

“Come as You Are”  
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler  
Presbyterian Church in Leonia  
June 23, 2024

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1 Samuel 17:1a, 4-11, 19-23, 32-49  
Mark 4:35-41

What is the last situation you found yourself in that terrified you? It wasn't *my* terror, but I was a bystander to a terrifying moment yesterday. We were making our way to Barclays Center in Brooklyn to watch a New York Liberty Basketball game, when we saw a man make a U-turn in bumper-to-bumper traffic on Atlantic Avenue. As he eased into the opposite lane, he swiped a man in the bicycle lane with his SUV; the other man on his bicycle, riding in the direction of traffic – as he should– tumbled from his bike but quickly hopped back up.

I'm not sure whose adrenaline pumped more swiftly- the driver of the SUV– let's call him Goliath, or the cyclist– let's say his name was David. Since we weren't going anywhere anyway stopped in that traffic, especially now with this SUV stopped in the road, the driver of *my* car took out her phone to record what might happen–”just in case this gets heated and a record is needed,” she said. At first, the driver of the SUV gestured to the cyclist, as if *he* had been at fault. Shouting followed, back and forth, and tensions rose while the cyclist rolled up the leg of his pants to show where he had been hurt. Finally, the driver of the SUV must have realized he was in the wrong or, at least, that there was no way he would win this standoff on a crowded Brooklyn street. We heard him utter these words: “I'm sorry.” The tension eased in the air, and at the same time the standstill traffic moved along.

Two stories in our texts– the standoff between David and Goliath, and the story of a storm at sea– drum up adrenaline for the listener who is able to put themselves into the place of the characters. Today we may be the boy David; we may be the giant Goliath. We may be the disciples, tossed at sea. How do we get from that place of turbulence and fear to a place where we can hear the words, “Peace, be still,” and let them wash over us as balm to our souls?

Last week, our Sunday School children and youth set the stage for what happens today in our Hebrew Scriptures, as well as for most of the summer. Their skit came out of the Book of Judges, and told of the time when the people Israel had arrived in the land of Canaan with the covenant God had brokered with them, a covenant *from* which they constantly strayed. God had promised their protection *as long as they stayed loyal to God*, but if they strayed, God warned that they would be delivered into the hands of their enemies. Faithfulness to God proved difficult to the people. In fact, they really stunk at it. And so God's shield of protection did not work on them, and their enemies came for them. This happened over and over.

So, God sent the Judges: people like Shamgar, Deborah, Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson to guide them in the ways of the covenant. Some of these judges offered good leadership, and others offered really stupid leadership. And so the people teetered between connection with God and their covenant, to woeful disobedience to God. And they teetered between having God's protection in their faithfulness, to being consumed by the cultures and dangers around them when they strayed.

The book of Judges ends ominously saying, "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes." Enter Saul. The bible in 1 Samuel initially describes him as a seeker of his father's lost donkeys, when God plucks him out of obscurity, and the prophet Samuel anoints him in a private little oil ritual. He never did find the lost donkeys; would Saul be able to bring the people Israel back from their lost ways? Even at first, Saul did not recognize the bigness of what God and the people required of him; he kept talking about his father's missing donkeys. But God gave Saul another heart, scripture says, and so it would be by God's power that Saul could rule Israel. In time, however, the Spirit of God departed Saul, and an evil spirit tormented him. It seemed that the only thing that could soothe him was a young shepherd boy named David. Whenever David would play his lyre for Saul, the evil spirit would depart from him, and Saul would feel relieved and feel better. "Peace, be still."

Fighting his personal demons was one thing. But another demon loomed large for Saul—the giant Goliath, of the Philistines, who had been taunting Saul, saying, "if anyone can beat me, then my people will serve your people. But if I prevail, your people will serve my people." Each of David's older brothers shrunk at the

challenge. So did the fiercest of Saul's warriors. It turns out though, that David had just been sent to the battlefield by his father, to bring cheese to his brothers and their commander. So he brought the basket, cheese which had freshly curdled from the milk of the sheep he had tended, and he assessed the situation.

"Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?" David asked. And who will take him on? David offered himself to face the giant. But Saul knew he was no warrior— just a music boy who tended sheep. But as David told it, shepherds can be pretty fierce, too. His ordinary tasks included rescuing sheep from a bear's jaw, a lamb from a lion's paw. There is some bit of outsized imagination of youth to David's belief— maybe life's realism had not yet weighed down his sense of what he might possibly do. Homiletics professor Anna Carter Florence says in relation to David's courage, "Is it any wonder that justice movements around the world rely on youth to fuel their revolutions? Adults may quail, but an adolescent at the peak of her idealism will believe herself fit for slaying a giant. A teenager who weighs less than Goliath's armor will dare to take him on. It's a gift of the age," Florence says, "and it's one that adults would do well to claim when courage fails."<sup>1</sup>

Saul tried to outfit young David with the heaviest of his armor: bronze helmet, chain mail, big sword. David couldn't even walk. He cast all this aside all these tools of war and bent down to the stream and gathered 5 stones. Maybe it was the cool water on David's hand that changed the temperature of the moment, for David at least, from terror, adrenaline, and anger, to "Peace, be still." With the first stone, David killed the giant.

