**Preaching Notes for the Fourth Sunday After Pentecost (June 21, 2015)**

[**1 Samuel 17: 32-49**](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=207#hebrew_reading)

When I was in the ninth grade, I ran for student council president. I ran for office because I really thought I could make a difference in our school, and I thought I could win. I was smart, popular, a good student, a cheerleader, and the editor of school newspaper.

My opponent was the class clown, a less successful student, someone who was always causing trouble. Well, it just goes to show you what I know. I lost the election, and not by a narrow margin. Why? Well, in my mind it was mostly due to my opponent’s platform speech. He made a campaign promise to bring saltshakers back to the lunchroom tables.

I should have known it was over in the moment I heard him say it. The entire student body cheered and clapped and stomped their feet. Looking back, I can’t blame them for imagining and hoping that one of us poor, suffering junior high kids might actually have enough power to change the school policy that did not allow us access to salt.

Of course, after the election, saltshakers never appeared on our lunchroom tables; and the way I remember it, the student council didn’t accomplish much that year. But it didn’t matter. Everyone quickly forgot the election and the campaign promise that never materialized, and we all went on with our lives.

That’s the way people are. They forget about broken promises because they know that even if this promise never materializes, another promise will come along tomorrow. In our world, there is never a shortage when it comes to another pretty face, or powerful image, or plea that pulls at our heartstrings. And we never give up hope that this new person might be able to make some small thing in our lives better for the moment.

The fact that people can be so easily persuaded to follow someone who doesn’t have a problem telling lies or making false promises shouldn’t surprise us. We want so badly to believe in something that we can be convinced to follow anyone with charisma, a winning smile, and a way with words. We will even vote for people with no character, no allegiance to truth telling, and no integrity. Consider history: People followed Adolph Hitler. Why do people do this?

They do it to feel safe. They want to feel like someone is taking care of them and protecting their interests. They want to believe everyone acts with honesty and integrity. But even if they know a leader is not honest, people are often willing to look the other way.

* Sometimes they are willing to look the other way because it is the easiest thing to do.
* Sometimes they are willing to look the other way because they benefit from a system that oppresses others.
* Sometimes they are willing to look the other way because they feel powerless to do anything to stop the evil or wrongdoing.

People give up even trying because they are so overwhelmed by the problems of the world. Many think: “What difference can I possibly make? This is the way it is, and I can’t do anything to stop it.” This is why evil people and evil systems are able to stay in power.

But at the same time people allow this to happen, they all cheer when David takes on Goliath and wins, or when the underdog begins to pull ahead of the pack, or when some small, insignificant person out there decides that he or she is willing to put it all on the line and take on some giant, whether it be a person, a political party, a corporation, or an empire. Everybody loves David and Goliath stories because they communicate something important. They give people a reason not to give up hope. They say, “Don’t you ever give up because truth and righteousness and love will prevail in the end. The power of good is stronger than the power of evil.”

And this isn’t just our hope. It is the hope of all people everywhere. Especially it is the hope of every person who has ever been faced with overwhelming and evil power. It is the hope that enables us to believe again and again that there is a way to overcome that power and win the future.

They hold on to hope because the hero in the narrative of David and Goliath is not the big guy. It’s not a story about the oppressor, the giant, the Goliath who always wins no matter what. It’s a story about the little guy, David. It is the story of the weak, the oppressed, the marginalized, and the powerless of the world. It is the story of those who do not simply hope for David to win, but who see themselves as David:

* People faced with giants of oppression.
* People who know their only hope lies with a living God.
* People who know that courage and resourcefulness are sometimes not enough.
* People who know that the human power even of those who wish to help them isn’t enough to take on the Philistines of the world, at least not on their terms.
* People who understand that whole systems of power, manipulation, and violence cannot be beaten by creating counter-systems of power, manipulation, and violence.

Didn’t we learn all of this from the Cold War and the nuclear arms race? Arms races may create stalemates between equally matched opponents, but they do not bring peace. This logic is at the very heart of why the violence of crime cannot be overcome by the violence of prisons and capital punishment. Evil begets evil. The David and Goliath story speaks deeply in the hearts of those who understand the truth of David’s words:

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.

It speaks to them because it reminds them that David is not just a courageous underdog. He is the one who knows that there is a power in the world that is stronger than any manipulation or violence can offer. His narrative offers an alternative vision to the ways of swords and empires.

David is not a pacifist. He doesn’t try to win over the evil forces of the world with gentleness and kindness. His enemy is struck down. David stands up bravely in the face of oppressive, frightening power, and he fights back. Ultimately, though, his trust is not in his own ability to fight back with an equal amount of strength, manipulation, and force. His power comes from his trust that truth will prevail.

