

“Still You Remain Singing”

A Sermon by Dr. Stephanie May

First Parish in Wayland

November 6, 2016

On this Sunday before the election, you can feel the fear vibrating within our society. Fear of loss. Fear of the other party or *that* person winning. Fear of a fair election. Fear for a peaceful transfer of power.

I'm afraid. I'm afraid that the divisions in our society will not be healed anytime soon. I'm afraid that our nation may erupt in violence . . . that our nation *has* already erupted in violence through sexist and xenophobic rhetoric, homophobic and transphobic assaults, the racist firebombing of a historic black church in Mississippi, and a militarized police moving on non-violent protestors at Standing Rock, North Dakota.

Not all fears are rooted in such political and social drama. Some of our fears are deeply personal. We fear losing our job. We fear news from a medical test. We fear being judged for our age, our size, our mental acuity, our athletic prowess, and more. We fear loneliness. We fear being overwhelmed. We fear becoming or not being a parent. We fear for our kids . . . *a lot*. We fear spiders or snakes or harbor other phobias. We fear loss. We fear death.

In a 2015 essay, author Marilynne Robinson offers her reflections on fear. She states her two-part thesis this way: “First, contemporary America is full of fear. And second, fear is not a Christian habit of mind.”ⁱ To bolster her claim about Christian habits, Robinson cites the Christian scriptures, which call for the faithful to trust the “gracious, abiding presence” of Christ. Underscoring the call to trust in this presence of God, she turns to a passage that warns what will happen to the people of Israel “if they depart from their loyalty to God.” From the book of Leviticus, she quotes:

“The sound of a driven leaf shall put them to flight, and they shall flee as one flees from the sword, and they shall fall when none pursues. They shall stumble over one another, as if to escape a sword, though none pursues.”

With this imagery, Robinson points not simply to fear, but to a *fearful* state of mind. A fearfulness that flees at “the sound of a driven leaf.” Or, as Sophocles said, “To one who is in fear, everything rustles.” A fearful state of mind consistently scans the horizon for the danger. A fearful state of mind swiftly and strongly reacts to any perception of threat.

Fear is a real and natural part of life. Defined in the dictionary as “an unpleasant emotion caused by the threat of danger, pain, or harm,” fear is our response to our drive to be safe, to be whole, to stay alive!ⁱⁱ Afraid of harm to ourselves or to whom or what we care about, fear can be a motivating response to act in ways that seek to preserve life. Sometimes we need such actions—holding tight to a toddler’s hand in a busy parking lot or taking precautions in advance of a hurricane.

But how do we determine danger and threat? How do we know when to be afraid? Of whom or what to be afraid? We teach our children “hot” as they reach for a flame. We assure them that there are *not* monsters under the bed. Our own parents or friends walk us through how to ride a bike, fill out a job application, or take on a new task at work. Faced with so many new, different, and unknown things throughout our lives, we assess potential threats again and again—often without even recognizing that we have quickly run through such calculations in our mind and body.

Such scans for potential threats are deeply shaped by the larger contexts of our lives. Williamson makes this point by reaching back to our Puritan ancestors. We laud the courage of these ancestors to take great risks in the face of violent persecution. In this story, the European oppressors are, of course, the villains. Yet, Robinson reminds us:

Those oppressors were motivated by fear of us. We were heretics by their lights, and therefore a threat to the church, to Christian civilization, to every soul who felt our influence. ... To suppress our tradition however viciously was a pious act.

Depending on where you stood, the Puritans were heroes or heretics.

Placing this idea into a more contemporary context, Robinson reflects upon how she is fearfully perceived by some—the “driven leaf” that rustles and invokes danger. She explains,

I have in fact a number of credentials that would make me a driven leaf, as things are reckoned now. I have lived in Massachusetts and other foreign countries. My command of French is not absolutely minimal. I have degrees from elite institutions. I am a professor in a secular university. All in all I am a pretty good example of the sort who inspire fight-or-flight responses in certain segments of the population.

Are we not also “driven leaves” that frighten some? We are members of a liberal religious tradition that seeks new knowledge and understanding rather than prioritizing the preservation of the past. We are residents of a state with strong liberal political leanings—

the first to legalize same-sex marriage, whose healthcare system inspired the architecture of the Affordable Care Act, whose senators have been liberal giants such as Ted Kennedy and now Elizabeth Warren. Like Robinson, we may have degrees from elite schools, speak foreign languages, and comfortably reside in cultural institutions of power. Does it change our perspectives if we consider ourselves to be the object of fear—the threat and danger to another person’s sense of life?

Fear resides around and within us. We are fearful. We are feared. Fear is a part of life. And so how do we live with fear? Respond to fear—our own or others?

