

Leaders and Demagogues

Scriptures: 1 Samuel 8:10-18; Matthew 27: 15-23

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I. Introduction

There is an important scene in the early part of *Moby Dick* in which Captain Ahab calls all of the crew of the Pequod together at the foot of the quarter deck and he tells them about this ferocious white whale named Moby Dick that he is determined to kill. He takes a big gold Spanish doubloon and he nails it to the mast and he tells them that whoever sees Moby Dick first would get that gold doubloon. And then, he passes around a big flagon of rum and asks them all to drink and pledge that they're all going to hunt Moby Dick to the death, and he gets them all worked up into this sort of frenzy as they pledged themselves to this quest.

Ishmael, who is the narrator and conscience of the story admits that -- these are his words -- "My shouts had gone up with the rest; my oath had been welded with theirs; and stronger I shouted, and more did I hammer and clinch my oath, because of the dread in my soul. A wild, mystical, sympathetic feeling was in me; Ahab's quenchless feud seemed mine."

Every January here at Metropolitan we take a little time to look at some of the important questions of the faith through a somewhat different lens. The intention is to engage in some conversation that might be more welcoming to people who are not regular churchgoers. We provide sort of a low-barrier opportunity for folks that might be interested in church but a little bit intimidated by the idea, to come and experience what church is like, the kind of conversations we have, the kind of life that we have together. And so, if you're a visitor here this morning, I'm glad that you're here and hope that you'll find this to be a rich worshipping community and one that you might want to come back to and be part of as we move into the year.

This month we have been reflecting on some of the wonderful themes that run through one of America's greatest novels, *Moby Dick*. And we're closing out this morning by looking at leadership, both what makes for powerful leadership and what makes for destructive leadership. Now in part I am obviously interested in exploring this both because it is a recurring theme throughout the book, but also because we as a nation are in the midst of a very heated electoral cycle as we hurtle towards the Iowa caucuses this week. It's also an important time in the life of our denomination as we elect new leaders to be bishops over us and elect leaders that will guide the course of our denomination over the next several years.

But I want to start off by saying I have worked very hard to not make this a sermon that is about partisan politics. What I want to explore with you all is what makes a good leader or a negative leader across the aisles of Republicans and Democrats. I want to particularly look at the way that Ahab models some very destructive characteristics of

leadership as he engages in some very clear demagoguery to shape this crew of the Pequod so that they will do what he wants them to do.

So, what I want you to do this morning is not listen to what I have to say and try to figure out which political candidate I may or may not be talking about, okay? In all honesty, I'm not talking about any of them. What I hope we can do is look at some of what Ahab demonstrates for us so that it can raise some red flags when we see leadership, Republican or Democratic, that is destructive.

II. The Genius of Democracy.

Our Hebrew scripture lesson this morning and, in fact, all of the scripture spends a lot of time unpacking what good and less-than-good leadership looks like. And our Hebrew scripture lesson this morning from Samuel is at a point in Israel's history when they have been governed by a series of judges. It's been a very tribal society up until that point and whenever there has been a crisis, God has called forth a judge to unify the nation and deal with the crisis at hand which is usually military -- the Philistines were attacking or whoever -- and then when the crisis is over, that leader goes back to doing what he or she, and there were both, had been doing before. But the Israelites have been looking around at the nations that surrounded them and they saw that the nations that seem to be the most politically powerful had kings that led them. So, the people came to Samuel and said, "You know what, we'd like a king just like the other folks have because that seems to be working for them." And part of what is going on there is some anxiety that they have because each of the judges that have been called forth thus far have been called forth by God and what happens if there's a crisis and no judge gets called? It's better to have a king.

So, Samuel tries to dissuade them and says to them, "I know it seems like an easy solution to our problems but here are the things that a king is going to do that you're not going to like very much." And he lays out this whole list of things that you heard read that are about the various abuses of power that kings were subjected to exercise. And Samuel says, "You don't have to do this. God is in charge. God is the king. You can trust that." And they said, "Thank you very much for your opinion. Can you please find us a king now?" Because they had their hearts set that this was a solution to their problem.

It is clearly one of the theses of the writer of Samuel and Kings that monarchy for Israel was a failed experiment, that they fell short of God's call in insisting on having a king. There's a very strong libertarian sort of streak to these books. But then it goes on to talk about, "Okay. If we're going to have a king, how do we make it the best king possible?"

