A Sermon Preached
at
Trinity Church Washington, Virginia
by
The Reverend Canon John W. Kilgore, M.D.
21 June 2015
Proper 7 Year B RLC
1 Samuel 17:1a, 4-11,19-23, 32-49
2 Corinthians 6:1-13
Mark 4:35-41
Psalm 9:9-20

He said to them, ‘Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?’

Sometimes when I get up into the pulpit to preach I have looked at the scripture readings, and particularly the gospel and I have said something like, ‘This is a tough one to preach on!’ Or ‘I’m not sure what to do with this gospel!’ Sometimes the message is obtuse or contradictory, just so off… So I am happy today, and say thanks be to God for a pretty straightforward gospel as well as Old Testament reading.

Today we have two great stories: David slaying Goliath and Jesus calming the storm. Stories well known to most of us. Certainly anyone who has been around the church much or read many Bible stories will know these two great ones. So what to do with them here today? How do they relate to us in this place on this occasion?

Well it seems like I should preach right into the elephant in the room. I’m Irish and pretty direct and straightforward. What you see is what you get. Probably not everyone here today is a long time parishioner at Trinity but most of you are and I hope to make this relevant both for long time members and for those visiting. I want to use this time and these Bible stories to talk about your transition. Or about anyone’s transition. I will be with you for five of the next six Sundays including today. So let’s begin a conversation. Your rector is retiring after an admirable service of 42 years. He has done a phenomenal job and you are a church to be proud of. Your ministries are impressive. Your outreach to those in need is laudable. Your care of one another is admirable and godly. And your welcoming of strangers is Christian hospitality lived large. Great stuff here. The spirit is alive and well at Trinity. I travel a great deal, around the world and I counted up yesterday that I have worshipped in somewhere between 100 and 200 Episcopal churches in the US, Europe, Central America, South America, Asia, and Australia. Some places the Spirit is alive and well and flourishing, and very evident. And some places not so much. Trinity Church here clearly shows the Spirit alive and well. One feels it during worship and around the place. And that’s good. But that can, in a time of transition like this, lead to anxiety. And I have heard a bit of that here, very understandably.

What’s going to happen after Jenks leaves? Will we continue as we have? What does the future look like here? What kind of new priest will we have? How will we change? Will the attendance stay up? Indeed Jenks has expressed some of that concern. I remember him saying, all three services are very different. If you change them at all people won’t come! There
is some truth to that. People don’t like change! You probably know the famous aphorism about the Episcopal Church and change. Change? How can we change? We can’t change that light bulb, my grandmother gave that light bulb!

Brothers and Sisters, this place is going to change. Absolutely. For sure. And that’s a good thing. Life is about change. Some leadership believes you need a long interim after such a long tenure of a rector. Another consideration is that a long interim leads to instability and people don’t come during such a time and a church declines. Uncertainty is not good and we should get on with it, and see what we are going to be…. One can make a good case for both courses. But I would submit that it is important not to plan it out too much but to carefully do it faithfully. Whatever that might look like. It is said the man plans, God laughs.

Let’s go back and look at our scripture readings for today and see if they might inform our discussion. The Old Testament lesson, as we heard read, and as I alluded to earlier, is the story of David and Goliath. Goliath was the Philistine champion ‘whose height was six cubits and a span.’ A cubit is about 18 inches and a span is 6, so that is nine feet six inches tall. Goliath had a helmet of bronze…a coat of mail…[weighing] five thousand shekels of bronze, or 125 pounds, and the tip of his spear weighed 6 shekels, 15 pounds. This was a big guy. Clearly a giant. And he was carrying heavy armor and a formidable spear. And then there is David, the lad, not trained in warfare but a shepherd boy who was ‘ruddy and had beautiful eyes and was handsome’ as we heard in the Old Testament reading last week. And David is pitted against Goliath the giant. This practice of selecting champions to fight one another as representatives of their respective armies was not uncommon in that day. It prevented large numbers of people being slaughtered. (We might consider something so noble today……) But the consequences were profound. The people of the loser would become servants of the winner. So it was going to be Saul’s people or the Philistines. Here we have a mighty giant against this ‘pretty boy’ shepherd lad……. Clearly King Saul and Goliath thought the fight was going to go the other way…. Until David professed his faith in the Lord, more particularly in the protection of the Lord. And told of his training caring for the sheep. Who would have thought being a shepherd boy could so launch someone into the kingship that David ultimately enjoyed!

And then there is the gospel reading today. Jesus and his disciples were tired, they had put in a long day. And Jesus says let’s go to the other side. The Sea of Galilee is not that big. It is actually a fresh water lake and you can most places see to the other side. It is quite picturesque. So one wouldn’t think it might be too dangerous. But the way the landscape is, the surrounding mountains/hills sort of ‘funnel’ weather down and there can be great and dangerous storms arising very suddenly there. Jesus is asleep in the boat, the storm comes and the disciples think they are going to drown. ‘Jesus, Jesus! Wake up! We are going to drown! The boat is sinking. Don’t you care? Help us bail water. Do something!’ Clearly they didn’t expect his response — ‘Peace! Be still!’ And then the dead calm which they didn’t expect either. Followed by his asking, ‘Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?’

