

It is such a delight to finally be with you this morning. I have had an event filled week, getting to know some of you and the area. The welcome Nina and I have received has been very warm, gracious and inviting. We are truly grateful and are excited about beginning our common life and ministry together. Both Nina and I strongly believe that I have been called to be here among you, and whether that is 14 months or 14 years, we are content to leave that outcome to the Holy Spirit.

I am aware that these last six months have been akin to a wilderness experience for this parish, in many ways a sad, lonely, grief filled time. It was also a time when I hope you discovered your strengths and the deep relationships you have among one another, helping one another cope with Sherrill's death and coming to grips with how to find a way forward. Some of you may be feeling relief that there is finally a priest here. Others of you may be feeling betrayed or angry because clearly I am not Sherrill and no one can take Sherrill's place. Both responses are part of a healthy grieving process. I see part of my job as assisting with the grieving process as well as collectively determining how we together go about being the body of Christ. I hope you will share with me your stories about Sherrill, your hopes and

dreams, your worries and your fears, your joys and sorrows as we live into our journey together.

So let us begin by examining what Scripture is telling us today, in our context. Certainly, our readings this morning contain two of the most familiar stories in the Bible. In our Gospel, we have Jesus calming the waters of the sea and in the Hebrew Scripture we have David overcoming Goliath. In both readings we have a big helping of fear running through each story, which heightens the drama.

Picture Goliath with me. He is 10 and a half feet tall. He wears a heavy helmet, his torso is covered in chain mail, and his arms and legs are protected with plates of bronze and he carries his spear slung over his shoulder with a certain nonchalance. Just in case he doesn't have enough protection, he has a shield bearer who, given that he was a Philistine, must have also been very tall and scary looking. Saul, who himself was a warrior of some renown and has shown great courage in the field of battle, was "greatly afraid" when he heard Goliath's challenge for a one on one fight. Who among the Israelites would be up for this challenge? And a young shepherd, a boy, steps forward, assuring Saul that with God's protection, he has killed lions and bears who threatened his sheep. Goliath is no more frightening and no more threatening than a lion or bear says this boy,

David. I imagine Saul was skeptical and hopeful at the same time. No one else was coming forward to meet the challenge. So he decides to go with David and puts his own armor on him. Now what happens when a boy puts on a man's clothes? They're too big, right? They hang on him. And Saul's armor is no exception - it's too big and David can't even walk in it. So David takes it all off and goes to meet Goliath armed with a sling shot and five smooth stones.

We all think of David as the underdog - he's one of our favorite underdogs. But was he? As a shepherd, he would have spent long stretches of time with only the sheep for company. Without modern day distractions, David would have had time to focus on God as well as his surroundings. He would have observed the miraculous in the changing of the seasons and in the life cycle of the sheep. Since his first days as a shepherd, perhaps as young as eight years old, until his approaching manhood, David had a well developed relationship and dependence upon God. He speaks with power and authority when he declares to Saul that God has saved him from the wild animals and that God will save him from Goliath. David doesn't need Saul's man-made armor nor Saul's man-made solution. What David needs is God. And David has God. Even a giant like Goliath is an underdog when competing with God! The truth contained in this wonderful story is that no

matter what giant faces us, whether it is illness, divorce, financial ruin, even death, that giant is no match for God who protects us.¹ This is not to say that these giants aren't scary, frightening and threatening. They are. We can face them, however, with God as our protection.

Easy to say, hard to do. I imagine that the friends and families of those who were slain at Emanuel A. M. E. Church in Charleston, S.C. are crying out like the disciples to Jesus in our passage from Mark, "do you not care that we are perishing?!" And we who read or hear about this horrible event are shocked, numbed, grieved by a tragedy that can only be called senseless - both for the victims, and for the young man who perpetrated this crime. I heard David Ross give a beautiful radio commentary on Friday, he said "you can kill the worshipers who pray for peace, but you can't kill the faith that keeps us trying." This is part of the point from our reading from Mark. Notice that Jesus does not tell the disciples that there is nothing to be afraid of. He does not trivialize fear or minimize it. He knows that there are people, things, and situations to be frightened of. Rather, his question is simply "why?"²

¹ Roger Nam, www.workingpreacher.org Alt. 1st reading, Comments on 1 Sam 17

² Michael L. Lindvall, *Feasting on the Word, Year B vol 3*, David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor, eds, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2009, p166,168.

Why be paralyzed by fear when we know by faith that God is greater than those things to be feared? That God never abandons us? That God's kingdom is breaking into this world and is unfolding then and now even as I speak. Why be afraid when each and every one of us is within God's saving embrace?

I am reminded of a story about John Wesley, who was on his second journey to America as the ship's chaplain during a really terrifying storm. In his fear that the ship was breaking up and that all on board would perish before they reached landfall, he was astonished to hear some passengers calmly singing hymns of praise to God. Singing hymns of praise to God did not strike him as the prudent thing to do under the circumstances. When eventually all were safely ashore, he asked his fellow passengers, who were German Moravians, what prompted them to sing and to sing so calmly. Their response? "Don't you have faith in Christ?" It was a turning point in Wesley's own faith journey.

So my hope and prayer for us as a parish community is that we can be like David, steeped in prayer, marveling in mystery and the miraculous, consciously cultivating our relationship with God in such a way that we can encounter all that we fear secure in the knowledge that God protects us, God saves us, God is with us. I pray that we can be like the disciples, who

although were bumbling and obtuse, came to understand, as the apostle Paul says, “I can do all things in Christ who strengthens me.” I pray that we can emulate Jesus, whose peace and very presence he gave us, so that we can rely on faith in the presence of that which we fear. If my own life is an example, this is a journey of a life time. And I am so very glad to be on this journey with you.

Amen.