

## **The Sea Is So Wide<sup>1</sup>**

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Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

5th Sunday after Pentecost - June 20, 2021

Texts: 1 Samuel 17:32-49; Mark 4:25-31

### **1 Samuel 17:32-49**

*We remember the story of David and Goliath from our Sunday school days. What message does it carry to us now?*

David said to Saul, "Let no one's heart fail because of him; your servant will go and fight with this Philistine." Saul said to David, "You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him; for you are just a boy, and he has been a warrior from his youth." But David said to Saul, "Your servant used to keep sheep for his father; and whenever a lion or a bear came, and took a lamb from the flock, I went after it and struck it down, rescuing the lamb from its mouth; and if it turned against me, I would catch it by the jaw, strike it down, and kill it. Your servant has killed both lions and bears; and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them, since he has defied the armies of the living God." David said, "The Lord, who saved me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, will save me from the hand of this Philistine." So Saul said to David, "Go, and may the Lord be with you!" Saul clothed David with his armor; he put a bronze helmet on his head and clothed him with a coat of mail. David strapped Saul's sword over the armor, and he tried in vain to walk, for he was not used to them. Then David said to Saul, "I cannot walk with these; for I am not used to them." So David removed them.

Then he took his staff in his hand, and chose five smooth stones from the wadi, and put them in his shepherd's bag, in the pouch; his sling was in his hand, and he drew near to the Philistine. The Philistine came on and drew near to David, with his shield-bearer in front of him. When the Philistine looked and saw David, he disdained him, for he was only a youth, ruddy and handsome in appearance. The Philistine said to David, "Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks?" And the Philistine cursed David by his gods. The Philistine said to David, "Come to me, and I will give your flesh to the birds of the air and to the wild animals of the field." But David said to the Philistine, "You come to me with sword and spear and javelin; but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This very day the Lord will deliver you into my hand, and I will strike you down and cut off your head; and I will give the dead bodies of the Philistine army this very day to the birds of the air and to the wild animals of the earth, so that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, and that all this assembly may know that the Lord does not save by sword and spear; for the battle is the Lord's and he will give you into our hand."

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<sup>1</sup> From the title of Marian Wright Edelman's book, *The Sea Is so Wide and My Boat Is So Small*

When the Philistine drew nearer to meet David, David ran quickly toward the battle line to meet the Philistine. David put his hand in his bag, took out a stone, slung it, and struck the Philistine on his forehead; the stone sank into his forehead, and he fell face down on the ground.

Mark 4:35-41

On that day, after Jesus had taught the crowd in parables by the seashore, when evening had come, he said to his own disciples, "Let us go across to the other side." And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he 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?" 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. He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" 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?"

Keep these words in your heart. The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. TBTG

We just heard two unbelievable stories: David slays the giant Goliath. Jesus soothes the stormy sea. Two tales of triumph in the midst of trouble. Two stories of people who fear for their lives. The Israelites fear the Philistines and their monster warrior, Goliath. The disciples fear the monster sea. Fear awakens our survival instincts in truly dangerous situations. But fear can also exaggerate danger and lead to irrational behavior. The sea is so wide, our boat so small. How can we save ourselves? We can't.

Both David and Jesus stay calm in the face of overwhelming threats, surrounded by panicking people. Jesus naps while the boat is sinking. David throws aside the unwieldy armor the king tries to put on him. Both display utter vulnerability, weakness so profound it would be laughable if lives weren't at risk.

How could they even do that? I think it was like this. Both had faced greater personal challenges: with his bare hands, David had killed lions and bears preying on his sheep, his flock. What's one slow-moving, heavily armed giant compared to those? Jesus had fought the temptations of Satan. What's a little lake water compared to the predator prince of this world? They didn't win those battles by faith in themselves, but by confidence in a higher power. From experience, they trusted that God would show up in their weakness.

