

HEAR WHAT THE SPIRIT IS SAYING

In Scripture and Prayer and The Great Cloud of Witnesses

Week of June 23, 2024

Collect for Proper 7

O Lord, make us have perpetual love and reverence for your holy Name, for you never fail to help and govern those whom you have set upon the sure foundation of your loving-kindness; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. **Amen.** BCP 230

1 Samuel 17: (1a, 4-11, 19-23), 32-49 NRSV, 1989

In our Hebrew scripture lesson the young man David, already secretly anointed by Samuel as king over Israel, arrives in Saul's encampment. Here the Israelites have engaged the Philistines. Goliath, a large and impressively arrayed Philistine warrior, has challenged the Israelites to produce anyone equal to him in battle, and David, hearing the challenge, volunteers. He goes to battle without the customary armor and fells Goliath with a single stone from his slingshot.

[The Philistines gathered their armies for battle. And there came out from the camp of the Philistines a champion named Goliath, of Gath, whose height was six cubits and a span. He had a helmet of bronze on his head, and he was armed with a coat of mail; the weight of the coat was five thousand shekels of bronze. He had greaves of bronze on his legs and a javelin of bronze slung between his shoulders. The shaft of his spear was like a weaver's beam, and his spear's head weighed six hundred shekels of iron; and his shield-bearer went before him. He stood and shouted to the ranks of Israel, "Why have you come out to draw up for battle? Am I not a Philistine, and are you not servants of Saul? Choose a man for yourselves, and let him come down to me. If he is able to fight with me and kill me, then we will be your servants; but if I prevail against him and kill him, then you shall be our servants and serve us." And the Philistine said, "Today I defy the ranks of Israel! Give me a man, that we may fight together." When Saul and all Israel heard these words of the Philistine, they were dismayed and greatly afraid.

Now Saul, and they, and all the men of Israel, were in the valley of Elah, fighting with the Philistines. David rose early in the morning, left the sheep with a keeper, took the provisions, and went as Jesse had commanded him. He came to the encampment as the army was going forth to the battle line, shouting the war cry. Israel and the Philistines drew up for battle, army against army. David left the things in charge of the keeper of the baggage, ran to the ranks, and went and greeted his brothers. As he talked with them, the champion, the Philistine of Gath, Goliath by name, came up out of the ranks of the Philistines, and spoke the same words as before. And David heard him.]

David said to Saul, "Let no one's heart fail because of him; your servant will go and fight with this Philistine." Saul said to David, "You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him; for you are just a boy, and he has been a warrior from his youth." But David said to Saul, "Your servant used to keep sheep for his father; and whenever a lion or a bear came, and took a lamb from the flock, I went after it and struck it down, rescuing the lamb from its mouth; and if it turned against me, I would catch it by the jaw, strike it down, and kill it. Your servant has killed both lions and bears; and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of

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them, since he has defied the armies of the living God.” David said, “The Lord, who saved me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, will save me from the hand of this Philistine.” So Saul said to David, “Go, and may the Lord be with you!” Saul clothed David with his armor; he put a bronze helmet on his head and clothed him with a coat of mail. David strapped Saul’s sword over the armor, and he tried in vain to walk, for he was not used to them. Then David said to Saul, “I cannot walk with these; for I am not used to them.” So David removed them. Then he took his staff in his hand, and chose five smooth stones from the wadi, and put them in his shepherd’s bag, in the pouch; his sling was in his hand, and he drew near to the Philistine.

The Philistine came on and drew near to David, with his shield-bearer in front of him. When the Philistine looked and saw David, he disdained him, for he was only a youth, ruddy and handsome in appearance. The Philistine said to David, “Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks?” And the Philistine cursed David by his gods. The Philistine said to David, “Come to me, and I will give your flesh to the birds of the air and to the wild animals of the field.” But David said to the Philistine, “You come to me with sword and spear and javelin; but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This very day the Lord will deliver you into my hand, and I will strike you down and cut off your head; and I will give the dead bodies of the Philistine army this very day to the birds of the air and to the wild animals of the earth, so that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, 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.”

When the Philistine drew nearer to meet David, David ran quickly toward the battle line to meet the Philistine. David put his hand in his bag, took out a stone, slung it, and struck the Philistine on his forehead; the stone sank into his forehead, and he fell face down on the ground.

