

Sunday, June 24, 2018  
National Presbyterian Church  
**Facing the Giant Storms**  
I Samuel 17:1-11, Mark 4:35  
Rev. Joyce M. Emery

Children's sermon

My nine year old twin grandchildren taught me a lesson that they had been taught just a month ago in school. They wanted me to be safe. Now my grandchildren live in the greater Seattle area, an urban area where there are lots of people, but there are also green spaces, and there are cougars. There was a recent incident where a cougar attacked two bicyclists. (show a picture of a cougar).

This is what they told me:

1. If you see a cougar – do not run - stop! Stand still. Why would that be? Because the cougar's instinct is to chase. You do not want to be chased by a cougar!
2. Make yourself as big as you can. Try to appear bigger than the cougar.
3. Look the cougar in the eyes. Don't take your eyes off of the animal or turn your back. Do not crouch or try to hide.
4. Yell. Throw rocks. You are potential danger to the cougar.
5. If the cougar attacks – fight back.

Now I hope that you never have to face a cougar or any other scary thing. But I want you to be prepared if you face trouble. Your parents and teachers, and Sunday school teachers are teaching you all kinds of rules about how to face trouble. Bears. Make a loud noise and run as fast as you can. We are going to hear the story of David in the Bible, who fought lions and bears as a shepherd and killed Goliath. His weapons were stones, a club, a slingshot. Our Christian faith teaches us that God us always with us especially when we face trouble. There is a very simple prayer I want to teach you. God help me. God help me. You can say it with your eyes wide open. You can say it to yourself, you can say it out loud. Pray. Name it....God help me.

Sermon

When I was offered this Sunday to preach, I went to the lectionary passages to see the texts. For this Sunday I found two of the great stories of our faith that many learn at a young age. Stories that we can go back to, pull out of our pocket, recite, and retell to give us strength.

There are times when the storms of life rage around us, literally and figuratively. How do we prepare for these storms? We learn lessons from scripture from David who was well prepared for this battle, from Jesus, who was God facing the deepest enemies of humanity. Hear the Gospel lesson from Mark chapter 4. (Read)

Jesus Stills a Storm

<sup>35</sup> On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side."<sup>36</sup> And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him.<sup>37</sup> A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped.<sup>38</sup> 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?"<sup>39</sup> 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. <sup>40</sup> He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" <sup>41</sup> 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?" The Word of the Lord.

In the Gospel of Mark this story is one of several miracles around the Sea of Galilee. When we read them all together we begin to see that God has the power over, and the power through all the storms that we humans face. First Jesus wakes up and subdues the raging sea, that has the disciples scared out of their minds. "Don't you care Jesus that we are perishing!" He replies. "Have you still no faith?"

Raging storms, the seas are a sign of the chaos that we encounter as human beings. Jesus rebukes the wind, like you would an evil spirit, and says to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceases, and the water becomes calm. As we read on,

Jesus then heals the Gerasene demoniac, sending a legion of unclean spirits into the sea. Demons must obey Jesus, the God of all creation. He then heals a woman who has been ill for twelve years. The frailty of human flesh, can be restored to health by the Lord of the universe. And then Jesus raises a young girl who has died. Even death has no power in the presence of the Son of God.

Jesus, has power over nature, demons, disease and death. And yet a fascinating thing happens after chapters four and five of the Gospel of Mark. Jesus goes to his home town of Nazareth and the residents take offense at this hometown boy. "Where did this man get all of this? Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and the brothers and the sisters?" And the scripture says "he could do no deeds of power there, except laying his hands on a few sick people. He was amazed at their unbelief."

The first disciples, like us are beginning to understand what it means to truly follow the Son of God. Can we trust, can we claim that God stands with us in all the storms of life and has the power to bring peace? How do we participate in God's work of bringing peace and healing here and now? Divine Agency could override all of human frailty, but God has given human beings freewill and we have choices to make. Our human agency matters. Think of Jesus hometown buddies who missed the work of Divine Agency because they were wrapped up in their human agency. Now let's look at David and learn from him. He seemed to understand the balance and trust between divine and human agency, God's work, our work.

David, the shepherd boy, David the man after God's own heart says: (I Samuel 17:46-47)

<sup>46</sup> This very day the Lord will deliver you into my hand...so that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, <sup>47</sup> 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."