Confidence is different from certainty. Goliath was certain no one could beat him; he ridiculed David as a silly child. Goliath was certain that nothing could penetrate his armor. That was his mistake. Certainty is a mistake. Certainty is the dead zone in our heads where we stop letting anything new in. David had confidence. Confidence in something greater than ourselves lets us

stay calm in the face of what we don't yet know or understand. Confidence lets us address real dangers and lay irrational fears to rest.

I hope you'll understand if I have to say a bit about my step-nephew Kevin, my sister's husband's son who died last weekend. By the age of 33, he was internationally known as a brilliant and innovative scholar, a passionate activist, and co-founder of the Mapping Prejudice project that exposes the racism woven into the legal fabric of our history. He's been called, "a champion of a brighter future." He and his fiancée Maggie (who spoke to our group last year when we visited the George Floyd Memorial) crusaded against society's predators.

People admire his confidence and marvel at his accomplishments. His family knew the history behind them. Kevin did not sail into success like a ship into a smooth harbor. His youth was turbulent, to the point where we sometimes feared for his life. But he faced down the demons *within* himself before going on to heroically challenge the demons in our society. It's not only how far he got in his 33 short years that impresses me but how far he came. Those who know about these things know he could only have done what he did with the help of his Higher Power.

Think of the fear infesting our world. How is it affecting us? One commentator wrote, "We Americans don't just disagree with one another. We don't just have different values, narratives, and perceptions of truth. We actually see one another as moral threats, incompatible with all that we consider good."<sup>2</sup> In other words, we're afraid of each other. Sometimes the danger is real. But sometimes we scare ourselves into irrational behavior. How do we know the difference, and remain calm and confident, ready to do the next right thing?

What the stories of David slaying the giant and Jesus soothing the sea - and my nephew Kevin - tell me today is that the first danger we meet is not the enemy out there but the enemy within. We learn by facing the lions, the bears, the fears that prey on us, inside us. *God saves us first from ourselves*. When we recognize our own inner traps, we lean on the strength outside us. As we sang, "In God alone we find rest, and peace, and joy." God's mercy doesn't make us invincible, it reminds us we are vulnerable - and loved already. Then our confidence is in God, and not in ourselves. And this is important because no matter how far we come, we'll still get things wrong sometimes. Sometimes we'll be too paralyzed with fear to act, or so armored with certainty that we don't know to be afraid. God's love, grace, and mercy - those are our strength, not our own perfections and achievements. What a weight this removes!

Danger is real, and always will be. But so is love, and so is hope. And the greatest hope lies in coming out of our shells of fear, and dropping our armor of certainty, and resting in the mercy of God. Seeing neighbors as neighbors - not as threats. Seeing others as dear to God. Seeing that

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<sup>2</sup> George Packer, in an interview with Jeff Goldberg, published in *The Atlantic* online newsletter, June 14, 2021.

“everything terrible is something that needs our love.”<sup>3</sup> God’s love. Can I do this? Not on my own. The sea is so wide and my boat is so small. Fortunately, Jesus is on board. And I don’t think he’s sleeping!

God calls you to be bigger, braver, smarter than you think you are, to do impossible, unbelievable things. You can do them with confidence, not in yourself, but in the divine arc of mercy that tells you, when you are weak, then you are strong. Face the fears within, and you can face the world. In God alone are rest, and joy and peace. May it be so for you, for all of us today.

### Prayers

God of mercy, strip us of our certainties and replace them with quiet confidence in you. When fear surrounds us, let us be your clear voice of reason.

God of hope, we have come so far as a nation on our recovery from pandemic. Let us not give up until the whole world has access to the vaccine, to good health care, and to wholesome lives.

God of peace, bring relief to the many troubled places on earth where fear is daily fare for your children. Make us peacemakers in all we do and say.

God of rest, you have taught us that our strength comes from you. May all who seek justice find rest in your presence; may we be still and know that you alone are God.

God of healing, bring solace and renewal to all who suffer and all who mourn, especially my sister Jacqueline’s family on the death of son, brother, and fiance Kevin. Remember us all in your kingdom and teach us to pray: Our Father, who art in heaven,.....

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<sup>3</sup> Quote: Rainer Maria Rilke