Exploring 1 Samuel 17: (1a, 4-11, 19-23), 32-49

1 Samuel. At one time, the first and second books of Samuel formed a single book. They were separated in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures known as the Septuagint (about 250 BC). 1 Samuel begins with the story of Samuel: hence the name. 1 Samuel is the first of four books which tell the story of Israel's monarchy. Samuel anointed the first king. We then read about King Saul, and later about David's rise to prominence.

Theological Perspective

By Marianne Blickenstaff

The story of the boy David defeating the giant Goliath with a well-aimed stone to the forehead is a favorite, especially among children, because it shows that God is on the side of the small and least powerful, and the unexpected triumphs over the conventional.

David, the youngest of eight brothers, is not even a soldier in the Israelite army when he volunteers to be the champion who will meet the Philistine Goliath in single combat. He hears Goliath’s challenge only because he is running an errand; he is bringing food to his older brothers in the ranks. This youngster, the “stripling” David ([1 Sam. 17:56](#)), steps forward as the only Israelite with enough faith in God and confidence of purpose to take on the heavily armed and experienced warrior.

If we read the story in the context of 1 Samuel, we already know that God’s spirit is with David. Just before today’s lectionary passage, Samuel secretly anoints David king of

Israel, and “the spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward” ([1 Sam. 16:13](#); see also [1 Sam. 2:10](#)). Though the narrative in chapter 17 seems to be unaware of David’s status as king, the story proves David’s ability to protect and lead the nation. Just as God bypasses all David’s older brothers to select him for kingship, so David is the only one of his brothers—and all the Israelites—who will meet Goliath’s challenge, in order to demonstrate that “there is a God in Israel, and that all this assembly may know that the LORD does not save by sword and spear” ([v. 46](#)).

This story encapsulates the Israelites’ ongoing saga as a nation, the triumph of the wily and quick over the more powerful. For example, Jacob, the younger brother, outwitted Esau and gained his birthright ([Gen. 25:29–34](#)). Jacob, whose name means “the supplanter,” tricked his brother a second time to gain his father’s blessing ([Gen. 27:1–36](#)). Moses outwitted Pharaoh and the mighty Egyptian empire to lead his people out of slavery (Exod. 5–15). The story of David and Goliath fits the same pattern: Goliath and the Philistines intimidate the Israelites with their show of strength, but they are unaware that there is a much larger plan and destiny for Israel at stake, one that was set in motion when God caused Jacob to become Israel and empowered Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt to Sinai. The Israelites themselves have a tendency to forget that destiny, as this story shows; though they amass for battle, only David hears the Philistines’ mockery as an affront to the living God ([vv. 26, 36](#)).

The story portrays the “uncircumcised Philistine” Goliath as a classic bully. We may imagine him as a stock character: big, a bit stupid, and somewhat bestial in manner. He towers over other men, and he fairly bristles with weapons of massive dimensions. He is a deadly predator comparable to the bears and lions David has encountered ([v. 36](#)). David is outmatched by the giant’s sheer size and brute strength, but David is much faster and far more clever. Goliath is weighed down by armor and weaponry. He is also hindered by his own expectations of how the duel will be fought, but he is in for some surprises. His first surprise comes after he calls for a “man” to come out and fight him, but instead, here comes a boy. His second surprise is that this boy does not even have a sword with which to defend himself. Goliath asks “Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks?” ([v. 43](#)).

The third surprise is Goliath’s undoing. As Goliath gloatingly calls his opponent forward to face off, David suddenly runs forward, whirls his sling, and buries a stone in Goliath’s head. The Philistine champion falls, and David beheads him with his own sword. The contest is over almost before it started. The abrupt and unexpected defeat of their giant causes the Philistines to run in terror from the pursuing Israelites.

Theologically, this story reinforces the biblical message that God can be found on the side of the weak, and that God often surprises us by favoring the unconventional: “The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength,” Samuel’s mother proclaimed ([1 Sam. 2:4](#)). Mary would echo these words in the Magnificat: “[God] has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. [God] has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly” ([Luke 1:51b–52](#)).

