

“Where Faith Meets Crisis”  
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I Samuel 17:1a, 4-11, 19-23, 32-49  
2 Corinthians 6:1-13  
Mark 4:35-41  
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Proper 7B

**Introduction to the Theme:**

I know a pastor who describes one of the most harrowing times in her life as being that time when a senior colleague—a charismatic and eloquent man who knew how to preach and pray in deeply moving ways—systematically worked to destroy her. He turned from being a supportive and encouraging mentor to a man who attempted at every opportunity to undermine her sense of confidence by making false accusations attributed to other people; by telling lies about her to other church leaders, and by refusing to engage in honest dialogue when she confronted him about the abuse of power. It was devastating, because this junior pastor knew that the behaviour was all related to the fact that she had discovered something about this man she had previously held in high regard—something they both knew compromised his integrity, but that he nonetheless refused to acknowledge.

The crisis was pretty severe, not least because the younger pastor had to come to grips with the fact that God seemed to be doing good things in the lives of others people even through this very destructive, but very charming spiritual leader. What she learned, though, is that God was working in and through and with her the whole time, too . . . it was one of the most poignant lessons of how crisis produces opportunities for richer and more profound faith and trust in God, who consistently proves greater than even our deepest adversities and crises, and finds ways of redeeming both troubled people and troubled realities.

Last week, after the service, Colin and I were talking about his sermon. I had commented appreciatively on the way that he so deftly highlighted important themes from each of the *three* lectionary passages he opted to have read (we usually only hear two)—particularly because each passage on its own was so rich with sermon fodder. And we agreed that it’s occasionally like that with the lectionary texts: you can have one week where you look at all four assigned texts and wonder, “Now what in the world can I say about any of these, and what possible relationship do they have one to another?” And other weeks, we’re served up with four texts that are so delicious each on their own, so full of rich substance and nourishing stuff, that it seems impossible to choose just one or two to focus on, and therefore we read them all and see how the threads come together.

This is another text-rich week. And the fact that I've used all four texts in our service this morning (the Psalm was in our Call to Worship, and Chris is going to read the other three in just a moment) has less to do with the fact that I'm competitive and wanted to play a little game with Colin (!) than it did with the fact that I have a tendency to be indecisive—I'd rather have a bit of each than have to forego any of the puddings that catch my eye.

A simple fact of life is this: from the moment we're born until the day we die, we live in a world that is pierced through with conflict. So long as we're engaged in any kind of relationship, we are presented almost daily with situations that could result in various degrees of crisis. The invitation in our scripture readings—and in our life of faith—is to recognise trust in the One who is with us and will help us overcome any and all adversities, come hell or high waters. Chris is going to come and read the first of our three lessons.

**Prayer:**

**God of peace whose stillness overcomes all storms, help us to settle into your presence now. For our lives are often wearying and leave us feeling battered, and we need to hear and trust your word deep within us so that our faith might be renewed. May the words of my mouth and the meditations in our hearts bear witness to your presence within us and beyond us. Amen.**

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As I suggested in our introduction to the theme of this morning's lessons, all three readings depict people of faith reacting to crisis.

And each of the stories has much wealth to be mined that we will only scratch the surface of today—but my hope is that when you go home, you might look at them again; dig a little deeper and think a little more about each one. Because each story represents threats and crises that most of us experience at one point or another in our own lives.

We started with the story of David and Goliath. And although it's often told as a story to children about how little people can do big things, it's about so much more than that.

The nation of Israel had been invaded by the Philistine army, which pitched camp in Judah with the intention of waging war and taking over. Before the battle commenced, one of the Philistine's men—Goliath, a colossus of a man—strode up shouted to the Israelites that, instead of a messy battle, they could solve things once and for all by just sending their best guy to fight him. Whoever won that battle would win the war for their respective nation: if Israel's guy killed Goliath, then the

Philistines would be their slaves. If, however, Goliath slew their best guy, then Israel would once again be forced to know the oppression of slavery, this time to the jeering, bullying Philistines.

Although it *is* a story about how God does the most astonishing and unexpected things through the least likely characters, this is not *just* a story about a boy against a giant. It's about the more global threat of terrorism. It's about the threat of one nation wielding its force and will over another. It's about the threat of our leaders not knowing how to lead, or not doing it effectively. It's about our fear of being dominated or controlled—whether by an individual, or by another nation. It's about the fear of lost freedom, the threat of lost autonomy, the distress of being defeated.

It's also a story about how individuals and nations can lose their way. How people who once looked to God for strength and direction can forget how that's done, and the consequences that kind of forgetfulness can have. It's a story of how “fear and lack of courage go together, just as faith and courage go together.”<sup>1</sup>

The disciples in our Gospel story were learning that same lesson, only the threat they were up against was the forces of nature—powers they couldn't really do battle with, but could only strain against and eventually submit to.

As those who are participating in our Bible study on Mark's Gospel will recall, Marcus Borg writes in the book we're reading together, “The story is filled with fear. It is night, dark. The disciples are on the sea and the storm comes up. Waves crash into their boat and threaten to swamp it. Fearing that they are in mortal danger, they cry out to Jesus who is asleep in the stern: ‘Do you not care that we are perishing?’

“Awakened, Jesus rebuked the wind and silenced the sea. Then he addressed the disciples: ‘Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?’ [Again], fear and lack of faith go together; so also faith and courage go together.”<sup>2</sup>

One of the stumbling blocks to faith for many people today actually comes as a result of miracle stories like this one. For people who trust their experience of this world and the consistency of its natural laws, it is very difficult—perhaps impossible—to trust the factuality of this story. And too often, that's as far as they get: without querying whether the factuality of the story is important to its meaning and truthfulness—or whether the importance of the story depends on its factuality—they dismiss the Bible as being untrustworthy and irrelevant, because they suppose it presents an unreliable account of how the world really works.