On one side, the Philistines, were fierce enemies of the people of Israel. They were a coastal people who had great cities, fleets of ships, and the greatest tools of war. They knew how to work with iron. They had no respect for the one true God. On the other side, the first King of Israel Saul and his army. Three of David's brothers were serving as soldiers for King Saul. David's brothers were involved in this stalemate of a battle with the Philistines. Each morning they are rising, to take on their battle gear and form a line against the Philistines. Each morning the huge Philistine Goliath, probably 6 feet nine inches, rages out with a sneer and a challenge.

“Send one to fight and kill me and the battle will be yours.” “Are you going to fight? Are you? Not me. Who will do this?” The soldiers of King Saul and the soldiers of the Philistines have been living in the tension of this confrontation for 40 days.

A simple shepherd boy, but the future anointed King of Israel, comes at the request of their Father Jesse, bringing bag lunches for his brothers on the battle front and some cheese, 10 rounds, for the military leaders. You sense David wants to see what is going on. His big brothers taunt him for being there and in essence tell him to go home, back to Daddy. They call him negligent for leaving his post as the family shepherd. David listens and learns of the challenge of Goliath and volunteers to step up and fight Goliath. The word is sent to King Saul and the King offers to suit up David in protective armor for the battle. David tries it on – not comfortable. Forget it. So he heads out unprotected to stand before Goliath. What tools of war does David have, a sword, a shield? No five smooth stones in a bag attached to his belt and a slingshot, the tools of his trade. And... a strong relationship with God built on faith – that God is with him and God’s people of Israel in the middle of the storm of this battle. How was David so well prepared?

Shepherds tell us that there is a lot of down time watching sheep. The cure for boredom while spending countless hours watching sheep eat their way through a field, or rest by quiet waters is to practice, watching, praying, singing, playing, slinging stones. David had probably worked on the precisions of his shot with a sling, identifying a boulder at a distance and choosing the location to hit it. David was an expert. And that is what he did as he stood before the laughing Goliath. He took a stone, aimed and shot it, and it hit Goliath just in the spot that would take him down – above his eyes – at his forehead -the one area that was unprotected. David knew how to take down the enemy. No taunting words, just a courageous young man, well prepared for this battle and many more battles to come.

Lessons. David stood his ground. God was right beside him – he was anointed and ready to serve in the battles for his people. He was well prepared. He had not wasted his time; he had honed his skills for the job that God had given him for such a time as this. David learned how to be the best shepherd possible. It didn’t matter that his brothers and Goliath scorned his youth and stature. He had a strong relationship with God. He could pray, and play and write worship liturgy out of the experience of the presence of God. He knew and trusted Yahweh’s ultimate protection and power. He was willing to be used by God to face the enemies of his day. For the battle is the Lord’s.

Enemies, battles, storms can be very personal and emotional. Storms wage in our communities. Storms rage in our world. God wants to bring peace.

I will reluctantly confess a personal story. I was born with a temper. My Mother used to tell tales of my antics, you know, a toddler child falling on the floor to scream, writhing to get her way. It never worked – but there was this storm that would rise inside of me. I remember it. Honestly, it was awful. This temper lasted until my early 30’s. No more falling on the floor, but this anger that would rise, there might be a slammed door, and certainly a raised voice. I want you to know that that storm is gone – it never rises. Never. I learned to ask God, saving Jesus, Holy Spirit, to enter the storms, to calm my mind, and I learned to understand what was triggering this temper. God gave me peace over the storm. You can ask my husband Dave who has known me since the age of 17. The personal ragging inner storms are gone. The temper is gone.

Then there were other storms brought on by sickness, or sickness of others, even death. Sometimes the desire is to run fast from the storm. God has taught me, through the witness of Christian faith to enter the storm and stand there with Him and others. The most difficult storms have been those when people I dearly love have lost their mental health – there is nothing to say – you can only hang onto them with the Lord in the storm. God help me. Help them.

We practice standing in the storms of our personal lives, so that God can prepare us to face the storms of life with others. There are injustices that must be faced on behalf of another. And then we must step out to stand in the storms of our culture, the wars that wage, and the conflicts that face us as human beings. I enjoy historical biographies, when those who have gone before us, have faced the challenges of their day. Each of us can name the historical figures that have faced the storms of their day and found victory and lessons for all of us. Winston Churchill, Dietrich Bonhoeffer have been explored recently.