When things are upsetting, fearful, panicky; when we are faced with insurmountable odds, huge obstacles, difficult times is when we are tempted to react so unwisely. Our bodies are programmed with a flight or fight response. Our adrenaline kicks in, we get anxious and wired up. Ontologically we are programmed that way, as are animals, to respond to the attacking lion, to flee the bear chasing us, to be ready for battle. But we can also freeze in the face of fear. But Jesus tells us otherwise. He wants us to turn down the adrenaline. Jesus says, ‘Slow down!’ Take some time. Those physiologic responses are made for immediate reaction to
imminent physical danger and survival, not for long term decisions. Jesus knows we don’t make good decisions when we are anxious, panicky, or threatened. When he and the disciples are in the boat and there is a storm he doesn’t help bail the water out of the boat. He says, ‘Peace! Be still! Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?’ And David when faced with Goliath relied on his cunning, his brain, his smarts, and his faith. ‘I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts,’ he said to Goliath.

I recently read that faith is not just a matter of intellectual conviction; it is trust in God along with appropriate action when confronted with a life-threatening situation. But it really is a balance of the two. And a firm enough faith to know that we are moving forward even when it may not seem like it.

When there is imminent change in our life, when there is chaos, when we are threatened with things that seem beyond our control is when we most need to slow down, to take our time, and to say our prayers. And there is a reassuring calm that comes with that. God puts his hand on our shoulder, holds us in the palms of his hands, so gently if we but let him. But we have to keep our focus on our God and on our faith. Especially in times of trouble and times of change.

Author Bruce Larson writes, ‘We have found ourselves in hopeless situations and the more we do, the worse it gets…We can make matters worse by our frantic efforts to save ourselves when God is trying to tell us: ‘Stand still.’ He goes on to say, ‘Knowing when to keep striving and when to let go and ‘let God’ is the wisdom we need to both accept and practice.’

There is a story about two frogs in the barn eating bugs for lunch. They saw a milk pail and jumped up onto it but misjudged their distance and how narrow the walls of the bucket were, and they both fell into the half full bucket of milk. They swam and swam and it seemed impossible to get out, the sides of the bucket were too steep and slippery. After a while the first frog said this is impossible, I’m going to give up. He stopped swimming, sank to the bottom and drowned. The second frog said, ‘No way! I’m not going to give up. I have confidence, faith, that this can turn out all right.’ He swam and swam faster and faster and faster until he was almost too tired to swim any more. Then his legs began to feel heavy and tired, until he realized that the milk was thickening. It turned to cream. And he swam just a bit more and the cream turned to butter. And the frog was able to stand on the butter and hop out. ‘I knew it would turn out all right he said!’

You are in a great transition in this parish today. Times of transition can be difficult. But they can also be very good. There is a terrific book that I have used for years and have recommended to many others who found it helpful. It is called Transitions, by Michael Bridges. He is a psychologist and he writes about transitions of all kinds: divorce, loss of job, death of a spouse, retirement, adulthood. He says that transitions are characterized by three phases. First you have to have a good ending. Second there needs to be a significant fallow period, a time of rest, of gestation, a time when things are growing, fermenting, settling in under the ground. And third it is important to make a good beginning. You have done a very nice job of saying goodbye to Jenks; you have made a good ending. You are now entering into the fallow period. This is the time when it is so important to be calm, to be still, to not be panicky or anxious, and to be faithful. To say your prayers. To let things settle.

There is an exciting new phase for Trinity coming. But it will be different. Yes, some people will leave; that is inevitable. New people will come, and it will be different. But God will take care of
you and of Trinity. If you but keep the faith, keep your eyes on the goal, keep swimming like the frog, and say your prayers together.

Walking in lives of faith does not mean that there will not be storms. It does not mean a storm-free existence. Jesus does not save us from storms. Jesus saves us in storms. If we will but let him. David wasn’t saved from the fight, but in the fight.

It is about prayerfully, faithfully keeping the course. Saying our prayers.

I would like to suggest one very practical, easy, and extremely useful practice. When there is a time of crisis, when there is a time of difficulty, when you are feeling particularly stressed, stop. Stop. Sit down. Quietly. And say your prayers. In my medical practice, I used to stop midday and read the Noonday Office from the Book of Common Prayer. And it made such a difference in the rest of the day. And Evening Prayer is a great tool for putting our lives, our difficulties in perspective. In the afternoon or evening read Evening Prayer, page 62 in the BCP. Or just stop and say the Lord’s Prayer. There is amazing strength in stopping and resting in the Lord. Whatever your transition. Whatever your difficulty.

Trust in the Lord enabled David to defeat Goliath. Faith in God rescued the disciples from the storm in the boat. Trinity is going to change. But it is in God’s hands, not ours. We have to trust in that and faithfully walk along. Walking faithfully, saying our prayers, trusting in God’s providence, all will be well. ‘Why are you afraid, have you still no faith?’ That great mystic and saint, Dame Julian of Norwich said, ‘All will be well, all will be very well.’ And it will if we but walk in the Lord. Trinity is changing but all will be well. Just trust and say your prayers through the process.

Amen.