

Fifth Sunday After Pentecost – Nate Wieland

1 Samuel 17:32-49; Psalm 9:9-20; 2 Corinthians 6:1-13; Mark 4:35-41

We come to the texts today and immediately experience two familiar stories for anyone who's ever been involved in any kind of Sunday School: David and Goliath, and Jesus calming the storm. And I think these are so commonly used because they're stories. They're not instructions to a church, like we'd find in Paul's letters, or genealogies, or extensive lists of laws for the Jewish people like you'd find in Leviticus; they're stories about people, like us, who find themselves in tough, or dangerous, or exciting situations, also much like us at different points in our lives. I mean, not many of us here have stared down a nine and a half foot giant or been in a boat in the middle of a storm with Jesus sleeping next to us, but we have all lived lives up until now that have some degree of translate-ability to these texts. That's what we like about stories, we read ourselves into them and we read them onto our own lives. And as people who are trying to follow God as best we can, these stories have something special to speak to us, because they also are about people who are trying to follow God as best they can. A task neither parties seem to have mastered. Perhaps that's another reason we come back to these stories. They make us realize that all of our mistakes aren't the end of the world, but are written into God's ultimate story of victory and salvation.

Speaking of mistakes, let's start by diving into the Old Testament lesson for today: the story of David and Goliath.

What immediately strikes me about this passage is that there is no word from God or to God, only words about God. There's lots of, "I shall do this in the name of the Lord, God of Hosts!" But very little, "Do this in my name, The Lord God of Hosts." The story begins as most stories in the Old Testament do, with war and violence. Which, admittedly, grates on my nerves. Every time I see it in the Bible I cringe a little bit, because that's not the God I've come to know! The God I know in Christ turns the other cheek, he loves his enemies, he heals, and forgives, and restores! God doesn't demand violence, right? Despite every inclination I have to reason this passage away, I can't. And believe me, I tried. I read this story every which way, but just two chapters earlier God was saying to Saul, "Go and slaughter the Amalekites, leave nobody alive, and devote all they have to destruction." So it's a tension that we live in, always reconciling the violence we read with the love we have come to know. And I imagine that this continual wrestling produces some form of worthwhile transformation in us, even if I've yet to discover precisely what that looks like.

Nevertheless, if we scale down in this story and just look at what David is doing, there's some interesting things to note. As I said earlier, God never really speaks to David in this passage. David just heads out to the battlefield to give his brothers some food, hears the challenge of

Goliath, talks to a few people to clarify if what he's heard is right, and the rest is history. But something is really just off to me in this story, and it starts with David's proclamation, or trash talk, if you will, to Goliath. I feel like David really threw me for a loop here. He says, *You come to me with sword and spear ... but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts ... The Lord will deliver you into my hand, and I will ... cut off your head* and feed your friends to the birds and the beasts of the field *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*. So there's a lot going on here. On the one hand I'm sensing a lot of hostility. David has laid down some serious threats towards Goliath and his crew, some of which in today's day and age would get him labelled as psychotic. But on the other hand, I'm getting kind of a sword beaten into a plowshare kind of vibe, like when he says at the end that God doesn't save with the sword or the spear. Which has got me intrigued, right? Oh, God doesn't save with a sword and a spear—so what's going to happen? Is David going to go the diplomatic route and sit down with Goliath over a cup of tea and work things out? Is God going to break open the heavens and deliver some convincing word to disarm the Philistine army? What happens next is really kind of disappointing. David says, "God doesn't need a sword or a spear to make his power known! ... But the rules don't say anything about a slingshot." I mean, what a cheap trick! I'm not impressed by that at all! It feels like David was so close... but just missed the mark. So close to truly understanding and living out the character of God, but took a sharp left turn at the end. And who knows? Maybe this is a symbol to us that David **was** close, throughout his whole life. He was a great ruler, and a man after God's own heart. But he was not the messianic king that Israel had long hoped for, and his tactics against Goliath put that on display. Because the Lord doesn't save with a sword and a spear! But God also doesn't save with a slingshot. In fact, the true messianic king faced a Goliath of his own, a Goliath much more dangerous and imposing than a nine foot Philistine. Furthermore, the true messianic king demonstrated that it is not the sword and the spear that save, but the cross. And not a cross imposed upon one's enemies, but a cross received and grace extended. Jesus, the true messianic king, absorbed rather than inflicted violence, and defeats Philistia and defeats Rome and defeats violence and defeats evil with a radical forgiveness that offers a seat at the table to even the ones that kill him, including us! Though David got it wrong, Jesus got it right!

It is not violence and power that save the world, it is meekness and gentleness and receiving the violence that the world would seek to inflict on God as God makes God's life present in and among us. Jesus takes the worst thing, the death of God, and through resurrection turns it into the best thing, salvation for the world. Freedom from the death that Goliath sought to inflict on David, and freedom from the death that any force of evil would seek to inflict on us. The good news of the story of David and Goliath is that violence does not have to be returned in kind! We can relish our weakness because God, in God's strength, has created a path out of death through the cross, and we can hold onto this life with open hands because we know that it can't be taken

from us! When the world offers death, we are free to offer mercy, love, and forgiveness because, unlike David, we have nothing to defend. In the same way that Jesus stood defenseless before Pilate, we may stand defenseless in any and all situations knowing that what is truly worth holding on to, life with God, is irreversibly ours forever.

