

“In the Face of Giants and Storms”
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury
I Samuel 17:1a,4-11,19-23,32-49; Mark 4:35-41

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Our Gospel lesson begins in the evening, after a busy day of healing and teaching. People have surrounded Jesus every step of the way and continue as night approaches. If he is to rest, Jesus decides they must set sail.

We know the story: a heavy wind comes up on the lake, waves batter and almost sink the boat, and the disciples panic. Meanwhile, Jesus sleeps soundly on a cushion in the back of the boat. The disciples awaken Jesus, who says to the sea: “Peace! Be still!” Other translations of these commands are: “Quiet! Be still!,” and: “Quiet! Settle down!,” which sound like a parent’s first call to children having a slumber party: “Time to settle down.”

Yet, the literal translation is more powerful, like the third call to the slumber party, with Jesus’ words to the storm being the same he uses to cast out demons. It would be like Jesus saying: “Shut up (wind)! Be muzzled (waves)!”

Let us hear Mark’s story of Jesus and the disciples caught in a nighttime storm in Mark 4:35-41:

³⁵*On that day, when evening had come, Jesus said to them, “Let us go across to the other side.”* ³⁶*And leaving the crowd behind, they took Jesus with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him.* ³⁷*A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped.* ³⁸*But Jesus was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?”* ³⁹*He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm.* ⁴⁰*Jesus said to them, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?”* ⁴¹*And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”*

I picture Saul dressing David for battle with Goliath with his heavy armor as I do children playing dress up with adult clothing, with the arms of shirts extending down to the knees, dresses and skirts dragging along the floor, hats overflowing the head, and the clip clop of shoes being dragged along the floor by small feet. Sometimes, when our grandson is looking for his shoes, I tell him he can wear mine, and he tells me, “They are too big.” Yet, we note David does not say, “Saul, this does not fit me,” or “This armor is too big.” David says, “I am not used to it.”

There is more to hear in the scene of David setting aside Saul’s bronze helmet and coat of mail. What Saul and the Israelite army heard from Goliath was a defiance of their nation, Israel. It scared them, and Saul’s response was to match the armor and armaments of Goliath and the Philistines.

What David heard from Goliath was a defiance of their God. David’s decision was to clothe himself in trust of God, not strength of armor. David’s trust lies neither in Saul’s armaments, nor in his own resume as a lion and bear killer, but as he tells Saul, “The Lord, who saved me from the paw of lion ...and bear, will save me from the hand of this Philistine.”

God became David's shield-bearer. In the face of a giant, David was willing to make himself vulnerable, standing firm in his trust of God's justice. Psalm 9, a psalm of David, uplifts God as the one Walter Brueggemann calls the powerful "equalizer," the one who will stand between a strong adversary and a weak petitioner. [Texts for Preaching, Year B, Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 1993. p. 395]

In biblical times, the threat of a mortal enemy, and the terror of giants like Goliath, were matched by the fear of the sea. Even for trained sailors, the sea was considered the abode of chaos, the dwelling place of sea monsters. Even on the inland Sea of Galilee, storms could develop quickly and cause panic, destruction and death. I recall college summers sailing on Lake George in upstate New York, when a sunny sky could turn dark in a minute, as a storm raced in over the surrounding hills.

Jesus has instructed the disciples to cross over the Sea of Galilee after a busy day. It is evening turning to night. There were no shoreline lighthouses with shining beacons, no onboard generators to power lamps; any possible light would come from the moon or stars, but they are hidden behind dark, storm clouds. It was pitch black, except for sporadic lighting flashes. So, when their boat begins to be swamped, I can only surmise the disciples' fear of drowning was increased by an inability to see.

Let's be clear. The disciples' fear was real, even with at least four being veteran fisherman. To say when faced with giants and storms, we should remain fearless is a bit beyond the human ability. So, after I read Jesus put a muzzle on the storm, and then turned to his disciples and asked, "Why are you afraid?," I am thinking Jesus needs a reality check.

"Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" My answer: "Jesus, what are you thinking? This is not about faith, it is about fear, real pit of the heart and soul fear."

To say, "don't be afraid" when a child is lost, when one has received news of cancer, when one is in the midst of a battle, when one lives in an abusive situation or on a drug-infested street, or when a gunman opens fire in the midst of your church's prayer meeting – to say "don't be afraid" seems almost callous.

Yet, as I studied the text more, I wondered: is Jesus really dismissing the disciples' fear about the raging storm and swamping boat, or is he more responding to their accusation couched as a question, "Don't you care that we are perishing?"

The idea of sparring with an enemy is pretty easy to understand, as Goliath challenged Israel, and scoffed at the young David. Yet, the storm on the sea, with Jesus with us in the boat, invites us to consider those times when we might feel we are sparring with God. That's a whole different experience, and I wonder if it is the kind of experience felt by those at Charleston's Emmanuel AME Church this week, when in the midst of a Bible study came a sudden, murderous rampage.