Jesus echoes David’s trust when he tells his disciples, “You will know the truth and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32). The truth in the story of David and Goliath is that God stands in ultimate opposition to arrogant, self-serving power and its violence. Trust in God nurtures our hope that there is a way into the future when it seems like there is no way. It says that there is a chink in that armor, a weakness in the system. It says that a perfect hit, a well-aimed stone of opposition, can bring down the giants that would seek to control us by intimidation.

Every one of us, every generation of human beings, must re-learn this lesson of trusting God in the face of oppression, because it is so easy to forget. It is so easy to think that we can’t do anything about it. It so easy to stop fighting and give up on any remnant of hope that things will ever change. But things do change. They do!

When I was in high school in the early eighties, I was certain that the United States and the [former] Soviet Union were going to destroy the earth and all life in a nuclear showdown. I could never have imagined that there would come a day in my own lifetime when that particular threat would be ended because the Soviet Union would no longer exist.

Right now, I can’t imagine that there will come a day when terrorists won’t be able to scare us into circling our wagons. I can’t imagine a day when hate and prejudice will no longer cause otherwise loving, Christian people to treat their brothers and sisters poorly because of the color of their skin, their gender, their religious beliefs, or their sexual orientation. I can’t imagine a day when we will stop treating this earth that God has so lovingly created as a commodity to be used up and abused for only a few generations more.

But the story of David defeating Goliath reminds me that I must hold on to home with both hands and trust and believe that there will come a day when these things will come to an end. Because our faith tells us that the way of God, the way of life, the way of truth-telling and honesty and integrity, is stronger than the way of the sword or spear.

[**2 Corinthians 6:1-13**](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=207#epistle_reading)

I have written in this space many times about my mother’s work as a US-2 Missionary as a teacher at a high school for black girls in Asheville, North Carolina, in the late 1950s. I will not be writing about that today, but rather, telling a story about my mom and dad that occurred shortly after they married.

My mom and dad were married in the summer of 1960. In the fall of that same year, they moved to Durham, North Carolina, so my dad could begin his studies for the ministry at Duke Divinity School. My mom took a position teaching in a local elementary school in Durham, and they set up house in a small trailer. My grandfather had loaned them the money to purchase the trailer for them to live in while my father was in school.

In 1960, Durham, North Carolina, was still mostly segregated. My dad says that Duke Divinity School had not yet integrated. In fact, the school did not even have any women students in his program, even though the Methodist Church had voted four years earlier to ordain women and allow them full clergy rights. The trailer park where my parents lived was not racially integrated either. In fact, it would not be inaccurate to say that not only were people of African American descent not welcomed to live in the community; they were not welcomed to even visit.

One afternoon, my father came home after classes to find my mother excited because she had just received a telephone call from her former superintendent at Allen High School. The superintendent had told my mom that several students from Allen were going to be taking a lengthy bus trip to an event in the northeast. On the journey they would be passing through Durham and needed a place to stay overnight. She asked if my mom and dad would be willing to pick the girls up at the bus station, feed them dinner, put them up for the night, and then get them back on the bus the next morning. My mom was happy to do this. When my dad returned home, she told him about the request.

Upon hearing this news, my dad became concerned. They had already had some trouble with their neighbors. He said to my mom, “Mazie, we live in a trailer park in North Carolina. If they come, who knows what could happen to them or to us. Our neighbors could turn our trailer over or worse! Now is not the right time for something like this.”

My mom’s response to his statement has lived on in our family lore. According to my father, my mom looked at him and said, “When is the right time?” My father says that he was transformed by her words. He knew that she was right. And so, the girls came for their visit, and everything went fine.

When is it the right time for us to begin our work together without accepting the grace of God in vain? Paul says that the time is right now: *now* is the acceptable time, and *now* is the day of salvation. Therefore, we must not put obstacles in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry.

Of course, we can decide that “now is not the right time” on any number of things, and for very good reasons. My father was probably right to be afraid of how his white neighbors might react. But as a servant of God, my mom was unwilling to refuse hospitality to her friends even if it meant possible “afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, or hunger” (2 Corinthians 6: 4).

I have great admiration for people who are willing to take great risks on behalf of others. My mother is certainly not the only person to have done this. She is one of the many among the great cloud of witnesses who have stepped out in the name of justice to offer “kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God” (2 Corinthians 6:6-7) on behalf of others.

Every person of faith has to decide for himself or herself when is the “acceptable time” to take a risk on behalf of another and to step out in faith armed only with the “weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left” (verse 7). Certainly there are plenty of reasons in the world today -- indeed, in your own community -- for taking a stand for justice, mercy, compassion and love.

The only question we need to ask ourselves is, “When is the right time?”

