

**Sunday, November 8, 2015**  
**Rev. Diane Monti-Catania**

**Sermon – “Do Not Be Afraid”**

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I want to turn our attention this morning to the first reading from the Book of Kings.

1 and 2Kings provide a continuous account of Israel’s history from the death of King David around the year 970 BCE to the release of the exiled King Jehoiachin from prison in Babylon sometime around 560 BCE.

It is entertaining reading – you could sit down this afternoon with a cup of tea and read it like a novel.

The stories in Kings tell more than history for they chronicle the evolution of Israel’s theology.

The early part of the book recounts Solomon’s rise to power and his building of the temple, as well as his eventual downfall.

As I’ve mentioned before, it is important that we know the history of our own theology.

These stories from the Hebrew Bible give us an understanding of the world into which Jesus came.

You cannot understand the ‘New Testament’ without having an awareness of the ‘Old Testament.’”

Chapter 8 of 1Kings contains this beautiful blessing of the people at the dedication of the temple- a prayer that is thousands of years old, but speaks to our own faith today:

*“Blessed be the Lord, who has given rest to his people Israel according to all that he promised;*

*not one word has failed of all his good promise, which he spoke through his servant Moses.*

*The Lord our God be with us, as he was with our ancestors;*

*may he not leave us or abandon us, but incline our hearts to him, to walk in all his ways, and to keep his commandments, his statutes, and his ordinances, which he commanded our ancestors.*

*Let these words of mine, with which I pleaded before the Lord, be near to the Lord our God day and night, and may he maintain the cause of his servant and the cause of his people Israel, as each day requires;*

*so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the Lord is God; there is no other.*

*Therefore devote yourselves completely to the Lord our God, walking in his statutes and keeping his commandments, as at this day.”*

Solomon did not live up to his own commitments.

He turned away from the Lord and rather than using his great wealth and wisdom to build up God’s kingdom, he fell prey to the human frailties of lust, greed and desire for power.

The Lord raised up adversaries against Solomon and the kingdom was divided in two: Judah and Israel.

Twenty subsequent kings reigned over Judah with another nineteen leading Israel.

Years of conflict and struggle ensued.

It is into this scenario that the holy man Elijah is introduced to us.

Elijah is an Israelite prophet in the times of Kings Ahab and Ahaziah, during the first half of the ninth century BC.

He is the protagonist in four stories in the book of Kings and appears with Moses at Jesus' transfiguration.

Elijah is characterized as a 'zealot for the Lord' fighting the foreign god, Baal and the worship of other Gods.

Prior to today's lesson Elijah has just survived a famine and drought that he had foretold.

Following God's instructions he traveled to a place where he lived on the water of a river and had bread and meat delivered to him by ravens, an unclean bird.

Now we find him following God's instructions to go to another town and find a widow who will care for him.

Imagine his disappointment when he goes to the town and finds the woman and she says that she and her son are about to starve to death and they have nothing to share.

The two stories together testify to Elijah's ability to perform miracles as well as providing examples of God's care for all faithful Israelites who adhere to God's covenant.

The importance of honoring the covenant, believing in God's love, and setting aside our fears are all messages that carry forward into our faith lives today.

I often characterize our biblical history this way:

God, the omnipotent, all powerful being created us.

God of the clouds, unseen, communicating through the prophets;

God gave us the commandments and the covenant.

We did not listen.

We did not obey.

God realized that we needed something more.

Next, we have God made incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ.

God came and walked among us to show us what it meant to love and be loved.

We were shown, first hand how to live out these commandments.

It was too radical, too hard and we killed the messenger.

But God, all forgiving, all loving, God came up with yet a third attempt to help us live into the promise of the kingdom.

The Holy Spirit was sent to be a part of our very being.

God breathed into us the gift of the spirit.

Each and every created being received this gift.

God's message of love was written on our hearts.

Have we gotten it?

How do you think we are doing?

Do you live your life sensing the movement of the Holy Spirit – God's presence in your day to day routines?

My Worship Renewal class this week will focus on the dynamics of worship – what happens when we gather.

We were asked to reflect on the ways that our worship helps people experience the awe and majesty of God.

One of the questions that intrigued me was how does your worship reflect your theology?

This question of theology also came up a few weeks ago in our bible study conversation.

Theology is the articulation of God's attributes and relations to the universe; the study of divine things or religious truths.

Basically, your theology is what you believe God to be--both in the world and in your life.

Can you articulate your theology?

Is what you believe reinforced by your worship experience?

Our theology is developed over time and is informed by both history and experience.

This is why we pay attention to the biblical history of our faith and study how our ancestors gave voice to their beliefs.

We endeavor to teach what we believe to our children, but that will only take root if or when they experience the divine encounters we describe.

Our challenge as a faith community is to be able to tell others why we gather and what we get from it.

This is how the invitation is formed.

We would never tell people what to believe – but we certainly ought to be able to tell them what we believe.

Worship is a time to give thanks and praise to God.

It is also a time to remind ourselves that we are stronger in community – better when we can acknowledge our shared sinfulness, as well as our shared joy at being beloved by God.

Patience, forgiveness, reconciliation – these are the things that we practice in a faith community.

In a world where differences seem more pronounced than ever, church is a place with a level playing field.

No one person matters more than someone else.

Each voice is valued and each person treasured.

Weekly worship ought to be the place that you come to be reminded and restored.

Reminded that you are part of something much greater than yourself and restored to confront the challenges of everyday life.

It ought to be part of your Sabbath – your day to honor God.

I have developed a ritual of worship on Fridays – my Sabbath day.

I hike up Lion's Head trail to a place beyond the popular view – a quiet place where everything I can see is God-made – just hills and trees, rocks, birds.

On my hike up the mountain I review the events of the week and think about things that have happened.

When I get to the top, I sit quietly on the rock, warmed by the sun and I pray.

I pray for you.

I pray for my family.

I pray for God's presence to be a part of my life.

I spend most of Fridays in silence and certainly the hour and a half that I spend in the woods.

Without fail, I leave that place restored, rejuvenated and clear about what I need to do.

The rock has become my sacred place.

I want this church, this meetinghouse to be your sacred place.

I want to provide you with worship that will afford you the opportunity to be away from your daily troubles and anxieties.

I want you to come into this holy space and feel the mystery and awe of a divine being.

I want you to hear music that brings your soul in touch with God.

I want you to pray in such a way that you are changed. One of the words that we use a lot in the United Church of Christ is transformation.

I believe wholeheartedly in the ability of each one of us to transform ourselves into the being that God created us to be.

I encourage you – I invite you – to fully enter into the worship experience.

Let yourself be free to feel genuinely loved by God and this community and to sing praise and give glory to the one who loves us all.