We love stories that feature a reversal of fortune, the victory of a puny shepherd kid facing a muscled Schwarzenegger. We know what it feels like to face overwhelming odds

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and almost certain defeat—personally, institutionally, and communally. The David and Goliath story is uplifting and empowering because David is so resourceful, and he acts on behalf of God and his people. He does not let others' expectations impede his success. Saul tries to equip him with armor and a sword, but David relies instead on the strategies and strengths he has mastered as a shepherd protecting his father's flocks. David's action reminds us that God may already have empowered us for a task, if we have the courage to draw on those skills and resources.

We never know whom God is going to call to lead God's people, or by what unconventional ways God will empower them, and us. We complain about the need for change, but we often resist the ideas and actions of the foolhardy person who steps forward in faith. Perhaps we need to lose the armor and remain light on our feet. Perhaps we need to listen with discernment for the voices of those who walk among us, led by the spirit of the Lord.

“Theological Perspective (1 Samuel 17:(1a, 4–11, 19–23) 32–49),” in *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Additional Essays, vol. 30, Feasting on the Word* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2012).

Psalm 9:9-20 NRSVue, 2021

A petition for personal deliverance to God who will not forget the poor, the needy, or the oppressed..

- 9 The LORD is a stronghold for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble.
10 And those who know your name put their trust in you,
for you, O LORD, have not forsaken those who seek you.
11 Sing praises to the LORD, who dwells in Zion. Declare his deeds among the peoples.
12 For he who avenges blood is mindful of them;
he does not forget the cry of the afflicted.
13 Be gracious to me, O LORD. See what I suffer from those who hate me;
you are the one who lifts me up from the gates of death,
14 so that I may recount all your praises and,
in the gates of daughter Zion, rejoice in your deliverance.
15 The nations have sunk in the pit that they made;
in the net that they hid has their own foot been caught.
16 The LORD has made himself known; he has executed judgment; the wicked are
snared in the work of their own hands. *Higgaion. Selah*
17 The wicked shall depart to Sheol, all the nations that forget God.
18 For the needy shall not always be forgotten, nor the hope of the poor perish forever.
19 Rise up, O LORD! Do not let mortals prevail; let the nations be judged before you.
20 Put them in fear, O LORD; let the nations know that they are only human. *Selah*

Exploring Psalm 9:9-20

Psalms is a collection of collections. The psalms were written over many centuries, stretching from the days of Solomon's temple (about 950 BC) to after the Exile (about 350 BC.) Psalms are of five types: hymns of praise, laments, thanksgiving psalms, royal psalms, and wisdom psalms. Within the book, there are five "books"; there is a doxology ("Blessed be ... Amen and Amen") at the end of each book.

Pastoral Perspective

[Psalm 9](#) is a prayer that captures many dimensions of our experience of faith. It moves between praise and petition and between thanksgiving and lament. It looks at Israel's faith from the perspective of the community and from the experience of the individual believer. Underneath these various dimensions of faith are strong affirmations about the character and action of God.

The psalmist's declarations about the nature and ways of God are like the ocean floor underneath the shifting tides of our spiritual experience. The psalmist portrays God as the everlasting ruler who sits on the throne as the fair and righteous judge of nations. God destroys the wicked and redeems the oppressed and afflicted. God has made the world in such a way that evil schemers get caught in the traps laid by their own unholy plans. Evildoers will be forgotten on the earth, but God does not forget the needy who look to God for deliverance. When mortals presume too much about their own power or place, God's judgments remind them of their finite and limited existence. As God has delivered the faithful people from their enemies in the past, God will act again to save the suffering from their oppressors. When the community of faith gathers to worship, the people gather to worship this God, whose being, nature, and actions are the secure foundation of human life.

Like the restless tide, human faith ebbs and flows. Faith changes with the forces that press upon life; the experiences that mark the days, weeks, and years; and the longing and dreams that lie deep within the human heart. Although the reading begins with verse 9, the psalm itself begins with the psalmist's declaration of [thanksgiving, exultation, proclamation, gladness, and praise](#). Corporate worship and much individual prayer open with such joyful praise for God's mighty deeds of deliverance. Speaking as an individual or perhaps for the whole community, the psalmist gives thanks to God for divine justice and protection in the past. In our worship today, the people give testimony in words, prayers, song, preaching, and personal witness to the ways in which individuals and the whole community have experienced God's redemptive and saving work. This testimony serves as the foundation for discerning what God is doing in the present and as the ground for future hope.

