

Our Power Comes from God

This morning, we heard two of the Bible's best loved stories. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the shepherd boy David defeats the giant Goliath in single combat, rescuing his people from the Philistines. In Mark's Gospel, Jesus calms a violent storm, rescuing his terrified disciples from death at sea. Both stories are all about the power of God, and they remain very relevant today.

Let's start with the Hebrew Scriptures. God has chosen David as the next king of Israel. The first king, Saul, is still on the throne, but the Spirit of God has left him. The Philistines attack Israel, led by their champion Goliath, a heavily armed nine-foot, nine-inch monster. Even King Saul, a strong man who stands a head taller than anyone else in his kingdom, couldn't defeat Goliath in a sword fight. But nimble little David, armed only with his slingshot and the conviction that he is fighting under the protection of the God of Israel, takes Goliath out with one shot, then lops off his head with his own sword. The Philistines flee in terror and Israel is saved.

Now, to Mark's Gospel. Having spent the day mobbed by crowds, Jesus decides that he and the disciples will leave Capernaum by boat. Night has fallen and Jesus is asleep in the stern when a massive storm blows in. The disciples, former fishermen who know when a boat is about to capsize, wake him, asking "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" Jesus speaks a few sharp words, and the wind and waves settle right down. He then asks the disciples, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" They, in turn, ask each other, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" Our translation says they are "filled with great awe," but it's probably more accurate to say that they're utterly terrified. In fact, I came away from this text with the distinct impression that the disciples are more afraid of Jesus than they are of the storm.

There aren't a lot of gargantuan, sword-swinging Philistines around anymore; maybe there never were. Goliath is so absurdly huge that he's probably more symbol than soldier. We

know what he represents. War is so widespread around the world and mass shootings have become so common in this country that many of us have grown numb to violence. As for Mark's storm, the 2023 Annual Report of the American Meteorological Society, aptly titled, "All Hands on Deck," confirms what most of us already admit. Climate change has made heat waves, storms, droughts, and fires so much worse worldwide that the storm in our Gospel passage seems almost mild by comparison. Our world may be vastly different from the world of our ancestors, but we know, as they did, what it is to live in dangerous times. We also know, again as they did, how badly things can go wrong when people with power start throwing their weight around. When leaders force their fellow children of God to bend to their will, they abuse their power and it's never benign. Be they the heads of governments, universities, secular businesses, religious denominations, or families, there is no such thing as a benevolent dictator. Period.

At first blush, David's violent encounter with Goliath may not seem like a lesson in the right use of power, but it is. David is defending his people, finishing a fight the Philistines started. He refuses the armor and sword that are the hallmarks of royal privilege. He inflicts no more pain than necessary, doing only what he must to neutralize the threat. In other words, David does what a good shepherd is expected to do, protecting his flock from predators. And he does it all in the name of God, the holy One who chose him to be Israel's king and gave him the power to prevail against Goliath in the first place. Truly, the big guy never stood a chance.

This Scripture passage and others like it have been misused over the centuries to justify horrifying behavior. To be clear, I am not advocating for the divine right of kings, holy war, any kind of superiority based on an accident of birth, or the condescending concept of *noblesse oblige*. What I *am* saying is that all power comes from God because all life comes from God, so whatever power we have is given to us by the Most High. That makes our power a sacred trust

that comes with the great and terrible responsibility to use it wisely and in accordance with God's will for the good of God's people. We need to recognize and respect that.

We must also recognize that our power, no matter how great it seems, is nothing compared to the power of God. Not all of the disciples were fishermen, but those who were had probably battled through plenty of storms before they left their nets to follow Jesus. They knew just how powerful storms could be, so they could appreciate how much power it took for Jesus to calm one down. And he did it effortlessly! If Jesus could tell the waves and wind to shut up and they instantly obeyed, what else could he do? Just how powerful was he? And could anyone so powerful be trusted? When the disciples ask, "who is this," they're really asking whether it's safe to be around Jesus. And when Jesus asks, "have you still no faith," I think he's really asking why they haven't yet come to trust him enough to know that he won't hurt them.

In his commentary on Mark's Gospel, Bible scholar Joel Marcus observes that the human challenge to God is what the disciples ask Jesus: "do you not care that we're perishing?" It is met by the divine challenge to humanity: "why are you cowardly?" Both are real questions because they both reflect realities, the reality of the desperate human condition in which so many suffer and die, and the divine reality which assures us that all will eventually be well. Marcus writes, "the ultimate issue at stake in any given circumstance is which of these two realities will turn out to be determinative." My own sense is that it can take a while, but God's reality always wins out in the end. Or, as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. put it, "We shall overcome because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

On Wednesday, we commemorated Juneteenth. It's imperative to honor the end of slavery in the United States, and it saddens me that it's necessary. If there's a worse abuse of power than claiming ownership of another human being, especially when that claim is enforced with

relentless violence, I don't know what it is. Thank God that the abominable institution of state-sanctioned slavery finally ended. Better still if it had never existed in the first place.

People of color, members of the Pride community, and others who suffer at the hands of abusers will tell you that we still have a lot of work to do to make the world safe for everyone. Having grown up in the 1960s and 70s, I've seen and marched in a lot of protests and signed reams of petitions. They used to be effective, but I'm not sure they are anymore. These days, people who abuse their power seem to know they're doing it, like what they're getting out of it, and actively enjoy it when others object. If they care at all about public opinion, they hire PR firms to spin their vices until they look like virtues. Arguing with them is, at best, a colossal waste of energy and time, and it distracts from what we could be doing to mitigate the harm they cause. It's more effective, I think, for us to try to discern what God wants, then humbly ask him for the strength to help as best we can, steering clear of pointless squabbles we can't win.

Sometimes it feels as though we're up against an army of Goliaths who are hell bent on gobbling up whatever they want no matter the consequences for everyone else. It can be hard to stay hopeful. But, as Paul reminded the Corinthians, appearances can be deceiving. No matter how hard they pound their chests and bellow, whatever power those Goliaths have comes from God, and they can never be more powerful than God himself. With God's power behind us, we can remain true, alive, and rejoicing as we help bring the Kingdom closer. We can trust Jesus to protect us, calming the storms that rage around us so we can concentrate on doing our portion of God's healing work in the world. Yes, Jesus cares if we perish, and that means we won't. If we are brave and steadfast enough, we will eventually win through the storms to that place where the arc of the universe finally touches justice. And when we do, I believe that Jesus will be there waiting for us, rejoicing that we have finally found our faith. Amen.