution, famine, hurricanes, tsunamis, and tornadoes. Even during Pax Romana, the peace of Rome, persecution, suffering, and violence were

still big business. We need to remember that our fears and our challenges are not so unique. Maybe we need to hesitate before claiming, “Nobody understands what I’m going through.”

As a young child, Maya Angelou was violated, molested. The police came to inform Maya’s grandmother that the man who abused her had been brutally killed. Yet, overhearing this, Maya did not feel relief or freedom or safety. In fact, the news traumatized her to the extent that she barely spoke **at all** for six years, fearing that her voice, if she spoke, could get someone killed. Fear can erase hope, and yet, faith has the power to inflate hope while deflating fear. You see, this young, terrorized 7-year-old child would become the woman who would write — “I believed that there was a God because I was told it by my grandmother and later by other adults. But when I found that I knew not only that there was God but that I was a child of God, when I understood that, when I comprehended that, more than that, when I internalized that, ingested that, I became courageous” ... “A woman's heart should be so hidden in God that a man has to seek [God] just to find her.”

At Christmas, we sing it amidst candles and wreaths without pondering the power the words illumine if we take them to heart — Yet in thy dark streets shineth ... The everlasting light ... The hopes and fears of all the years ... Are met in thee tonight.” The Lord is our Shepherd King.
Amen.