

“Facing Giants”
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Elkton United Methodist Church
June 21, 2009

I Samuel 17 (selected verses)

Mark 4:35-41

Last week, Don and I and three lay members of our church attended Annual Conference. It was held down at UMES in Princess Anne, and for three days we worshiped, and celebrated, and heard all sorts of reports. Many of them were reports about the ministries that have been and are taking place all around the conference. It was a very uplifting time (and in a little while you'll hear more about it from one of the lay persons who attended).

But hearing about all the things that were going on around the conference caused me to reflect a little on all of the things that have gone on around here, in this church, over the past year. There have been lots of good things, but today, I want to lift up what I think was one of the best things of the past year - and that is, the Men's Gathering at Camp Pecometh.

Now, I wasn't present for that, but I'll bet I've talked to two-thirds of the men who were there, and from all accounts, it was incredible. It was an opportunity for men to share together about faith, and life, and joy and sorrows; to worship together, and walk together; to laugh together, and to shed a few tears together.

I want to tell you that a gathering like that has been a dream of mine for years. I kept bringing it up and bringing it up, and it finally happened, and I, for one, was thrilled. Because, you see, I worry about men a little - no, I worry about men more than a little.

Men have a lot on them. We expect a lot from men. I told the staff the other day that I actually feel sorry for men sometimes - because they are expected to be the strong ones all the times, and they're the go-to guys when something goes wrong. If there's a noise in the night, we expect them to investigate. If a mouse or (God forbid) a snake turns up, we expect them to get rid of it. If something happens that strikes fear in our hearts, so often we turn to the men to be strong and courageous.

That's why I feel sorry for men - they have a lot on them, and that's why I was so glad for the men's gathering - for it was a safe place for them not to have to be in control, and to not have to take care of everybody else.

As it happens, both of this morning's scripture lessons, are about men in tough situations. The Hebrew scripture is about young David facing the giant Goliath, and the Gospel lesson is about a boatful of disciples hanging on for dear life in a raging storm at sea.

Before I go any further, let me shift gears and say that, even though these scriptures involve men, what I'm going to talk about now is about all of us - not just men, but all of us - men, women, youth and children. And what I'm going to talk about is "facing giants" - what happens when life's struggles and problems come our way. Notice I didn't say "if" struggles and problems come our way - I said "when," because as we're all well aware, none of us is immune from the storms of life. It's part of being human.

David may have stared a literal giant in the face, but I know that some here have faced the giant of disease, or unemployment, or rebellious children, or broken relationships, or mortgage foreclosure, or the death of a loved one. And the disciples may have been clinging on for dear life in a rocking boat, but I know that some here have clung on for dear life because of not having enough money to pay the bills, or having someone you love being addicted to drugs or alcohol, or having someone you love betray you or treat you badly, or having heard a bad diagnosis from a doctor.

None of us is immune from the storms of life. It's part of being human. The question is how do we handle them? What do we do when the giants show up? What do we do when the boat of life threatens to overturn and drown us?

Well, friends, I think both of these lessons this morning provide valuable insight for us to answer those questions.

The first lesson I think we can learn, and to which I've already spoken, is that tough things happen to everybody - even people of faith. David, the chosen one, chosen by God, for something very, very special - faced a literal giant who could have killed him. The disciples, the very ones whom Jesus chose to be with Him on His earthly journey, nearly drowned in a torrential storm.

Spiritual giants, our forefathers in the faith, facing adversity. No one is immune from life's struggles, not even people of deep faith.

Someone pointed out that "Jesus never says, 'there is nothing to be afraid of.'" It's true. He does say, "Be not afraid" - in other words, do not let the fear overwhelm you, or cause you to forget who is holding you in the palm of His hand. But he never said, "there is nothing to be afraid of," because frankly, he knew that there is - that everyone of us would face terrible things at one time or another.

So that's the first truth of these lessons - bad things do happen, to everyone -

bad people and good people - atheists and the most faithful of disciples. Bad things, struggles, storms, happen.

Which makes the second learning from these lessons all the more crucial - and it is this - that we remember, when the bad things happen, that we are not on the journey alone - in fact, we are never alone - God is always with us.

One writer put it beautifully: “The hard truth is that fearsome things are very real: isolation, pain, illness, meaninglessness, rejection, losing one’s job, money problems, failure, illness and death. As we grow in faith, we come to understand that even though such fearsome things are very real, they do not have the last word. **They do not have ultimate power over us, because reigning over this world of fearsome things is a God who is mightier than they.** Time and again in scripture, the word is, ‘Do not be afraid.’ It is, you might say, the first and the last word of the gospel. It is the word that the angels speak to the terrified shepherds, and the word spoken at the tomb when the women discover it empty: ‘Do not be afraid.’ Not because there are no fearsome things on the sea of our days, not because there are no storms, fierce winds, or waves, but rather, because God is with us.”

