

“In Our Elements”
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Presbyterian Church in Leonia
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1 Samuel 1a, 4-11, 19-23, 32-49
Mark 4:35-41

Our scriptures today invite us to do as David did, and take away our armor and defenses and stand before God and whatever giants or storms threaten us.

We all have had our Goliaths-- some who lurked in another point of our lives, and some who may tower over you today. It could be a situation, an illness, an enemy, a system... anything that seems just too big to overcome. Even if it doesn't carry sword and spear and javelin, even if it doesn't hurl insults and taunts at you, the Goliath in your life may have the power to send you trembling in helplessness. Understandably-- that's what each of Saul's soldiers did, and they were seasoned warriors.

Jesus asked the disciples while the storm raged around them, “Why are you afraid?” I wonder if the disciples thought he was being a jerk for belittling their terror while he had been asleep during the storm. “Teacher, don't you care? We could drown!” they called out as the waves sloshed into the boat.

And we can all feel like that when our boat rocks dangerously. We ask God, we ask Jesus: we *trusted* you. Why have you fallen asleep on the job?

Debie Thomas points out that so many believers are more interested in God doing things *for* us than God being *with* us. But chances are that even in our most watery chaos, Jesus is right there in the boat with us, getting just as battered and soaked.

I went in for a physical last week, and the last time I had been to this doctor was in March, a couple weeks before the pandemic had shut everything down. “Good thing you're here now,” my doctor had told me then, “because things are about to get crazy.” That was the understatement of the year. I asked her last week how she was doing after braving the storm. She shared the joy of a recent day when there were no patients in the COVID wing of the hospital, and how, in the worst of it, she was delivering bad news to families often, sometimes by phone because it wasn't safe for them to be there. But things were calm now, and it had been months since she had lost someone to COVID. Then she told me how she was also surprised recently when, while making rounds, she had to deliver the news to a family that their loved one wasn't going to make it. He was dying of something ordinary-- nothing COVID related-- but as she was telling this family she was brought to tears, as if carrying the weight of all those losses she had seen during COVID with her. It had been months since she had lost a patient to COVID, but it was as if, in that moment, they were still with her.

I told my doctor it was a good sign that she cried then. Despite the trauma she has lived through, she hasn't lost her humanity; she hasn't lost her compassion. And although she

couldn't heal this person who was dying, or the many others lost due to COVID, she was in the boat with them, and her care can offer healing on some level.

It's still annoying that Jesus could sleep while everyone else feared the storm which could have drowned them. But Jesus knows when he's in his element: whether he's talking scripture in the Temple, or just about anywhere around water, he acts like it is his natural habitat. Remember, it was while he came out of the waters of his baptism that he heard God telling him how beloved he was. In another story, he actually *walked* on water. And so, when faced with the elements of a raging storm on the sea, what brewed inside of Jesus was calm and peace.

We will soon take the elements of communion: bread, and juice. What will brew inside of us as we take these elements of Jesus Christ into our own bodies?

I asked Micahel Hinton what the elements of jazz are. I expected him to say something similar to what the New York Jazz workshop lists on its website: blues, syncopation, swing, and the creative freedom that is shown in improvisation.

But what Michael said was this: First, it is listening with love and respect to one another. Then, bring with you the intelligence and skill that comes from practice. Also, you need a desire to find a good groove and to be part of something. Finally, you need to be open to the unknown showing up in music. Oh, and having a good ride cymbal is also essential, Michael said.

I'm not sure about the ride cymbal, but the other things Michael said actually make pretty great foundations for faith, too. We listen with love and respect to one another, and to God. We bring the spiritual intelligence and skill that comes from practicing our faith-- that is, doing things like talking to God in prayer, feeding the hungry, studying scripture, or serving one another in church. We need a desire for God-- a holy yearning for something that is beyond ourselves. And we need to be open to the unknown among us, whether that is a raging storm being coaxed to peace, or the dead rising to new life. Christian faith has to be open to the **weird**, for if the world is to be *only* as we expect it to be, then what need have we of making music, and what need have we of God?

These elements do not prevent us from facing threatening storms. They are not armor or weapons against the Goliaths that tower over us. But they can remind us of how close God actually is. Trusting in that elementary truth, we can simply do what we do best. We don't have to be a warrior if we are a shepherd. Your task, my task, is to simply be the person God called us to be, even within our own human limits. That is the only resource God needs to do holy work with us and through us.