So, for Herman Melville, the abuses that were prone to monarchy are really solved in this wondrous, glorious experiment of democracy that was the United States. And he spends a lot of time in *Moby Dick* talking about the really wonderful gifts that we are given as a country. He uses the Pequod as a sort of microcosm of America and

celebrates in very powerful language the amazing gift of our diversity and our hard work and our equality. It is noteworthy for a book that was written in 1851 as civil war was on the horizon for America that of the three major characters and most powerful figures in the ship, the three harpooners, one is Polynesian and one is Native American and one is African American. So, he really uses this microcosm of the whaling ship, and he was on whaling ships so he knew what the life was like, to celebrate the diversity and the equality that was American democracy.

In contrast to many of the nations that had kings, Melville writes, "But this august dignity of which I treat, is not the dignity of kings and robes, but that abounding dignity which has no robed investiture. Thou shalt see it shining in the arm that wields a pick or drives a spike; that democratic dignity which, on all hands, radiates without end from God; God Himself! The great God absolute! The centre and circumference of all democracy! His omnipresence is our divine equality."

And then when commenting a little bit tongue in cheek on the nature of the kings that many of the European powers had, he says, "Certain I am, however, that a king's head is solemnly oiled at his coronation, even as a head of salad. Can it be, though, that they anoint it with a view of making its interior run well in the same way we anoint machinery?" He meant that as a joke. You can laugh.

III. Ahab represents the danger to Democracy

So, Melville had a great love and respect for our democratic process, and he recognized and used Ahab as a tool to explore what can go wrong in the democracy when we find ourselves subject to demagoguery. And Ahab in this scene on the quarter deck models a lot of the classic techniques that demagogues throughout history have used. And I want to just unpack a couple of them with you because the basic point is these are the red flags that we need to be watchful for in our political discourse as we engage in this election.

The first thing that Ahab does, of course, is appeal to the sailors' self-interest and greed. He starts off nailing this big gold doubloon, \$16, which in 1850 was a fair amount of money, on the mast and essentially inviting them to compete with each other for who gets that money. And friends, whenever leaders, particularly political leaders, are appealing to our greed and self-interest, red flags should go off for us. And frankly, we see this a lot on both sides of the aisle when it comes to the financial stability of our country.

For Republicans, the argument largely gets framed as if our government was smaller and right sized, we would have less taxes to pay and therefore more money in your pocket, right? On the Democratic side, the argument largely gets framed if people who are extremely wealthy and wealthy corporations were paying their fair share, then we could get all these things accomplished and we, middle class folks, wouldn't have to have our taxes rise. So, what's interesting to me in that is that on both sides of the aisle

there are very different models of government but a very similar appeal to our greed and self-interest. We can do all these things and it's not going to cost you a thing because either we right size the government or those rich folks pay for it all.

Well, dear friends, whenever a leader appeals to your baser instinct, you have a message there that you need to pay attention to. It used to be in our country that we had leaders who would actually invite us to and challenge us to sacrifice for the good of our nation, for the upbuilding of the people around us. It wasn't all about my personal benefit, it was about how we supported and enhanced the life of one another. Why don't we have that conversation anymore? Why is all of our appeal to our own greed and self-interest? And it'll be great to blame the people who are leading us for that, but I've got to say we feed right into that, right? Because our political leaders have figured out that as soon as somebody says, "You know what, you may need to have your taxes raised a little bit," they lose, right? "You may have to give up a little something that you were planning on buying this year," they lose. Nobody is willing to take that risk and we have told them that it's risky for them. So, we have trained our politicians to appeal to our basest instincts.

The antidote to that, dear friends, is continuing to learn generosity. So, when I talk to you all about generosity during stewardship, it's not simply because I want to pick your pockets, you know, entirely. It is because becoming generous is about how we learn to extend ourselves and have that best piece of ourselves grow, not the most unattractive pieces of ourselves.

Ahab, of course, continues this wonderful process of demagoguery as he casts this picture of this terrifying white whale that they are all going to encounter. He feeds on their fear and the fear of their unknown and he binds them together with this common purpose because of this enemy who is out there against us. Well, this is a classic technique that has been used for ages and whether it is Nazi Germany identifying the Jews as the problem or whether it's Rwanda identifying the Tutsis as the problem, somebody's going to die because of our fear.