In a talk about his popular book *Between the World and Me*, Ta-nehisi Coates describes the book as “effectively an extended essay told in a letter form to my son [on] the notion of fear.”ⁱⁱⁱ A powerful and sobering essay, Coates prepares his son to live as a black man in a world deeply shaped by white supremacy. The fear, insists Coates, is a bodily experience. Addressing his son, Coates writes,

This need to be always on guard was an unmeasured expenditure of energy, the slow siphoning of the essence. It contributed to the fast breakdown of our bodies. So I feared not just the violence of this world but the rules designed to protect you from it, the rules that would have you contort your body to address the block, and contort again to be taken seriously by colleagues, and contort again so as not to give the police a reason.^{iv}

In this passage and throughout the book, Coates describes in detail how he has navigated life in a black body within a society that is built upon exploiting, enslaving, and killing black bodies. How does one live in a world that poses so many threats upon your black body? How does one live in a world in which so many perceive your black body to be a threat? How does one relate to fear?

Coates has no illusions about the dangers his son faces. Yet, he also insists that living within such awareness brings a perspective about life that those who live in what he describes as “The Dream” struggle to see. Coates writes to his son:

I am sorry that I cannot make it ok. I am sorry that I cannot save you—but not that sorry. Part of me thinks that your very vulnerability brings you closer to the meaning of life, just as for others, the quest to believe oneself white divides them from it. The fact is that despite their dreams, their lives are also not inviolable.^v

These are hard words to hear as a person who checks the box ‘white’ on forms handed to me. They are hard words because they resonate with my own experience of life—of needing to be woken to life’s disappointments and injustices, of needing a disruption to the Dream that all will be well for me and mine.

Fear is a part of life because life does contain threats and dangers . . . for all of us—and, as Coates reminds us, for some more than others. To believe or to live otherwise is to live in a “dream” that belies the fullness of our own lives as well as the experiences so many others face day in and day out. Fear is real and yet a fearful state of mind can leave us ready to flee or fight at the sound of every rustling leaf.

For Robinson, a fearful habit of mind does not reflect the Christian call for trust in God. For some of us, the anchor that holds fast through our times of fear may indeed be faith in a divine power that pulls us towards a resolution in goodness. For others, who are atheists or hold a different view of divine power in history, Robinson’s hope may not resonate.

Whatever we may or may not believe about God, what I find important in Robinson’s essay is the belief that in the face of fear, we need something strong and big to hold on to. We need a metaphysical anchor that is tied to a place deep within ourselves. Something that we believe to be trustworthy and solid to which we can hold tight.

The hymn which we sang before the prayer, “Voice Still and Small”, suggests that amidst the struggles and fears of life, a voice still remains singing. Notably, the lyrics to this song were debated between the composer and the hymnal editors. The composer’s lyrics read, “Still *you* remain singing.” However, the editors sought a change to “still *we’ll* remain singing.” I learned this from a blog by Thom Belote, a UU minister who grew up in this congregation. Belote describes this shift from you to we’ll as a theological one.^{vi} In the midst of our uncertainties and struggles, who or what has the strength to quell our fear? A divine You? Perhaps a you that symbolizes a relational connection between self and world—something akin to Jewish philosopher Martin Buber’s I-Thou? Or, are we held fast by a community of persons, by a ‘we’, by those with whom we share meals or coffee hour or even a large, indeterminate circle of folks who share similar values or hope in humanity’s possibility for goodness and justice?

The religious freedom in our tradition means that we may answer these questions differently. However, in the face of fear, I do believe that we all need an anchor that holds fast amidst the uncertainties and the struggle.

In his letter to his son, Ta-Nehisi Coates writes, “I would not have you descend into your own dream. I would have you be a conscious citizen of this terrible and beautiful world.”^{vii}

What I hear in this is Coates declaration of an anchor. Yes, the world is terrible, with divisions and dangers, with uncertainties and risk, violence, hatred, and oppression. And, yes, the world is so beautiful, with music and art, mountains and oceans, good humor and love.

Can we live as conscious citizens of this terrible, beautiful world? Can we be a part of the struggle in which we name our own fears and the fears we instill in others? Can we resist the pull towards a fearful habit of mind as we hold fast to a sense of goodness and love and value of *Life* that transcends the threats and dangers? Can we hear the voice that still remains singing amidst the “dark and rain, sorrow and pain”?

May we hear this song.

May we answer Yes.

May we live awake to this terrible, beautiful world.

So may it be.

Amen

ⁱ Marilynne Robinson, “Fear”, *New York Review of Books*, September 24, 2015 Issue,

ⁱⁱ English Oxford Dictionary. Accessed online November 3, 2016:

<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/fear>

ⁱⁱⁱ “Ta-Nehisi Coates on Fear and the Black Experience”, Religion and Ethics Newsweekly, PBS, November 20, 2015. Accessed online November 3, 2016:

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2015/11/20/ta-nehisi-coates-fear-black-experience/27488/>

^{iv} Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*, (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), 90.

^v Coates, *Between the World and Me*, 107.

^{vi} Thom Belote, “Lecture #7: “Unitarian Universalist Approaches to World Religions,” accessed online November 3, 2016: <http://revthom.blogspot.com/2009/07/lecture-7-unitarian-universalist.html>

^{vii} Coates, *Between the World and Me*, 108.