

Dear God, Protect Us

1 Samuel 17:32-49

Crossroads Christian Church

Mark 4:35-41

June 21, 2015 Pentecost 4 B

Isn't it ironic how we like staged or fake excitement and risk, yet we do everything we can to protect ourselves from it happening to us? We watch disaster movies or crime shows on TV and feel the adrenalin flow; but we do it from the safety and comfort of our own climate-controlled living rooms.

It's easy to sit in the comfort and protection of our homes watching someone else in a dangerous situation. It's more difficult when you're driving at night and see you oncoming headlights in your own lane; or you're in the military on a patrol in a potentially hostile situation; or when you're in the emergency room with a high fever; or when you've just lost your job and don't know what to do next. Like the father of a sick boy in another story in Mark, we want to cry out, "Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief!" Or we want to cry out, "Dear Lord, protect me!" "Dear God, protect us." Anne Lamott, a Christian writer, says that the two most authentic, heartfelt prayers, are "Help! Help!" and "Thank you! Thank you!"

Unlike the prosperity gospel folks, we know that our positive thinking or prayers aren't going to keep our lives trouble free. Jesus said that rain falls on the just and the unjust alike—and so does hail, and illness, and accident, and lots of other things. But we do know that in the midst of all the chaos of life, we can call out to God, and that God will be with us. God won't always give us the quick fix or easy solution or in the nick-of-time escape, but God will be with us no matter what.

One of the reasons that the Bible is so significant to Christians is that it doesn't portray a neat and tidy life of sweetness and light, a spiritual never-never land. Rather, the Bible shows us human life at its grittiest levels. It shows us situations where life is on edge. The Bible shows us that God is with us, that God is in our midst, not just in church, or as we gaze at beautiful sunsets, but in the worst and most frightening times of our lives. The two scriptures we heard this morning reinforce this belief.

The story of David and Goliath is one that we've heard and loved from the time we were little children. The spunky little guy takes on the really big mean guy and wins big time. The bigger they are, the harder they fall. Slingshot and rocks verses sword and shield, and the slingshot wins. But we hear the story knowing how it came out. We know the ending. Think about it for a moment as if you'd never heard it before. Two clashing cultures are occupying the same land. You are a soldier among the Hebrews. You have a

leader, King Saul, who has unified the tribes to fight against your common enemy, the Philistines. But still the Philistines have the stronger force, with larger numbers and more technologically sophisticated weapons. They want you to be their slaves, and they have the military wherewithal to make it happen. You have lesser numbers, are far less well organized, your weapons are primitive, but you have determination, hope, and faith in God. Then the enemies offer a deal—a cease-fire. Your biggest, strongest, meanest warrior takes on theirs, one-on-one, no holds barred. The army whose champion dies, surrenders. A battle with only one casualty—but there’s a catch. Their biggest, strongest, meanest guy is a whole lot bigger, stronger, and meaner than yours. Suddenly no one wants to volunteer. The task is humanly impossible. The other guy’s a giant!

Then along comes a smart aleck, red headed little kid, not even a real soldier, carrying lunch to his older brothers in the reserve unit, and he offers to take on the enemy champion! Of course, no one takes him seriously. Then, when they realize that he is serious, they are scared stiff. “Are you sure that you know what you’re doing, kid?” the king asks. They try to put the king’s armor on the kid to give him some protection, half a chance against the mighty Philistine giant’s weapons, but the armor is so large that it pulls the scrawny kid down! No, a shepherd’s weapon, a slingshot, and five smooth stones from the river bed are all he needs. Goliath doesn’t know whether to laugh or be insulted when he sees the boy, but this isn’t a normal battle. It is God behind the scenes, inspiring David, guiding the rock through the air, and suddenly, Crash! It’s over! It’s over. Not because of Israel’s might or strength, or David’s superhero cloak, but because God was there. It was a lesson in trust, taught in the most desperate circumstances. God had once again overcome the forces of chaos.

Our New Testament story from Mark is also a lesson of trust in the God who can overcome the forces of chaos. This time, a group of people who were trying to learn more about God were following an exciting young teacher and healer, As commercial fishermen, the Sea of Galilee was their home turf. They knew it well, its shiny blue glassiness on a still summer day; the soft gray and indistinct horizons during a gentle spring rain; the wind and waves and violence of sudden storms. When their teacher asked for a boat ride, they agreed. They offered their teacher hospitality, letting him share the simple pleasures of life out on the waters, away from the pressing crowds. James and John must have smiled knowingly as their teacher grew so relaxed in the boat’s gentle rocking that he fell asleep. But then came the storm. The wind and waves and rain rocked their boat and threatened to swamp it. Their home turf had become a nightmare of disorientation and fear; and their guest was still asleep, resting as gently as a toddler in its mother’s arms.

"Master!" they cried out. "Don't you even care if we perish?" There was anger as well as fear in their words. "You've gotten us into this situation," we can almost hear them saying. But Jesus' trust in God is so great that he's not worried. He gently corrects the disciples and invites them to grow in their faith. Then he calms the stormy sea. Chaos is subdued.

Peace. Stillness. Maybe they wonder for a moment if they were really alive. Yes, they're still in their own boat, soggy with lake water. They no longer fear for their lives, for their fear is replaced by awe and wonder. It leads them to ask a question. "Who is this that can control the wind and the seas?"—a question that will one day lead them to an answer—"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

Frederick Buechner preached a beautiful sermon on this text that points us outward and onward, as Jesus commanded his followers long ago: "Go....Go for God's sake, and for your own sake, too, and for the world's sake. Climb into your little tub of a boat and keep going."¹ Buechner reassures us that Jesus will be with us: "Christ sleeps in the deepest selves of all of us, and...in whatever way we can call on him as the fishermen did in their boat to come awake within us and to give us courage, to give us hope, to show us, each one, our way. May he be with us especially when the winds go mad and the waves run wild, as they will for all of us before we're done, so that even in their midst we may find peace, find him"² (unquote)

In both Bible stories, God's power and love bring salvation into and out of a difficult, terrifying situation. In the first story, Goliath represented the powers of chaos and destruction. In the second, it was the elements of nature. For the Hebrews, the stormy sea was a symbol of chaos, of nature out of control. Remember in Genesis 1, how God's Spirit brooded above the primordial waters of chaos, as the first step toward bringing it under control, so God could begin the act of creation? In Mark's story, the God who created order out of chaos was now restoring order and good out of chaos, all through the actions of this one man, the one they would one day call the Christ.

We can't ignore the fact, we can't run away from the fact, that some days in our lives we will feel that everything is falling apart—it might be economic distress, marital or family conflict, violence, life-threatening illness, or our own depression or anger. Like the soldiers in Israel's army or the disciples in the boat, we cry out, in a mixture of anger and fear, Dear God, protect us. The Biblical record gives us stories like these, stories that encourage us to trust in the one who can protect and deliver. We know that in daily life God doesn't always fell the giant or calm the waves, that we

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Secrets in the Dark: A Life in Sermons*, HarperOne, 2006, p.295.

² *Ibid*, p. 297.

can't just wish away a bad medical report or trouble or catastrophe. Yet the more we come to trust God's love and grace and power, the more we will know that when we cry out, "Dear God, protect us," that God will listen. God will care. God will be there with us. God will protect and guide us. Amen.

By Michael E. Dixon