Audre Lorde, the black feminist writer and activist once shared these words: "For the master's tool will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change." She argued that making changes means "learning how to stand alone, unpopular, and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those others identified as outside the structures, in order to define and

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<sup>1</sup> Anna Carter Florence, *A Is for Alabaster: 50 Reflections on the Stories of Scripture* entry under **Goliath**.

seek a world in which we can all flourish. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths.”<sup>2</sup>

David won in that famous battle against Goliath, and that unmatched battle became a metaphor for every underdog cause. Israel would not forget their identity as an underdog people, hundreds of years later. Perhaps this story emboldened a Jewish uprising against the Roman empire— which had been brewing in the years before Mark’s gospel was written, and in the year 66 CE the Jews actually occupied Jerusalem. But Rome prevailed over the Jews, and in the year 70 CE Rome destroyed their Temple— to this day, only the Western Wall remains of it. For the Jewish people, the Temple was the heart of their relationship with God, and without it, they felt adrift. These were the times from which Mark’s gospel about Jesus, who had died about 35-40 years earlier, was written. It spoke to a people who had been defeated by Rome, and felt lost at sea.

Just before Mark’s telling of Jesus and the disciples in the boat on a stormy sea, Jesus had just been on land and given 3 parables about seeds and the earth, seeds and the planting, seeds and what they shall become. We as readers and hearers of this word find ourselves covered in soil and wondering what God might grow from us. But then, Mark puts us in the boat with Jesus and the disciples. Will the same power that God has over the earth and what grows from it hold sway over the waters?

It’s an important question, considering others of power and might who claimed control over the seas. “Persian ruler Xerxes and the Seleucid ruler Antiochus Epiphanes are associated with control of the sea. Roman emperors are frequently identified as ‘masters of sea and land,’ including Julius Caesar, Augustus, Tiberius, Gaius Caligula, Vespasian, Titus, and Domitian.”<sup>3</sup> In Roman rule, the emperor became lord of the sea by heavily taxing anything that happened on it: transportation, fishing... even those simple fishing boats we see the disciples sailing in the gospels had to pay their portion to Rome.

And so when Mark tells that the sea roared its head, and the wind slapped the disciples’ faces, and the waves beat the sides of the boat, and water began to fill

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<sup>2</sup> Audre Lorde essay, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master’s House: Comments at ‘The Personal and the Political’ Panel, Second Sex Conference, October 29, 1979.

<sup>3</sup>Warren Carter, *Wisdom Commentary Series: Mark*

the deck of the boat, readers of Mark's time may have felt the terror of facing the natural elements. But they also may have felt the terror of drowning under Rome's oppressive rule.

And yet Jesus slept through it all. "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" cried the disciples in their terror and anguish. Jesus awoke, and called to the wind, "Peace, be still." And the wind ceased. And there was a dead calm.

Juneteenth marks the final announcement that would grant freedom to enslaved Americans. The Emancipation Proclamation legally granted that freedom on January 1, 1863. But that news did not arrive all at once, because enslavers set on keeping their power held that news from those they had enslaved. Union troops made their way into the far reaches of the south, announcing liberty to the captives and freedom to the oppressed, and Galveston, Texas, was the final stretch of land where people learned of their legal freedom, on June 19, 1865—nearly 2.5 years after the Emancipation Proclamation.

I wonder what the story of freedom feels like to someone who has lived under a state of capture, and whose family members could be separated from them as easily as a changing tide. I wonder what it feels like to face Goliath on a daily basis. I know the stories of freedom, liberation, power, and dignity are still being written, still being told.

I know that at times, you may face storms and giants that feel as if they will surely take your life away, and you have no weapons. You have no legal power over the sea. What you do have is a couple of stories plucked from a much larger story. You have the word of God, that points you toward the faith that God made you for more than captivity. You have the assurance of God that though storms will come, they will not overwhelm you. You have the promise of Jesus Christ, that you can in fact be born of the water, and in doing so, be born of the Spirit too. The wind is not your enemy. So, come as you are. If you are poor, if you are only a teenager, if you are a simple shepherd, come. If you are afraid, if you stand alone, feeling as if the world is against you, come.

I would say, *even* if you are the bully, full of swagger, **come**. Jesus can see you, beyond your taunts and your offensive jabs. He can point you to a power that

comes differently than what your tools of war offer. He can teach you how to quiet the demons within yourself, to find the place within where even you may say, "Peace, be still." The world still thunders with Goliath's footsteps, and we have to face the possibility that those may be made by us.

The reign of God is near. In fact, it already exists beyond the death-dealing forces we are too quick to bow down to and worship. Come as you are, but put your trust in God. You may find the world will change. You will find that you will be changed.