Even as the psalmist expresses gratitude for God's deliverance in the past, the psalmist lifts up a lament for the present situation of distress and suffering. The enemy appears to have the upper hand, and life itself is under threat. Again the psalmist speaks, not only as an individual, but also as the representative of the needy and the poor who are in mortal danger. What does the believer do when God seems absent from human suffering and does not hear the human cry of pain? The believer follows the lead of the psalmist in expressing both praise and lament. It is the praise of God that grounds the believer and allows the person of faith to stand in the fray; it is the lament poured out to God that keeps faith authentic and opens the heart to deeper insight, greater trust, and more bountiful healing. There is always a temptation to overlook the good and not to take the time to praise God as the source of this goodness.

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There is another, perhaps greater temptation. It is to minimize or suppress the painful disappointments, real struggles, and serious threats in a life of faith. Pastors and spiritual leaders are particularly prone to this second temptation, because it is hard to acknowledge problems for which there are no easy answers. Trying to avoid anxiety by denying ambiguity or by offering simplistic, pat answers to serious and complex questions does not increase faith or nurture the spiritual life. It destroys it. When once-good marriages fall apart, neighborhood violence threatens children, urban schools decline, hunger and homelessness rise, and political oppression continues, it is time to offer laments and petitions to God. The power of the psalm is found in the way it fearlessly expresses anguish, frustration, and pain, but the psalm never lets go of a confident faith that the God who has delivered Israel in the past will act again to save the people.

A part of what it means to be the church is to be a community of hope. The community of faith is built upon the foundation of Jesus Christ. He is the incarnation of this God who redeems and saves. When the church acknowledges in worship and in its daily life the God who is the foundation of life, then there is room within the church for the praise, laments, and petitions of the people. With God as the ocean floor, the tide of faith can ebb and flow and be ever renewed by the Spirit of God.

A healthy congregation is one that encourages both praise and lament, not only in corporate worship, but also in small groups, Bible studies, ministry teams, and spiritual retreats. It finds ways to equip the people to be open, vulnerable, and honest in sharing their faith. Such a congregation extends itself in ministry with the oppressed, afflicted, poor, and needy, not only within the community of faith, but also beyond the community. By giving its life for others, the community of faith advocates for the vulnerable in the society and world. It offers petitions to God on behalf of others and stands as a witness to the God of compassion and justice in a world that seeks to ignore, defy, and even usurp God's holy reign.

The church always lives in anticipation of what God is doing next. Even when we cannot see how or when God's action will come, we trust with the psalmist that God will not forget the poor, the afflicted, and the vulnerable. God who will act is the same God who has acted. God's actions will always be to overcome evil, redeem the earth, and establish justice among all people.

“Pastoral Perspective (Psalm 9:9–20),” in *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Additional Essays*, vol. 30, *Feasting on the Word* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2012).

2 Corinthians 6:1-13 NRSVue, 2021

In our epistle reading Paul continues to commend himself, together with the ministry of his coworkers, to the troubled Corinthian church. Paul and his colleagues have proven the value of their ministry through multiple and profound sufferings, and also in the tenor and quality of their labors. They do all of this in service to Christ and for the benefit of those for whom they strive, and at great personal cost. They have opened their hearts in every way to the Corinthians, and now Paul asks that their love and care find reciprocation.

1 As we work together with him, we entreat you also not to accept the grace of God in vain.

- 2 For he says, “At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you.” Look, now is the acceptable time; look, now is the day of salvation!
- 3 We are putting no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry,
- 4 but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: in great endurance, afflictions, hardships, calamities,
- 5 beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger;
- 6 in purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love,
- 7 truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left;
- 8 in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors and yet are true,
- 9 as unknown and yet are well known, as dying and look—we are alive, as punished and yet not killed,
- 10 as sorrowful yet always rejoicing, as poor yet making many rich, as having nothing and yet possessing everything.
- 11 We have spoken frankly to you Corinthians; our heart is wide open to you.
- 12 There is no restriction in our affections but only in yours.
- 13 In return—I speak as to children—open wide your hearts also.

