

6.24.2018 Pentecost 5, Proper 7, Year B
The Rev. Elaine Ellis Thomas
All Saints Episcopal Parish
Hoboken, NJ

1 Samuel 17:1-23, 32-49
Psalm 9:9-20
(2 Corinthians 4:5-12)
Mark 4:35-41

*...and they woke him up and said to him,
‘Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?’ (Mark 4:38)*

This morning, we have heard two of the most famous stories in all the bible: David and Goliath and the calming of the storm. Even people not very familiar with our scriptures have most likely heard some reference to both of them. The problem with that is that in their very familiarity, these stories lose their ability to amaze, to teach, and to help us understand just what it is God is trying to tell us in them. Maybe it’s time to take a fresh look.

I don’t know if the clergy who were here during my two Sundays away said anything to you about the readings from 1st Samuel, a series of readings that I promised to follow over the course of this summer. So, to recap, on my last Sunday with you, I told you about young Samuel who heard God’s voice calling to him in the night until he responded, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening” (1 Samuel 3:10). The next episode has the people of Israel begging for a king to lead them. Up to this time, they had only “judges” who helped lead in times of trouble or settle disputes, but these judges did not rule over an entire nation. Samuel tried to talk them out of it, saying that a king will only force you into servitude, will draft your sons to fight, and will eventually take all that you have. The people insisted, anyway, and so God told Samuel to anoint Saul as king.

Well, it turned out just as Samuel had said it would, and if we read between the lines a bit, Saul was not exactly stable, and so God told Samuel to find another, and that turned out to be David, who was just a boy shepherd at the time Samuel anointed him.

And then we come to today, when this boy defeats the mighty Philistines and their giant warrior, Goliath, with a stone from his slingshot. Goliath terrorized and taunted the Israelites, and the Philistines were a fearsome threat. Soldiers were terrified of him, but not David, the future king. Can’t you just see him in all his bravado, shedding the too-big armor they put on him and boasting that he killed lions and bears with his slingshot and could surely kill Goliath, as well? That monster on the other side of the field had everyone

shaking in their boots, and David had only a few stones in hand, but, as he said, “I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel” (1 Samuel 17:45).

The Israelites on the battlefield facing Goliath probably felt much like the disciples in that boat with a sleeping Jesus did: God of Hosts, “do you not care that we are perishing?” (Mark 4:38), and yet a boy strode confidently out into the battlefield, that same God of Hosts with him.

What monster did the disciples fear? Yes, there was a storm, and the sea was a place of monsters and the unknown forces of evil, so there was that. But they were also going “to the other side,” the region beyond Galilee where the Gerasenes lived, including the one named Legion who was possessed. It’s that place on the border, that place where they didn’t know anyone, that place where the stranger lives, and they were afraid. And it is here that Jesus teaches a lesson we might otherwise miss: the opposite of faith is not doubt, as most believe. No, it is fear. And I don’t think Jesus is saying that fear is a *bad* thing, but you see, the disciples were *paralyzed* by their fear. They couldn’t bring themselves to do anything other than to wake him up because they were terrified.

Fear can cause us to do strange things. We might avoid that giant on the battlefield. We might dodge the unfamiliar. We might bypass the stranger. We might even become so fearful that we imagine the worst about the ones we don’t know, so we are tempted to build walls, to demonize, to incarcerate, and once we’ve put up this barrier and so distorted our vision of our fellow human beings, then we can justify anything.

But that’s not what Jesus did. First he calmed the storm, and then he went and healed an outcast man who suffered, not just from demons but from isolation, suspicion, and dehumanization by his community. And we are called to do likewise. The immigration crisis at our borders will not solve itself. Yes, we can make phone calls and contribute money and rail into the ether on social media, but ultimately, we have to engage with our neighbors. All of them, including those who come to us as strangers, those whom we might not be able to understand, those who don’t look like we do. Ultimately, we have to put our bodies on the line, just as Jesus did on the cross. I don’t yet know what that might look like for each of us, but I do believe it’s where we are headed.

Last August, we held a mass prayer meeting at my church, St. Paul’s Memorial Church, in Charlottesville on August 11 to prepare ourselves spiritually for the Unite the

Right Rally the next day. The Rev. Traci Blackmon of Florissant, Missouri was our preacher, and she preached on this David and Goliath text. The way she interpreted the story on that occasion was to point out to us that David did not just kill Goliath. He also cut off his head. Now that sounds gruesome and awful, and it is. But as an allegory, Rev. Blackmon said that in all the years of emancipation and Civil Rights, we never cut the head off of racism and white supremacy. We thought we had ended it, even when we elected a black president, but there it was, rearing its ugly head with even more viciousness.

What is happening on our border is just that same white supremacy in a different form. While there are far fewer Europeans coming here in recent years, they are not separated from their children upon arrival. They are not called “illegals.” No, it is the brown bodies crossing into our country from the south, many of whom are fleeing destitution that the US helped to create.

As a nation, we have not learned our lessons well. We have not rooted out racism and white supremacy and fear of those different from ourselves. And it will be our undoing. And we cry out, “do you not care that we are perishing,” when we have all the power we need to change it. The God of Hosts is with us. The God of Love is with us, inviting us to overcome our fear and reach out our hands in love to those who need it. It’s what Jesus did. It’s what we are called to do, as well.

The Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians,

“As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says,

‘At an acceptable time I have listened to you,

and on a day of salvation I have helped you.’

See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!

(2 Corinthians 6:1-2).

Now *is* the acceptable time. Do not be afraid. The God of Hosts is with us.