

June 21, 2015 Sermon “Invitation, with Storms” 1 Samuel 17:1a, 4-11, 32-49 Mark 4:35-41

This has been a stormy week. A friend of ours has spent several days in the hospital with severe pain and nausea; nobody can figure out what is causing her condition...she remains in that place of fear, uncertainty and devastation.

The murderers who escaped from the upstate NY have not been caught in the two weeks since their accomplishment was discovered. It seems amazing, in our day and time, that those two could still be on the loose. Makes everybody uncomfortable.

Then there came the shooting in Charleston, where a young white man killed nine people at a black church prayer meeting/Bible study after spending about an hour being welcomed by them. Though he was caught, and though the Internet has revealed his involvement with neo-Nazi and other racist groups, deep questions remain. How could one human being be so filled with hatred for others of a different race that he could carry out such a cold-hearted attack? Our nation reels, and church folks everywhere shudder at the power and destructiveness of such hatred.

Storms. You probably know of other kinds of storms in addition to these. Illness, broken relationships, addictions, depression, politics, money problems, cruelty to animals or children, other troubling events on the news or in our own lives.

Both scriptures we heard today are familiar ones. Both show God’s power at work in human situations where human power alone simply was not sufficient.

In the story of David beating the mighty giant Goliath, the shepherd boy traipses out to meet the mighty Goliath while all the Israelites shake their heads in despair and are frozen with fear. The Israelites were in their Promised Land, but they were far from secure as the Philistines kept threatening them. In young David, the entire nation saw itself – the small, the powerless, the dispossessed – standing against the giants, the powerful, the well-armed.

The Philistines attacked with their champion, the huge Goliath, who was outfitted with incredible armor and weaponry. Goliath demanded that one Israelite come forward to fight him. Archeologists and anthropologists are quick to point out that this struggle was symbolic of an age of transition. The Philistines, being seafarers who lived along the coast, had learned from other nations how to make strong weapons of iron and other metals. The weapons of the Israelites were much less sophisticated, as symbolized by David’s rock and sling. The message: In spite of the fact that the Philistines had superior weapons, the Israelites were able to triumph because they trusted in God.

As a shepherd, young David had stood his ground against the beasts, handled his fear, and been victorious. Now he faced another challenge. Another threat, another terrifying beast. But David had faith that God would be with him to meet this challenge as well. “You Goliath, you come out to meet me with a spear and a shield, but I come out to meet you with a power that you cannot imagine in your wildest dreams.” God. With his faith and a rock and slingshot, David defeated the giant Goliath, the source of so much fear.

At the beginning of the Gospel of Mark, it says that Jesus is none other than “the Son of God.”

Mark starts out by making sure to tell us what he's trying to get us to know. The rest of Mark's gospel tries to let us in on what it means to us, the fact that Jesus is the Son of God.

Today's lesson would have us see that as the Son of God, Jesus had power over the wind and the sea. It also shows us that just because Jesus was and is the Son of God does NOT necessarily mean that life will always be lived in safe harbors or with smooth sailing.

It was just about sunset when Jesus suggested that his disciples get in the boat and go with him to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. So they went, at Jesus' invitation. Jesus fell asleep, and a huge storm arose very quickly and threatened to kill them all. The disciples couldn't believe that Jesus was sleeping through the commotion! They yelled at him, "We're drowning! Don't you care?"

The first part of Psalm 69 has a wonderful image: "Help, I am drowning and am swamped...up to my neck, totally overwhelmed."

When I was growing up, I heard folks say, "Let Jesus be Lord of your life and your life will be transformed. No more fear, no more struggles. It'll be just one big party, praising the Lord." It sounded good. Really good. And in a way, they were right, for there is deep joy and always the opportunity to praise God.

But in a way they couldn't have been more wrong. Life is full of storms, and the Bible - as I read it - does *not* say that folks who follow Jesus are going to avoid any of them. In fact, the gospels would have us see that life became more and more challenging for those who stayed with Jesus. Discipleship - following Jesus - seems to involve getting into stormy situations, whether it's from challenging the status quo (working for justice - sometimes against Goliaths) or from reaching out to the wrong people (the way Jesus did) or from just realizing that all of life is a gift which must be shared as such (Pope Francis just came out with a very strong encyclical, where he challenges all of us and the way we are living. He will face storms!) ... Storms. Threats. Fear. Challenges to our faith, where we find ourselves crying out, "Are you here, Jesus? Do you care what's happening here? Can you help me, Lord? WILL you help me, God?" The folks at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston have so put their trust in the Lord being with them through this grief-filled time that they have dared to offer forgiveness to the shooter of the nine murdered there Wednesday. They *know* that their Lord is with them!

Years ago now-retired Methodist Bishop William Willimon told of an experience he had with a woman who was also well-acquainted with her Lord. I read from Willimon:

"We say we want a God who hears, who cares, who acts. But do we? I was visiting an older woman (well past ninety, she was) in a nursing home. She had lost her sight and most of her hearing. Now her days were spent mostly sitting there, waiting for someone to pay her a visit, which few did. Before I left, I asked her, 'Would you like for me to have a prayer with you before I leave?' She responded, 'No, I don't. If you want to pray, that's fine with me. But I've already had plenty of time to say everything to God I wanted to say. Besides, I'd best not bother God at this point.'

'Oh, you are never too old to bother God,' I reassured her. 'God is always eager to hear from you.'

'It's not that,' she said. 'I just don't know whether or not I want to hear from God. God has asked me to do so many difficult things over the years, and demanded so much of me. I think I best leave God alone for now.'

Willimon concluded: "I was amazed! Here was a woman who knew very well an active, involved, demanding, living God who does not mind bothering us. In today's gospel, Jesus invites his disciples into a boat, thereby putting them at some peril in the storm. He was there, true, to calm the storm, to save them in their distress. But not before he called them out to risk, to serve, to adventure with him." (*Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 28, No., 2, p. 58)

We are called to follow Jesus. Sometimes his invitation to us may make life more threatening. Sometimes it may seem to us that Jesus is asleep, not seeing our struggles or fears, not involved in what seems all too ready and able to overwhelm us.

Even so, he is with us. He has promised to be with us in every moment, through shootings, through roof leaks, through cancer, "always, even to the end of the age." (Matthew 28) "Peace. Be still." The winds, the waves, the things that would undo us, will all finally submit to his power.

On Friday, news reports showed relatives of the slain church members being given the chance to speak to the young man who killed them. Did you hear them? They told the young man about the persons whose lives he cut short, but they also offered him something deeply challenging: their forgiveness. The young man may have killed their loved ones, but he had NO power over their faith in Jesus Christ, for they offered the one thing nobody else could have offered when they said, "I forgive you." That's power over the worst kind of a storm, power that conquers any evil. (pause)

We may feel as small and powerless as David, standing before problems and challenges in our lives today which may seem like Goliaths. But God is with us. Jesus invites us to take a ride with him. Scary, challenging, but it will also be a ride which will lead us to abundant, everlasting, and incredibly powerful life.

In the face of our fears, we are promised that, no matter what is happening in our lives, our Heavenly Father knows our needs and is right here with us. "Instead of rushing to communicate our panic to him, we should allow God to communicate his calm to us" (Hal Luccock).

May our lives be full of faith adventures as we let our Lord invite and lead us and strengthen us through today's challenges and all the storms ahead. And may we who try to follow him leave in our wakes repeated times of sharing forgiveness and hope as we find our strength in our Lord. Amen.