Exploring 2 Corinthians 6:1-13

2 Corinthians. This is a letter, written in the style common in the first century AD. From the text, we know that Paul wrote it in Macedonia after leaving Ephesus, probably in the autumn of 57 AD. It gives us a picture of Paul the person: an affectionate man, hurt to the quick by misunderstandings and evil-doing of his beloved fellow Christians, yet happy when he can praise them. The letter's prime intent is to combat evils which have arisen in the Christian communities in the Achaian peninsula of Greece.

Pastoral Perspective

By John T. McFadden

A text from an unknown sage that every pastor has occasion to cite somewhere in the course of parish ministry is this: “The reason that fights in churches get so vicious is that the stakes are so low.” Trivial issues peripheral to the mission of the church—the color of the new carpeting in the fellowship hall, dress codes for junior high dances—consume a disproportionate share of time and energy and sometimes lead to outright conflict.

While the Christian community in Corinth likely did not struggle with decorating issues, they appear to have bickered over almost everything else. A colleague who serves a large, affluent suburban parish once confessed that she finds Paul’s letters to the Corinthians disturbing precisely because they are so relevant to her setting, portraying as they do a congregation whose members were far more interested in the pursuit of personal spiritual “knowledge” than the greater good of the community. Paul may have defused a crisis in the Corinthian church through his “severe letter,” but it remains a community that is divided, distracted, and self-preoccupied, reconciled with neither God nor one another.

In the midst of this narcissism, competition, and conflict, Paul proclaims that far more is at stake than the “spirituality of the week.” The radical new way of life offered in the gospel

of Christ, he insists, demands total allegiance, even if the cost of that allegiance is the kind of suffering he himself has willingly endured: “afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments” (vv. 4–5).

The list goes on, and it makes us squirm for several reasons. We squirm first because it strikes us as unseemly for Paul to draw so much attention to his own sufferings. As pastors, we are taught to make reference to our own lives only in the form of humorous anecdotes or the occasional humble confession of personal failings and foibles. To lift one’s own life up as an example for others to follow or to speak of the costs we have paid for our discipleship is perceived as bragging; placing ourselves above or apart from our congregations. In challenging the narcissism of the Corinthian community, Paul’s recitation of personal hardships strikes us as narcissistic in itself.

We squirm also because, in an era when fundamentalist extremism threatens the integrity of all faith traditions, we have lost our ability to distinguish between “passion” and “fanaticism.” What sort of Christians will willingly, even gladly, endure beatings and imprisonments for the sake of their faith? Extremists. Fanatics. People who fly planes into buildings or bomb abortion clinics. We have become frightened of passionate faith, faith that commands total loyalty and obedience. We maintain a safe distance from Kierkegaard’s precipice, embracing instead a gospel of reason and moderation.

In the service of a gospel of moderation, the role of the pastoral leader shifts from bold proclamation to helpful facilitation: we step between the followers of Apollos (committed to blue carpet in the fellowship hall) and those of Cephas (the green carpet contingent) and suggest that a muted shade of aqua might represent an acceptable compromise. “Being pastoral” is reduced to “being helpful” or “making everybody happy.” Our pastoral leadership is trivialized, and the churches we serve become irrelevant to the gospel.

Paul’s pastoral message to the self-preoccupied Corinthian congregation was, in effect, “Get over yourselves!” In Christ we are a new creation, a new community: the former things, including competitive social hierarchies, have passed away. True pastoral leadership lies not so much in applying balm to wounds as it does in proclaiming the good news that each person has been declared infinitely precious in God’s eyes; that a life’s value and worth grow not from the status attained through wealth or position in the community but from being one for whom our Redeemer died upon the cross; and that true joy grows not from the absence of hardship but from knowing God’s grace even within that hardship.

Paul is speaking to the critical issues of how we create and sustain genuine Christian community and how authority is expressed responsibly within that community. Christian community is not formed or maintained through holding tastes and interests in common, and authority within Christian community is not to be confused with popularity. In their founding essay for [The Ekklesia Project](#), Stanley Hauerwas and Michael Budde wrote: “Thomas Aquinas claimed that our ultimate destiny is to be made friends with God—a view that obviously challenges the superficial understanding of friendship that assumes friends ‘like’ one another. Charity, according to Aquinas, is that agent that makes such friendship

possible. To be so formed does not mean that we all share a common ‘experience,’ but—more important—that we share common judgments. Charity, after all, is the deepest form of knowledge.”[1]