And he concludes with this: “The deeper truth, that only faith in the God who raised Jesus from the grave can teach, is that even though there are real and fearsome things in this life, they need not paralyze us; they need not have dominion over us; they need not own us; because we are not alone in the boat.” (Feasting on the Word, pp. 164 ff)

We are not alone in the boat, and we are not alone on the battlefield. We are never alone. That’s the Good News of these two lessons, and that’s the good news for each and everyone of us. We are never alone, God is always with us, so when the storms and battles do come, we do not fight them alone.

Michael King is a pastor who saw that lesson lived out in the life of a woman in his church. The woman’s husband had a serious stroke and was sick for years after that. She cared for him for everyone of those years. After he passed away,

Rev. King was visited with the widow and she told him that people had long asked her how she was able to keep on going. “She said that before living through his stroke, the years of caring for him and those final months of never knowing whether tomorrow he would be alive or dead, she too would have said that she could not endure such an experience. But once the time came, there also came resources - from ‘beyond,’ as she explained it through her Christian faith - and she had strength enough to sail even across that sea of troubles.” (On-line, Rev. Michael King)

I know many here could bear witness to having that same experience. Never in your wildest dreams could you imagine surviving what you survived, but you did - and you did, because you were not alone - God was with you - and gave you what you needed to put one foot in front of the other, and you weathered the storm.

Perhaps there is nothing more important to remember when storms hit your life than that - that you are not alone in the boat - God is right there with you, and will give you what you need to get through it.

The third and final insight I think we can take away from these lessons this morning is that, when storms hit, each one of us is faced with a choice - to handle it alone or turn it over to God and handle it with Him. Our world would tell us to handle it alone - pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps and handle it. But our God says, “I am here for you. Be not afraid, I am with you.”

The writer Leonard Sweet made an interesting observation about the gospel lesson. He wrote: “The miracle Jesus wanted to show the disciples was not the miracle of calming the storm, but the miracle of calming them in the storm.”

That’s the miracle - it wasn’t so much about the storm, it was about them. Come to think of it, God didn’t take away Goliath, rather God’s strength surged through David to give him what he needed to take Goliath down.

So these lessons aren’t about opening up undiscovered wells of courage within ourselves when we face storms, they are about turning to God in the midst of them and trusting in Him to carry us through.

Oh, that we would remember that when the bad times come. Too often, we panic and try to deal with things ourselves and forget to lay it all at Jesus’ feet.

Well, this week I read of something really interesting that I hope will stick in our minds the next time something hard comes along. It’s a custom of the British Navy. Apparently, if a sudden disaster happens aboard a ship, the ‘still’ is blown. Now, the still is not what you might think, the ‘still’ is a whistle that calls the crew to a moment of silence - right in the middle of the crisis. The still is blown, and all

the people aboard know that it means that are to be silent and prepare to do the wise thing. Then the moment passes and they spring into action. Observers of this system have noted that this moment of still, this moment of calm has helped avert many a catastrophe, and has prevented many scatterbrained actions. (On-line, "The Goliath Factor")

Perhaps we would do well, when bad things happen, to have a moment of "still" in our lives - a moment to breathe deeply, and remember that though things seem out of control, God is in the midst of it, and will show us the way through.

Friends, there have been and will be plenty of things that rock us in our lives, but the Good News is that, no matter what, we're not on our journeys alone - God is with us - and if we but turn to Him, and allow him to, He will carry us through whatever life brings - and all will be well. That is His promise.

So if you are going through a tough time right now, be not afraid. If you're life is being tossed and turned because of sadness or despair or broken relationships or no job or too little money and too many bills or disease or death, be not afraid - for God is with you, and if you turn to Him, He will carry you through.

Bill O'Brien, a man who sadly had to watch his wife struggle with a horrible disease, knew that, and one day, he sat down and wrote this:

"How blessed are those whose hearts are set on pilgrimage,
who wait upon the Lord in a dry land.
The Shepherd hears their cry and gently opens
springs of living water right where they stand."

"Now with a new song they lift up their voices
to their great God a hymn of praise is due.
The Christ of Calvary's victory stands before them
and bids them follow through his grave to life anew."

(On-line, "Sail On," Bill
O'Brien)

May we lift up our voices and praise the God who, even when the storms of life are raging, no especially when the storms of life are raging, is right there in the boat with us, carrying us through the storm. Thanks be to God for His love that never, ever lets us go. Amen.