[**Mark 4:35-41**](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=207#gospel_reading)

The story of Jesus calming the storms appears in various forms in all four of the gospels. In Mark’s version, the story is part of a larger group of events that happen early in Jesus’ public ministry in and around the Galilee region.

The reading for today follows a series of parables about seeds: the sower and the seeds, the self-growing seed, and the mustard seed. All of these parables were told as a method of planting the seeds of faith in the hearts and minds of the men and women who came to hear Jesus teach.

Parables are like metaphors. On the surface, they tell a simple story, but the deeper meaning behind the story is harder to catch. Only those with ears to hear can fully understand. Unfortunately, most of the people in the crowds didn’t have ears to hear and didn’t catch his meaning. Even the disciples didn’t understand, which we know because Jesus went to great lengths to try to explain the meaning to them privately.

Difficulty in understanding is not a bad thing. It helps us to know that faith in Jesus is something that requires a greater power than what we human beings can muster on our own. It requires the power of God, working through the Holy Spirit, for us to truly understand.

At my seminary, Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, there used to be a sign at the front entrance to the building drawing from the words of St. Anselm that Christian education is about “faith seeking understanding.” That is what the parables are all about: faith seeking understanding. Faith is a seed planted by God, but it needs the nourishment of the Holy Spirit to grow to its fullest potential.

After the seed parables, there are four miracle stories that are also about faith seeking understanding: (1) the reading for today about Jesus calming the storm, (2) then the story about the man who was filled with demons that Jesus cast out into a herd of pigs, (3) the healing of the woman who had been hemorrhaging for twelve years, and finally (4) the raising of Jairus’s daughter from the dead.

To sum it up, in this section of Mark’s Gospel we’ve got parables, which are stories Jesus tells that are not easily understood but that plant the seeds of faith in the hearts and minds of hearers. The parables are followed immediately by a series of miracle stories that show the special power that Jesus has: power that can calm the storms and the sea; power that can remove the demons of people’s lives; power that can heal people; even power that can raise the dead to new life!

After spending untold hours telling the parables about seeds and planting seeds of faith among a huge crowd of people and then spending even more time trying to help the disciples understand the meaning of the stories so the seeds he had planted would take root, Jesus was tired. He was worn out. He was done, as my husband Scot loves to say. So he asked his disciples to take him to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, to a predominantly Gentile region known as Decapolis, maybe so that he could get far enough away from the crowds who were following him around to get some rest.

After Jesus gave the instruction, “Let’s go across to the other side,” the disciples all hopped in and took off across the Galilean lake. Soon after leaving shore, a storm kicked up. A big storm, apparently. Big enough to rock the little boat around and scare these experienced fishermen half to death. But not big enough, it seems, to wake up the very tired, sleeping Jesus, who was out cold on a cushion in the boat.

I can understand that. I have had a hard couple of weeks, which were made all the more difficult by the fact that I am adjusting to wearing hearing aids. So I’ve been sleeping hard, which is very uncharacteristic for me. Usually I wake up several times, or have trouble sleeping. In contrast to me, Scot, my husband, is a very deep sleeper. Once he’s out, that’s it. Even if I get up and stir around, or there’s a big loud storm, or a fire truck going by, or a scary thing that goes bump in the night, Scot sleeps right through it, while I lie there awake and terrified.

Have you ever had that happen? Something wakes you up and scares you to death, but it doesn’t rouse your spouse who sleeps like the dead? I don’t know about you, but when that happens to me, I feel a little bit irritated. Angry, even. Because when I’m scared, I want someone to comfort me. I want Scot to at least wake up enough to put his arms around me and soothe me and tell me I’m safe and secure and everything is going to be okay. That’s one of the reasons I married him!

So that’s how the disciples felt. They wanted Jesus, the person they trusted and loved and who made them feel safe and secure to wake up! They wanted him to tell them not to worry, that everything would be okay. But Jesus slept like a baby. He slept right through the cracks of lightning that lit up the sky. He slept right through the rolling thunder. He slept right through the bouncing waves. He even slept while the boat started to fill up with water! And I’ll bet the disciples weren’t just scared at this point. I’ll bet they were irritated too. So they woke Jesus up and gave it to him:

“Hey, man! Wake up! Don’t you even care that our boat is sinking, and we are all about to drown?”

That’s what we do sometimes when we are scared, right? We panic. We cry out. We get angry and lash out at the people we love. We may even lash out at God. The Bible is filled with examples of people lashing out at God. Consider, for example, Job in his final speech to God: “I cry to you and you do not answer me; I stand, and you merely look at me. You have turned cruel to me; with the might of your hand you persecute me. You lift me up on the wind, you make me ride on it, and you toss me about in the roar of the storm” (Job 30:20-22 NRSV). Or the Psalmist who cries out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?” (Psalm 21:1 NRSV).