Paul seeks to make of the Corinthian church a community defined by mutual charity rather than by competition for spiritual “knowledge,” and he demonstrates a model of authority based not upon superior personal wisdom, but rather upon willingness to surrender comfort, safety, and personal ego (no small challenge for Paul!) in service to the gospel. Paul, however imperfectly, seeks to embody “servant leadership.” Servant leadership does not claim personal power, but rather seeks to give itself away in Christian love for others. It does not employ threats or manipulation, but only the proper tools of charity: “patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God. (v. 6)” How does a pastoral leader help to build a genuine Christian community, fully reconciled with God and with one another? By loving that community unconditionally (“There is no restriction in our affections”) with a love that will risk speaking the unpopular truth that the community needs to hear (“We have spoken frankly to you Corinthians,” vv. 11–12).

If Aquinas is correct in saying that it is our destiny to be made friends with God, we must practice being friends to others who also seek to be made friends with God. For Christians there can be no such friendships unless they are rooted in charity.

[1] Hauerwas and Budde, *The Ekklesia Project: A School for Subversive Friendships* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2000), 1–2.

Mark 4:35-41 NRSVue, 2021

The gospel is the story of Jesus’ stilling of the storm. The narrative was used in the life of the early church to stress the importance of faith in difficult times. Still more significantly, it served to emphasize the majesty of the Lord Jesus whose power could control destructive natural forces and, symbolically, the cosmic forces of evil. Audiences of that time would recognize the parallel between Jesus’ sovereignty over the storm and the power of God shown when he, according to myth, conquered the watery chaos and formed the world.

- 35 On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, “Let us go across to the other side.”
- 36 And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him.
- 37 A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped.
- 38 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?”
- 39 And waking up, he rebuked the wind and said to the sea, “Be silent! Be still!” Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm.
- 40 He said to them, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?”
- 41 And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

Exploring Mark 4:35-41

Mark. As witnesses to the events of Jesus' life and death became old and died, the need arose for a written synopsis. Tradition has it that Mark, while in Rome, wrote down what Peter remembered. This book stresses the crucifixion and resurrection as keys to understanding who Jesus was. When other synoptic gospels were written, i.e. Matthew and Luke, they used the Gospel according to Mark as a source. Mark is most probably the John Mark mentioned in Acts 12:12: his mother's house was a meeting place for believers.

Pastoral Perspective

by Michael L. Lindvall

Fear. The visceral response of Jesus' terrified disciples in a frail storm-tossed boat resonates both in the individual lives of Christians and in their corporate life in congregations and civic communities. We are afraid of the "wind and waves" that assail our fragile vessels—our lives, our churches, our cities, and nations. We fear disapproval, rejection, failure, meaningless, illness, and of course, we fear death—our own death, the death of those we love, and the potential demise of the communities we cherish.

The overshadowing pastoral reality that these verses from the fourth chapter of Mark present to preacher and congregation is that of faithful disciples overcome with fear and Jesus' loving yet firm response to their debilitating anxiety. The sea, the storm, and the fragile craft that carry our Lord and his followers across the Sea of Galilee offer evocative metaphorical images of our life journey—the perils of some passages, the profound vulnerability of the craft that bears us on our way, and our longing for One who calms both us and the storm. Some congregations may indeed need to be given permission to pull this text into their own context in such a way, rather than simply reading it as an ancient natural miracle story.

Fear is confronted in this story, but not by a sudden burst of courage or resolve on the part of the disciples. In the course of the storm, they never themselves pull themselves together. They do not, at least not on their own, discover inner resources they did not know they had. Rather, it is Jesus who calms both them and the storm with the power of his presence. Faithful proclamation of this text will, therefore, not so much challenge hearers to discover forgotten courage in themselves as it will invite them to turn again to the Lord of wind and wave, the one we trust to be more powerful than both Galilean storms and the storms that rage in our lives.

It is important to note that Jesus never says, "There is nothing to be afraid of." The Galilean storm was doubtless indeed fearsome, as are the "wind and waves" that threaten us. Rather, Jesus asks, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" To help understand this distinction, imagine a scene such as this. A child awakens in the dark of the night, terrified at some dream that has disturbed child-sleep, frightened of some phantom hiding in the bedroom closet. A mother rushes into the bedroom and scoops the little one into her arms and sits in a chair. She wipes sweaty locks off her child's forehead, caresses his hair, rocks her gently, and then she whispers what a thousand mothers have whispered since the beginning of time, "Hush now, there's nothing to be afraid of." The question these comforting words raise is simply this: "Is the mother telling the whole truth to her child? Is there really nothing to be afraid of?"

