

The Way Forward

Mark 4:35-41; 1 Samuel 14:1a, 4-11, 19-23, 32-49

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What is it in us that loves the cheer on the underdog? You know where the woman/man the average joe/jane, who has very little odds of winning comes up from behind to topple over the expected winner...the giant? Maybe it tugs at our sense that if given the right stuff and with the right backing, we can do anything. We can give the bully his/her due, we can face and even destroy what seems unsurmountable. Despite our size, we can win. Perhaps that's the kind of feeling which gets stirred up when we hear the beloved story of David and Goliath?

That's one of our stories this morning.

And then there is the Gospel lesson. The disciples had been out with Jesus, accompanying him as he healed the sick, cast out demons and taught about the rein of God. In doing so, Jesus made the local rulers extremely angry by challenging their rules. He healed on the Sabbath, for example. There had been great tension. And let's be honest, Jesus hadn't exactly made it easy to follow him. People didn't always understand him. He preached about scattering and sowing seeds, and other parables, confusing many people, including those who knew him best. Why wouldn't he just say what he meant in plain...Aramaic? It must have been a bit frustrating, to say the least.

The disciples were experienced fishermen. They may not have had vast theological training, but they knew and respected the sea. That's why when the storm suddenly came upon them, they were fearful. The same words used in our passage to describe the fear they experienced, are the same as those who were in the boat with Jonah before he was thrown overboard and swallowed by the whale. It was a big and a sudden storm.

And then there is Jesus, curled up, fast asleep, that is...until they frantically woke him. With a word and gesture, Jesus calmed the seas. And the story goes, they were filled with great awe, as they witnessed that even the seas obeyed him.

The message? God's presence will carry us through the most tumultuous times in our lives and ground us in the face of great giants. That's perhaps the easy take away. But the work and power of God is not always quite that simple as it marinates into lives.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German pastor, theologian, author and staunch resistor to Nazi dictatorship. He also had a stint as a professor at Union Theological Seminary in Manhattan during his career, but returned to Germany to address the increasing tension caused by Hilter's regime. He was arrested in 1945 and sent to a concentration camp for several years where he was killed for his beliefs.

Theologian Matthew Skinner recalls a 1928 sermon of Bonhoeffer's in which he "suggested that the tenderness of the Incarnation has left people unable to [in Bonhoeffer's words] 'feel the shiver of fear that God's coming should arouse in us.'"

My concern is that our tendency with Jesus is to focus too often and too much on the soft, loving, what-a-friend-we-have-in-Jesus Jesus...rather than the Jesus who shakes things up and makes those of us with the privilege of wealth, power, and race uncomfortable.

According to Skinner, "When Christ quiets the forces that threaten chaos, makes the unclean clean, and restores the unacceptable to wholeness, these acts upend our cherished assumptions about order, security, autonomy, and fairness. When God comes so near, we cannot hide. Nor can we push God away" (New Proclamation Year B 2006). In a sense, God at work in our lives can "rock our boat," too. When that happens, I don't know about you, but that happens, my level of fear can feel as huge as a Goliath to me.

Over the last few weeks, our country has experienced a political, emotional, and spiritual tsunami. Not a storm on the sea, a tsunami. No matter where you stand on the political spectrum, the emotional upheaval of hearing the voices of children separated from their families and seeing images of the conditions of their housing has rocked and shaken people to their core, and have left many wondering: Who are we? What are we doing, and how did we get here? Our feelings have pitted us against each other to defend or attack policies and the very people who are most vulnerable.

(If deep feelings are being stirred right now, that's fine, but stay with me. How can talk of all that's been going on, NOT stir emotions? We can't be intellectual about this because it's a deeply emotional issue.)

The temptation for those of us not on the front lines of the borders would be to shut down emotionally, to escape into something beautiful and lovely, and to ignore or to blame others. But that is not what Jesus calls us to do. And quite frankly, the option to shut those feelings down and to move on to other topics is a measure of the privilege we share. Many others aren't so lucky.

I saw a blog posting this week by the Rev. John Pavlovitz which jolted me. The title? **"If your church is silent this week, you may want to leave it."** The author stated:

If there was ever a time when the Church should be visible and vocal it should be now.

If there was ever a moment moral leaders were made for, it is this one.

If there was ever a weekend where spiritual leaders should stand bravely in front of their faithful and speak the hardest of truths, complaint and mass exodus be damned—it should be this one.

He's right. The challenges of preaching to a congregation where there are differences of opinion on politics and public policy are great. I hear from people every week who agree and disagree with what I say. But that really doesn't and shouldn't matter, because I'm called to preach the Gospel as the Holy Spirit guides me.

Here's the thing about our Christian faith, and we need to look no further than our texts during Advent and Christmas to see it in black and white. It's a part of the story we don't always emphasize because it comes during a happy time of year right after Christmas. Nevertheless, it stands at the core of Jesus' life and message of welcoming the stranger and foreigner among us.