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<sup>1</sup> This observation was made by Marcus Borg in the book our church is reading, entitled: *Conversations with Scripture: The Gospel of Mark*, p. 45.

<sup>2</sup> Borg, *Conversations with Scripture: The Gospel of Mark*, p. 45.

But what if there's another way to read these kinds of stories? Again, those who are participating in our Bible study will recall that Borg proposes understanding them as what he calls "parabolic or metaphorical narratives." He writes, "The model for seeing them this way is the parables of Jesus. Recall . . . that Jesus' parables are not factual stories, and yet all Christians agree that they matter—that they are meaning-filled and truth-filled, even though Jesus made them up.

"Just as the parables of Jesus are meaningful and truthful even though he made them up, so also the stories of the nature miracles are meaningful and truthful even if his followers made them up. Jesus told parables about God; his followers may well have told parables about Jesus."<sup>3</sup>

As soon as we open ourselves to the deeper truths that can be conveyed through the symbolism of metaphorical narratives, our ears are tuned to hear the story in a new way. For example, Borg points out, *That this story is set on "the sea" is significant. Within Mark's narrative, "the sea" is the Sea of Galilee, even though calling this body of water a sea is a bit of a misnomer. It is in fact a fresh-water lake, and a not especially big one, about 12 miles long and seven miles wide. Luke 8:22-23 more accurately calls it a "lake". But the "sea" in Mark's story is more than the Sea of Galilee. In the Jewish context in which Mark was immersed (and Jesus and earliest Christianity), "the sea" had metaphorical meanings. In the Old Testament, "the sea" often has a more-than-literal meaning. In Genesis 1, it is the primordial chaos preceding creation.*<sup>4</sup>

Beverly Zink-Sawyer, a professor of preaching and worship at Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond, Virginia, observes that, "The events recorded in this section of Mark's Gospel take place on alternate sides of the Sea of Galilee. . . . Scholars have noted, however, that Jesus' command to the disciples in 4:35, 'Let us go across to the other side,' indicates more than simply a change of venue. The 'other side' represents Gentile territory, the 'country of the Gerasenes' (5:1). This is Jesus' first foray in Mark to what might be considered a dangerous, even inappropriate destination. . . . By carrying his ministry into Gentile territory, Jesus reaches out to the strangers, the others, even the enemies of the house of Israel. If Jesus stands as the example for the church today, this story raises for us the question, who are the strangers, the others whom we have neglected? Who are the people and where are the places left untouched by Christian hospitality due to ancient hatreds and fears?"<sup>5</sup>

Finally, our second reading—a snippet from 2 Corinthians—makes it clear that the relationship between the apostle Paul and the congregation he had mentored in Corinth was on tenterhooks—certainly not on brilliant terms. Not only that, but the

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3 Ibid., pp. 41-42.

4 Ibid., p. 43.

5 Feasting on the Word, Year B Vol. 2, p. 168.

church was divided amongst themselves. In a number of ways, our second lectionary text depicts the mixed and very human nature that even our church leaders can possess—this particular one prone to defensiveness, a bit of bluster and bombast, and what sounds like embarrassing self-aggrandizement.

At the same time, Paul’s words offer us a glimpse into the crisis that most Christians eventually face, when conflict erupts in the church. And, because the church community is like a family—we even use the language of ‘the family of faith’—the observations and lessons here can be applied to the crises of conflict within our own nuclear family, which are likely slightly more frequent than conflicts within the church. But to read Paul’s letter, it would appear that that wasn’t necessarily the case for those early Christians in Corinth! Not only had they had a falling-out with Paul, but they were clearly quarreling amongst themselves . . . they were apparently in the process of rebuilding, but as we all know, that’s no easy business and certainly not without stress.

Our epistle reading, then, represents the threat of disintegrating relationships and broken trust.

So at one level, our scripture readings this morning are chock-full of threat and fearsome things that are experienced by Christians and non-believers alike every day: the threat of domination by another person or nation; the threat of terrorism; the threat of incompetent or corrupt leaders; the threat of being overwhelmed by nature or other forces beyond our control; the threat of loss—of identity, employment, or stability; the threat of disintegrating and broken relationships. And the ultimate threat: death—our own, or that of someone we know and love and rely on for our equilibrium in this world.

The hard truth is that all of these threats, these fearsome possibilities and more, weave their way through our life—and too often, become realities. But in each of our stories, threat and fear are confronted . . . but not by a sudden burst of courage or resolve on the part of the faithful. Rather, they are met by a recognition that there is One who is stronger than giants and armies, more powerful than both Galilean storms and the storms that rage in our lives. As we grow in faith, we come to understand that even though such fearsome things are very real, they do not have the last word. Time and again in Scripture the word is, “Do not be afraid.” Not because there are not fearsome things on the sea of our days or in the battlefields of our lives, but because God is with us. <sup>6</sup>

The way we overcome the threats and daunting realities that threaten to paralyze or own us, is by looking back and recalling the ways God has accompanied—and even carried us—in the past; it’s by listening to and believing in the testimony

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<sup>6</sup> This paragraph is a paraphrase of a very helpful paragraph by Michael L. Lindvall, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 2, p. 164.

of others—whether in Scripture, or in the present-day community or family of faith that is ours; it's by placing our deepest hope and confidence not in the powers and authorities of this world, but in the power and presence of the One who stills the raging sea, brings order to chaos, and triumphs over death with everlasting life. Amen.