There is lots in our world to be fearful of. There are difficult tasks before us. But when our leaders appeal to our fear, we've got a problem. And whether that's our fear of immigrants coming across the border or our fear of ISIS or our fear of an expanding and increasingly aggressive Russia, whatever that fear is, when our leaders play off of that, they are again playing to our baser instincts and a red flag should go up for us. We are the most powerful, most wealthy country in the history of the world. What I think we want is leaders who will help us seize an opportunity to help shape our nation's, our world's history, not react out of fear.

We see both of these dynamics at work in our Gospel lesson, of course, this morning. Pilate has been brought Jesus by the leaders of the Sanhedrin, the synagogue, the temple, and they want to get rid of this guy. Well, Pilate recognizes immediately that they're acting out of self-interest, that they are jealous of the authority that Jesus is starting to garner and they want to get rid of him. And then you also have

the leaders of the temple who are playing on the people's fear, fear of the Romans should a revolt break out, their anger and frustration at Jesus for not being the kind of leader that they wanted him to be. And so, all of that gets focused on Jesus, who is then led to the cross. Whenever we are encouraged to fear something that is out there, when we're encouraged to react out of fear or fear's close sibling, anger, again a warning flag should go up in our heads that we're being manipulated and we need to be aware of that.

Now our Gospel lesson then goes the next step, which Ahab also does, which is if we can kill that thing out there, whether it's Jesus or Moby Dick, all our problems will be solved. And it is again, a classic technique of the demagogue to hypersimplify very complex problems in the hope that we will buy into an agenda that's going to solve the thing that we fear.

And dear friends, we don't have a single problem that we're facing that is not incredibly complex. There are no easy solutions to figuring out how to rebuild our educational system. There are no easy solutions to figuring out how to disentangle all of the combatants in Syria right now. There are no easy solutions to any of the problems that face us, and frankly if there were, we would've done them by now. But we live in a world of sound bites and tweets. And you know what, you can't have a particularly complex question or a conversation in 140 characters, I don't think. I've never tried it, but I don't think so. But we desperately want simple, clear, direct solutions to very complex, often very longstanding problems.

Demagogues have a tendency to throw out hypersimple solutions in the hope that our desire for a solution will cause us to buy into them. It is our responsibility to realize that the problems before us are highly complex and that we need to engage in a process that is often incremental in helping us move forward. And that's not emotionally satisfying, right? We just want the problem solved.

But, see, the magic of our democracy is that the solutions to the problems that we find most intractable ironically happen not with big sweeping simple solutions, but when people of very different opinions engage in meaty and substantive conversation with each other. This is also by the way at the heart of who we were to be as Methodists. John Wesley believed fiercely that our church needed to be a big tent because the Holy Spirit moves most powerfully when people who are of differing opinions engage in conversation with each other and that's where the Holy Spirit starts to work. And it is a great tragedy in my view that both as a church, not a local church but as a denomination, and as a nation we are in a period where polarization is so fierce that people can't talk to each other about how to solve problems.

The Holy Spirit works in a process that John Wesley called holy conferencing which is when I bring my understanding of who God is and where God is calling us to the table and you bring your understanding, and as we talk to each other a new way starts to emerge.

We're going to talk a little bit more about this as we enter into Lent in a couple of weeks because Lent is a time of spiritual discipline and we're going to be looking at the spiritual discipline of listening, how do we listen to each other. And I'm going to be kicking off a sermon series called *Holy Listening, Holy Speaking*, about how we engage in this process with each other in a way that is life-giving, both as a church and as a nation.

IV. Conclusion

Moby Dick is a wonderful book that is hard to categorize. It spans a variety of literary genres. It engages and tackles a lot of meaty subjects through its pages. But this question of leadership is a through theme for Melville. How we engage in a process that recognizes the power of our mutual voices together and how we avoid being manipulated and led by leaders who frankly don't have our best interest in mind. And Melville invites us to use Ahab as an example to understand what manipulative leadership looks like, and as *Moby Dick* sinks the *Pequod* and all hands die except for Ishmael, where destructive leadership takes us.

Amen.