Jesus, God with us, teaches us that the God of all creation reigns supreme and wants to bring the reality of the reign of God into every aspect of our lives. I deeply appreciate Dr. Renwick's image from last week of God planting a cross in the middle of the storms of our lives, the sin, the pain, the despair, the depression, the denials, the taunts, the tweets and claims victory. Sin in every form of storm will never have the final say. God hates disease, pain, sorrow death. God takes a stand in Jesus. Jesus could have run from the cross. Takes a stand for each of us. Rather Jesus lives in the storms – modeling for us courage, power and victory.

David shows us very personal examples of how to prepare. We use our time well, honing our skills of intellect, physical prowess and prayer.

Our faith community, the Body of Christ, gives us a profound place to practice preparedness. It is an honor to enter the caring ministry of this congregation, because here together we practice standing in the storms with one another.

I like you have faced many storms in my life – ones that raged up from the Atlantic Ocean, or that were caused by the physical challenges faced by loved ones, or the political challenges of a world profoundly connected. We can learn to trust and be courageous in the battles of our time and our place. We take these familiar stories out, and relearn the lesson of God-trusting opposition to oppression in every generation. God trusting persistence in the face of the giants. I never believed that the Berlin Wall would come down, that there would be an end of apartheid, that world leaders would meet with North Korean leaders. David's simple speech before Goliath desires that "all may know there is a God." So do we.

Resources of the living God can still beat the principalities and powers of this world who deal in violence and death. God in Christ requires faithful and truthful speech, courageous confrontation and the trust that by God's grace a well-placed stone might prove superior to the armor of a Goliath or Saul.

We have so many stories to share. But I close with a personal storm. It was June of 2009. Dave and I and three of our children had moved West. We had one college age son living in our previous hometown of Allentown, NJ. He was living with the Church Music Director and looking for a job. While out searching his brain shunt that had been surgically installed at the age of 7 began to fail. He called me to ask for help. He did not know what was happening. I was in a meeting at Seattle University. I did not know what was happening. He did not know where he was. He hung up. I kept trying to reach him. It sounded like we were losing him. Well we almost

did. It took three counties of responders to find him five hours later. He was dying in his car in a parking lot. He was airlifted for emergency surgery to the Hospital of the University of Philadelphia. I flew overnight to be with him. It was a harrowing time. I was at his side as he came out of surgery. I had secured a hotel that I could reach taking SEPTA somewhere downtown Philadelphia. I went to hotel late that night after welcoming our son back to life. The next morning I walked out of the hotel and looked up. There was the Presbyterian building of Christian Education sometimes called the Witherspoon building. I had looked for this building for 16 years when I lived in NJ – could never find it. You see, I am a historian and a deep fan of the history of Christian education in the Presbyterian Church north and south. It was, to me, a great gift from the Lord that morning. I looked up from the troubles I was swirling in, and there was this historical building that has meant so much to me for reasons I cannot explain in this sermon. There was this great peace that washed over me. God had gifts to give even in the eye of the storm.

Hurricanes come ashore, bringing circling winds and electrical storms and beating rain. At the center of the storm is an eye. The brutal winds pass and then in the eye of the storm is silence, a peace. I pray that each of us would begin to trust God to be the eye of the storms of our lives. To God be the Glory.

[I told two different stories in each worship setting. Because people have responded to those stories, I believe the Holy Spirit was guiding me in the telling. In one service after speaking about David using his time wisely to prepare for the future. I spoke about my work with the indigent in Vancouver, WA as a parish pastor. I consistently met people from all walks of life. I would talk about their hopes and dreams and what work they can do. On one occasion I met a young man in his early 20's a millennial. When I asked him what he could do, he said the only thing he can do is play video games.

In the other service I told about our son Adam who left the big job in Boston to move to Portland, Oregon to write his great American novel. He wrote two and then tried to get back into the job market. He started baking bagels at night. He told me, "Mom, I'm going to be the best bagel baker they have ever seen." He soon was managing a store and then a merger of two companies. He used his time well.

In one service I told of the honor of sitting at the VOAD (Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster) in Washington State. Region 10. There we actually responded to the storms in our region including Alaska, mobilizing the various partners to stand in the storms.]

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