Or even Jesus on the cross, who quotes these words and pleas with his own Father, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me” (Matthew 27:46) in a moment of agony and profound humanity and even, yes, I would venture to say, fear**.** It’s just human nature. It is part of the way we deal with traumatic events. We are frightened, so we cry out. We yell at our families, at the people around us, and maybe even at God.

The disciples weren’t angry at Jesus! They were scared to death, and I don’t think it was just about the storm on the sea. The storm simply served as the catalyst that brought all their fears to the surface and allowed for a moment of release.

These guys were in middle of a huge life transition. Only one chapter back, in the middle of chapter three, Jesus had called them for the special work of being his disciples. They had left their jobs and their homes and their families to go and follow him on this unknown journey. They had taken huge risks for a very uncertain future. And while they may have been convinced that Jesus was no ordinary mortal, they did not yet understand fully who he was.

So there they were, in the midst of all this change, and it was no doubt very frightening. I’m sure they were grieving for those they had left back at home. So they lashed out at him. The man they had left everything to follow and who now wasn’t even waking up to support them when they were scared out of their wits.

So Jesus was awakened from his deep sleep rather rudely by his frightened and angry disciples, and I imagine that he must have sat up straight and reacted to the situation like many of us do when we are suddenly awakened out of a deep sleep: he cried out.

Now here’s where translation becomes a little tricky. My translation has him crying out, “Peace! Be still!” But a more accurate translation of the Greek might be something a little stronger, like “Hush up! Quiet!” Or maybe even “Shut up and quiet down!” Sort of like a mom or dad might yell out to a bunch of out-of-control children, or a flight attendant might say to the frightened passengers on a turbulent flight. It is more of a command to the storm to settle down, and perhaps a command also to the panic-stricken disciples.

“Hush up! Quiet! Calm down! Why are you so afraid? Have you no faith?”

Now I have to say, I have heard many a preacher interpret this passage to be about our need to have faith, that if only we have enough faith God will carry us safely through the storms of our lives. And there’s some truth in that, I know. I do believe that God loves us and watches over us and wants to protect us. But the fact of the matter is, the storms still come. Good people get sick and die. Families fall apart. People wage war on one another. Disasters like tornadoes and earthquakes and hurricanes and tsunamis come out of nowhere and wipe out thousands of lives in an instant.

Where is God when those storms come? Why doesn’t God protect good Christian believers from disaster? Is it really because we harbored a doubt or felt afraid?

I want to suggest that when Jesus says to the disciples, “Why are you so afraid? Have you no faith?” he isn’t scolding the disciples or telling them they should never be frightened or panicked or angry when raging storms come their way. The story of Jesus calming the storm isn’t primarily about our faith, or even the faith of the disciples. It’s not about us. It’s about him. It is about hispower and identity.

This story is about the power of God that was made manifest in Jesus Christ: Power that was witnessed by many people, including the disciples. The story is about power that was so life-changing that these people wrote down the stories and passed them along to us.

The primary purpose of this story, then, is not to encourage us to just have a little faith. It is to help us understand who Jesus was and is: Jesus is the Messiah, the Lord of heaven and earth, God incarnate, fully God and fully man.

I think that is a word we can really hang our hats on, really trust in, really count on. Because once we are able to make that leap of faith, it changes everything.

For the disciples, coming to an understanding that when they were with Jesus they were with God Almighty was a transformational, life-changing realization. It didn’t come easily for them, just as it doesn’t come easily for us. But in time it did come, and once that happened, they were never able to go back to being the people they were before. They were transformed into disciples and empowered to become the body of Christ in the world.

To say that Jesus is God is to say that we believe that God was here, on this earth, in the person of Jesus. It is to say that God so loved this world that God came down here and lived among us mortals and sinners though we were and continue to be, so that everyone who believed in him would not perish, but have eternal life. It is to say that through the power of the Holy Spirit, God is still here with us whenever and wherever we gather in the name of Jesus Christ to worship God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we are transformed to be his body in the world. We are the body of Christ.

It is, in short, to make a confession of faith that we believe that God is under it all and over it all and through it all, right here, right now, and not just right here right now, but everywhere, all the time, no matter what.

* No matter what we do or say.
* No matter if we have a moment in which we are overcome with doubts and fears and cry out at the people we love, or lash out even at God.
* No matter what we do or what happens, as Paul says, nothing can ever separate us from the love of God shown in Jesus Christ our Lord.

And that kind of faith, the idea that everything and everyone in the world, each one of us, is held securely in the hands of a God who loves us so much that every hair on our head is counted -- well, that is one of the most liberating ideas that has ever come into the mind of human beings. It is what gives us hope and strength to go on, to persevere through the raging storms, to rise up from the ashes, even to look squarely into the face of death itself and be not afraid.