



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea
The Episcopal Church
in Destin, Florida

“Telling the stories of the power of God”
Fifth Sunday after Pentecost – June 23, 2024
I Samuel 17
Mark 4:35-41

A Homily by
The Reverend Jo Popham

In ancient times a dispute between nations might have been decided by individual combat. And so it was that David the Israelite and Goliath the Philistine fought. Philistia was a coastal nation on the Mediterranean Sea, and it was Israel's archenemy. Their armies faced each other screaming insults at one another from either side of the river valley in the hills just west of Bethlehem. On one side of the river was Goliath. He was very tall and wore a heavy coat of chain mail and bronze shin protectors. He was armed with a sword, a spear, and a javelin. Goliath even had his own shield bearer who ran in front of him. The giant's appearance intimidated Saul and his army of Israelites. How could they defend themselves against such a force – against a giant?

David, the young shepherd, had learned to protect his flock from lions and bears, (lions, and tigers, and bears, oh, my!), and he stepped up to take on the Philistine giant. Now David was easy on the eyes, but his eyes were focused on God alone, not on worldly limitations. Saul strapped his own armor and bronze helmet on David's small frame and gave him his sword. But David was unaccustomed to the trappings of weapons of war, so he took off the armor and armed himself with the Lord ... and with his sling and five smooth rocks from the wadi. In the arid parts of David's world, there were areas where a shepherd could find water for his sheep. After a storm with heavy rainfall, the run-off down a steep incline – down a wadi – would render the stones very round and very hard – almost like projectiles used in guns. Those were the rocks that David chose.

So the young shepherd slew the giant – with a slingshot – and people everywhere came to know of the great faith of the people of God in Israel because of the story of David who had the power of God and slew Goliath.

And we all know the story of Jesus rebuking the wind during a fierce sudden storm. In the story of Jesus calming the storm we see that God had given extraordinary power to his son Jesus the Christ, power to even control the forces of nature.¹

Jesus had been teaching from a boat, and he asked that the disciples take him across to the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee. He was more than tired; he was weary to the bone. He lay down to sleep in the stern of the boat. The crowd followed him in a flotilla, but their boats scattered when the weather turned – when the storm came up so quickly.² At least four of the disciples were professional fishermen, but the storm surprised and frightened all of the disciples. They knew well that small boats caught out on the sea would be in immediate danger. So for them to react with terror to that storm tells us that it was a significant event, a really frightening storm. And Jesus... Jesus remained just as he was...sleeping soundly... safe above the waves ...at the back of the boat where the helmsman should have been. At that time the disciples knew Jesus to be their teacher, but they did not fully know him. To them and the ancients, the sea represented evil and was a symbol of chaos, and natural disasters were thought to be the work of the devil. So when they woke Jesus, and he calmed the seas just by saying “Peace! Be Still!” the disciples were afraid because only God could control nature! Why did his followers lack faith in Jesus’s power to do wonders? Had they lost faith in God and Jesus’s trust in God? Do we lack faith? Do we believe in Jesus’s powerful ability to work miracles today?

What wonderful images we have in both of these stories about the power of God. The story of David and Goliath makes me wonder about how we settle our disputes in the 21st century – how we prepare for warfare – even verbal warfare? How do we arm ourselves? Do we carry only the word of the God as our protection? Are we prepared to face a 21st century giant? And how might we prepare to strike down those who would defy God? The story of Jesus calming the sea makes me question how we might calm the storm of doubt – even our own fears, our own doubts – even doubts that threaten the people of God, the church, and the spread of the good news.

We live in a very secular society. And yet, we all know of people who radiate God's love as a sort of unseen protective armor. I have known people who seem to be able to walk into the lion's den, to face down the modern day Philistines. I have known people who had no fear even in the fiercest of storms. And I have known people with confidence in their abilities, those who have the gift to communicate the stories of God to the world through interpreting Bible stories so that others can hear. I wonder, could it be that we are being called to relate what we believe and what we know from Scripture to those who have never heard God's story? We might start with a conversation that begins: "I was reminded this week of two stories that intersect in a profound way." And then we could tell the stories we heard again today, beloved Bible stories we likely have known since we were children. We know those stories. And we can all tell an entertaining story. More importantly, my friends, we may be the only way to open someone's heart to God today, or tomorrow, or the next day. There are people who long for love and don't even know that they are looking for the love of God. They may never have heard the powerful story of David and Goliath from the Old Testament or of Jesus's power over the stormy sea as told in the Gospel according to Mark that we heard today.

We are blessed with all we need to tell the stories of our loving and powerful God – stories that have the power to settle disputes between nations...stories of God's strength to calm storms...stories of the profound powerful grace that converts hearts.

My brothers and sisters, may we never lose heart – lose faith – in the face of the storms of our lives. And may we have the courage to share the stories of God with the world.

Lord, may it be so.

Amen.

¹ Here is my story you may have heard before – a story of power – a story of love. I grew up in Louisiana. I lived on a river – the Ouachita River (by some accounts the 2nd most beautiful river in North America). My family had a houseboat where I spent many days and even some nights on the river. One night we were up river at a beach. All the other boats left fearing rain. But my friends and I were swimming and playing in the sand and cooking on the boat and enjoying one another, and we stayed a little too long. We were overcome by a fast approaching storm with lightening and thunder and blinding rain. My Daddy was navigating by memory and the light from the lightening striking the river bank on either side of us. He guided us safely home. I still don't know how he did it, but I know that my friends and I loved him and trusted him entirely. He did not have power over the forces of nature, but he had skill and confidence to get us home to the dock safely.

² The Sea of Galilee is located in the east side of Galilee, in northern Israel. It is a fresh water lake over 104 square miles in area; it has almost 35 miles of shore line, is about 13 miles long by 7.5 miles wide at its widest, and is shaped rather like a pear or a violin. The lake is quite shallow – only 144 feet at its deepest. The entire lake is located within a great depression, about 680 feet below sea level – the Mediterranean Sea that is. It is the lowest sweet water lake in the world. The hills around the lake are 1300 to 1650 feet above the level of the lake. This depression is part of the Syrian-African fault line, which includes the Dead Sea. The water of the Sea of Galilee comes from the northern Jordan River, but also from springs that flow from the surrounding hills. It is known for its storms, which can come up suddenly and be life-threatening for any on its waters. The violent storms are caused by fierce winds that blow off the Golan Heights from the east. One such storm in March of 1992 sent waves ten feet high that crashed into downtown Tiberias and caused significant damage to the city.