The Gospel according to Matthew tells the story beginning in chapter 2. In the time of King Herod, after Jesus' birth, word got out that this newborn child might grow up to threaten the powers that be, so Herod sought him out in order to kill him. Fortunately, the Magi warned the young family of his plan. Then it was confirmed in a dream. So Joseph took Mary and their baby Jesus, escaped the terror in Bethlehem and fled to Egypt. They were refugees seeking asylum. Herod was outraged when he heard about this and he ordered a genocide of all children aged 2 and under living around Bethlehem. That's where there were most likely to be Jews. That act has become known as *the slaughter of the innocents*. After King Herod's death, Joseph had another dream telling him to take his family and go back to Israel. They made the long journey across the desert and made their home in Nazareth (the modern day Arab capital of Israel).

It's no wonder that Jesus grew up to teach the value of welcoming the stranger, because he had received such welcome from foreigners from his very early years. In the Bible, welcoming the stranger and being hospitable to the foreigner is mentioned 92 times...in the Hebrew texts and the New Testament. It's clear.

It's a central Biblical theme. Paul even says in the NT book of Hebrews: *Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that, some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.*

Obviously, as a country we need laws, and those who break the law need to be held accountable. We need secure borders to live with order. But what I see happening as I watch and read people's reactions is that there is such fear of the "other" or fear that in helping them our needs won't be taken care of. One meme I saw yesterday said this: As illegals are being housed and fed, receiving medical on our dime, America's seniors have to choose between prescriptions and food. The implication of course, is that America's seniors are white...or not immigrant of a certain background.

That mindset takes us down a very dangerous path, which, we as Christians cannot and must not go. It's simply not the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

It's almost as if the fear of the other for many of us is as large as Goliath was to David. And all we want to do is sling a rock and kill. To make them go away.

Let's go back to the Gospel text. There's a shift that happens when Jesus acts:

Their fear became awe. Fear focuses us inward, while awe focuses us toward the almighty power of God at work in and around us and calls us to act.

In that same blog post, Pavlovitz says a bit later:

You may want to ask yourself what use the religion they (your house of worship) espouse there actually is, if not to rescue the most vulnerable from the most powerful, if not to advocate for the least of these, if not to care for their neighbor as themselves.

If your faith leaders can't find their prophetic voices to defend children caged like animals and isolated from their parents, are they really worth looking to for guidance on how to live one's faith, know God's will, or emulate Jesus?

It's harsh, but true. So what do we do? What is the way forward for us? How can we walk forward together not focused on our fear, which may cause us to lash out at one another, but rather on the awe of God's presence at work in and around us to bring justice and hospitality to the stranger, whoever that is?

Our General Assembly has been meeting over the last 2 weeks in St. Louis. It's quite something to see commissioners from each of our presbyteries meet first in committee (as we do with such decency and order!) and then take items to the floor for vote. In each committee, there is much discussion, often with differing viewpoints and passionate debate. But with the reliance on the Spirit's work among them...with much prayer, they come out/ and have come out with deeply faithful stances for our denomination which are then voted on by the larger body. This year's theme: "Renewing the Vision: Kingdom Building for the 21st Century," from Matthew 6:25-33

Some of the issues this year: Reaffirmation of LGBTQ persons and the asking of forgiveness for the years it took the denomination to come to that place; Statements were affirmed around immigration, earthcare, and much more.

On a local level, our session has been in a process of visioning over the last year. At our meeting this past week, we completed a mission statement, which is this:

We are a welcoming and diverse Christian community living our faith in God and affirming the gifts of all God's people. We are dedicated to serving those in need, demonstrating our faith in action by following the teachings of Jesus Christ.

They will be continuing to work on putting structures in place so that vision may be practically lived out. But it is up to you to suggest ways in which God is calling you to do the ministry God calls us to do.

We may not all agree on what that looks like, and there's room for differing viewpoints while remaining in loving relationship, but as we make our way forward together, we do so in love and awe of the One Who chooses to use each of us in bringing about the reign of God here on earth.

If you were to look at the Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber, you might be turned off. She is hard to miss. She is covered in tattoos and curses like a truck driver. She's also the founding pastor of a wildly popular Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denver, House for All Sinners and Saints in Denver and author of the NY Times Bestseller, **Accidental Saints: Finding God in All the Wrong People.**

She recently said this: "I'm surprisingly unconcerned with what people in my church believe. Belief is going to be influenced by all sorts of things that I have nothing to do with, so I don't feel responsible for that. I'm responsible for what they hear — and hearing the gospel, the good news about who God is, slowly forms us over time."

So friends, hear this...the good news is that God loves you, God loves me, and God loves all people.

Let us make our way forward boldly in the awe of that knowledge.