So what does that mean for us? If Jesus, unlike David, absorbs violence and hostility rather than returns it, how does that change how we live our lives? Because I really don't think I need to preach a sermon to this congregation about why we shouldn't be putting up our dukes every time we're wronged. That's an important message, but I've been around this group of people for a couple years now and I don't think that's really a problem that needs addressing. Unless there's a secret St. Paul's fight club being run out of the basement that I'm unaware of. What does it mean for this congregation to provide a witness to the world that God truly doesn't save with the sword or the spear, or the slingshot? It's more than just avoiding fistfights. I think the answer has to do with power. More specifically, how we as the church wield power, and how we understand our power in light of serving an all-powerful God.

The sword and the spear are more than just weapons for killing, they're symbols of might. We see them paraded up on the majority of governmental buildings, family crests, even church imagery. The message is clear: this person, entity, or institution has the power to accomplish what it wants through any means necessary. Fall in line, bend to our will, do what we say because we have means of enforcement. This is the message the Philistines were sending to Israel by putting Goliath on the front lines. We have a bigger guy with a bigger sword, we can enforce our will over you, we have the power. And that power, that ability to influence and to change, is often what I think Christians envision when we imagine what our role in the world is. "Well, we need to influence the world for God! We need to change hearts, we need to win people over, we need to transform communities, perform miracles, save people and save the world." But really, that's nothing more than waving a sword around with God's name on it! It's using power in the same way that Rome would, but with Jesus's name on it. And played out to its natural conclusion, this is how you get early European nations and our own country advancing upon weaker cultures and countries with soldiers and violence in the first wave and priests and pastors in the next. It's an exercise of power to spread the name of Jesus. But to do this is to think too highly of our own efforts and too little of just how big God's role in the redemption of the world really is. We need to better understand our role in relation to God's, and I think the gospel reading for today helps us to do that.

In the gospel reading for today, Mark tells the story of frightened disciples and a powerful God. When reading stories from scripture, I think it's often helpful to identify ourselves in the story. That way we can identify the story playing out as we live our lives. As we try to know and follow Christ, what happens along the way? What roadblocks do we encounter? What people do

we meet? What detours are we forced to take? What problems arise? As the disciples quite literally follow Jesus, a problem arises in the form of a terrifying storm and a sleeping savior. A storm is raging that threatens to overtake the boat, and... just as I would be, the disciples are scared. I mean, water is already filling the boat. I don't think you have to have been in a boat before to understand how serious of a problem that is! So they do what I interpret to be a really faithful thing. They don't start scooping water out of the boat, they don't jump ship, they don't head for the life rafts. They cry out and ask Jesus why he doesn't care that they're perishing. And Jesus calms the storm, he saves them! He then offers a puzzling admonition, asking the disciples why they have no faith for being afraid. Well Jesus, check your feet, man, there's water in the boat! What did you want us to do? But I think to read it that way, that Jesus is admonishing them for being scared of the boat sinking, is a faulty reading. I think Jesus here is really asking, "Were you really scared that I don't care about you? After all we've been through, all I've shown you, you still think that I don't care?"

So in this way, I think this story gives us a really nice example of what the job of a faithful Christian is as we journey along the way, as well as what the role of God is in relation to that. We should strive not to be people that hold our hands out over the chaotic waters of a person's life and yell, "Peace! Be still!" But rather, people who grab on to the edge of the boat with one hand and the hand of a friend with another and hang on for dear life, calling out together for God to save us—and coming to find that it is not a word from heaven that calms the raging chaos, but a word from the God who is with us in the boat.

And the powerlessness that I mentioned earlier, that saving powerlessness exemplified in Christ crucified, comes in the form of the irrelevance of understanding the Christian task in this way. "Hold on to the edge of the boat and to the hand of a friend and call out to God? No, we need to be pursuing heroic acts of ministry, we need to be convicting people of their sins, we need to be innovating church and attracting people with different themes and schemes and ways for them to end up in the pews without them ever realizing that they're actually in church!" Or, in a sense, we need to be calming the waters. "Forget letting God be God, he's asleep on the stern, we need to get busy."

But God has already given us the truest form of ministry, and it's called presence. It's exactly what we see when we observe that Christ calmed the storm from the boat, not from a cloud. I think the church will really begin to see and be invited into God's work when it cultivates a patient and prayerful spirituality that lets God be God and us be just what we are, frail sinners that are just as much in need of healing as the ones we want to heal. Many times, the work God invites us into does look irrelevant! It looks like praying with a longtime friend who just lost a family member and then bringing them a casserole the next day, and then taking them to a baseball game that weekend, and then checking up on them even after that. Because they're your friend, not the recipient of your cutting edge ministry. And this lifts the burden from our

shoulders of trying to be a savior, because we're not saviors. God is the one who saves, and we get to enjoy the freedom that comes with not carrying that burden.