The disciples' question – "Jesus, don't you care...?" – is a very human response. We ask it when life hits rock bottom, when a child suffers harm, when a cancer is deemed terminal, when abuse ends in hospitalization, or drugs lead to street killings, or a man kills nine people at church prayer meeting, or a retired couple in our church is murdered while on vacation. "God, where were you? Jesus, don't you care?" In the face of struggles and tragedies, we may wonder if God is aware of our distress or needs to be awakened.

Again, I find it helpful to understand Jesus' response to the disciples as being more about the wake up question, "Don't you care...?" than about their legitimate fears of the storm. One writer compares this to a parent comforting a child after a nightmare. One might be tempted to say, "There is nothing of which to be afraid," except the nightmare and fear are very real for the child. A parent might better say, "Fear not, I am with you."

For me, Jesus is not really questioning the disciples' fear as he is the paralyzing effect of that fear. So, I hear his question, "Why are you afraid?" better heard as, "Why has fear so overcome you when I am with you?"

I have not seen it, but I became curious about the just released film, "Inside Out," when I heard a recent radio interview with its director, Pete Docter. It is "an animated film that goes into the mind of an 11-year-old child where Joy, Fear, Anger, Disgust and Sadness are all at headquarters – the control room in her brain – kind of competing to control her emotions." After a prescreening of the film for its production staff and their families, a father came in the next day and shared the his son's response to the film. "My son has been taking swimming lessons. And he's been afraid to dive off the diving board. It's just too high, and he's scared, so he hasn't been able to do it. Yesterday, after seeing the film, we went to lessons, and he dove off the diving board. And everybody said, yeah, that's great. How did you do it? And he said, well, I just felt like fear had been driving, and I asked [fear] to step aside." [Fresh Air, June 10: <http://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=413273007>]

In life, fear can protect from harm, but it can also paralyze. For me, the teaching this morning is not about being afraid, but what we do with our fear, especially when we sense it is time to tell fear to step aside. Throughout the Gospel of Mark, the disciples are confused about what is happening to them and with Jesus. Yet, within each moment is the question: "Where will your faith lead you, to paralysis or action?" In other words, "In the face of giants and storms, will you fade and fold, or stand fast and firm?"

As I listened to members of the Emmanuel AME Church this week, I heard amazing "stand fast and firm" faith responses from the families and friends of the nine men and women murdered at the church. There had to have been lingering fear, and certainly anger, but I heard an overwhelming flow of forgiveness uttered in the midst of what was an overwhelming storm. As did the Amish in Pennsylvania after the 2006 shooting of ten and killing of five of their daughters, such a strength to trust God and forgive is one I wonder if I could offer in the face of such storms of hatred.

This week also caused me to remind myself of my own responsibility to confront blatant racism, but even more, subtle racial hatred couched in innuendo. Such can be heard in false statements, some seeking to portray fact using the words, "those people," and others resurrecting stereotypes by couching them in humor. Hatred is learned and planted, sometimes by real experience, but often passed down through families and cultures, and now websites and social media. I believe Jesus would keep us alert to any ways we seed hatred, and make us bold to stand against the Goliath of racism, not just by ignoring racial jokes or not laughing at mean-spirited stereotypes, but by speaking out and calling them what they are. That itself can create fear for us, especially if it risks offending a relative, or losing a friend. Yet, it is at just such times we are called to tell fear to step aside.

Following Jesus, sailing with him night and day, is eventually going to lead to fear-filled moments. When we hop in a boat with Jesus, when we go up against giants who rail against our God, we are going to find ourselves in unsafe places and positions of fear.

Faith is not an immunity from fear, nor a guarantee we will never suffer in life, but that, in the assurance of our Psalm 9 call to worship, God offers a safe house for the battered. Faith is not that David will strike down Goliath, but David telling Saul he is not going to wear his armor, and willingly chooses the way of vulnerability based on a full trust in God. Faith is not so much the assurance of a calm sea in life, but that Jesus is in the boat with us; indeed, the paradox is that traveling with Jesus may land us in the middle of a stormy sea with no easy escape.

Jesus shuts up the winds and muzzles the waves. Mark writes the sea becomes a “great calm” and the wind “grows weary.” Living in faith and not being paralyzed by fear, means that even within the storms of our lives, there can be found a calm, a peace, a place where we can sense a shelter from any powers of destruction and despair seeking to overwhelm or control us.

At the points and places of our deepest fears, in the face of giants and storms, our faith offers a groping-in-the-dark trust of God’s presence, an assurance of Jesus still being in our boat.