Although we often confuse them, saying, "there's nothing to be afraid of" is a very

different thing from saying, “do not be afraid.” 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 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.

The novelist Emily Brontë lived and wrote in a rectory set in the bleak moors of Yorkshire. She lived a grim tragedy with her half-demented father and alcoholic brother. Nevertheless, she was able to write words like these: “No coward soul is mine, no trembler in the world’s storm-troubled sphere. I see Heaven’s glories shine, and faith shines equal, arming me from fear.”[1]

Instead of saying, “There’s nothing to be afraid of,” the whole truth would be for the mother comforting her frightened child to say, “Don’t be afraid, because you are not alone.” The easy part of the truth, which every child figures out sooner or later, is that some things that frighten us are real and some are not. But the rest of the truth, 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.

A scene near the end of John Bunyan’s classic allegorical novel *The Pilgrim’s Progress* finds the chief character, Christian, the archetype of a person struggling to lead a life of faith, nearing the end of his symbolic journey. This journey requires him to cross a great and fearsome river. He is desperately afraid. Together with his friend Hopeful, they wade into the waters with trepidation. Bunyan has Christian cry out, “I sink in deep Waters; the Billows go over my head, all His waves go over me.” Hopeful replies with what may be among the most grace-filled words in all of literature; “Be of good cheer, my Brother, I feel the bottom, and it is good ...”[2]

[1] Emily Brontë, “No Coward Soul Is Mine,” January 2, 1846.

[2] John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678), p. 1, sec. x.

Bibliographical and Contributor Information

Unless otherwise noted, the Introductions to the readings come from *Introducing the Lessons of the Church Year, Third Edition* by Frederick Borsch, and George Woodward. (New York; Harrisburg, PA; Denver: Morehouse Publishing, 2009).

Bible verses are from: *New Revised Standard Version: Updated Edition*. Friendship Press, 2021, unless otherwise noted.

[Book Outlines](#) are from [Commentaries on the Revised Common Lectionary](#) website maintained by the Anglican Diocese of Montreal.

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🌿 Odds & Ends 🌿

The sling as a weapon

The sling consisted of a leather swatch with straps attached on each end (e.g., [1 Chr 12:1](#)). The warrior inserted a stone into the leather, held the ends of the two straps, and whirled it around over his head. Once he had achieved sufficient centrifugal speed, he would release it and send it soaring with great accuracy. The manner in which the story of David and Goliath has been told has led to the perception that the sling was nothing more than a poor shepherd's substitute for a real weapon. In fact, ancient armies would have entire corps of sling operators. They were feared because of the deadly power of their projectiles and their exceptionally precise aim.



Winfried Corduan, "War in the Ancient Near East," in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. John D. Barry et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

1 Samuel 17:57-18:5, 10-16

This is an alternate first reading for this Sunday. In this Hebrew scripture story we find David in Saul's court following his defeat of the Philistine warrior Goliath.

On David's return from killing the Philistine, Abner took him and brought him before Saul, with the head of the Philistine in his hand. Saul said to him, "Whose son are you, young man?" And David answered, "I am the son of your servant Jesse the Bethlehemite."

When David had finished speaking to Saul, the soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul. Saul took him that day and would not let him return to his father's house. Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul. Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that he was wearing, and gave it to David, and his armor, and even his sword and his bow and his belt. David went out and was successful wherever Saul sent him; as a result, Saul set him over the army. And all the people, even the servants of Saul, approved.

The next day an evil spirit from God rushed upon Saul, and he raved within his house, while David was playing the lyre, as he did day by day. Saul had his spear in his hand; and Saul threw the spear, for he thought, "I will pin David to the wall." But David eluded him twice.

Saul was afraid of David, because the Lord was with him but had departed from Saul. So Saul removed him from his presence, and made him a commander of a thousand; and David marched out and came in, leading the army. David had success in all his undertakings; for the Lord was with him. When Saul saw that he had great success, he stood in awe of him. But all Israel and Judah loved David; for it was he who marched out and came in leading them.