

*Mark 4: 35-41**1 Samuel 17: 32-49*

June is such a great month. With it comes the early days of summer, graduation ceremonies, parties, and celebrations, the end of the school year, and perhaps my favorite, NBA Playoff Basketball. Now, don't get me wrong, the NBA playoffs don't have anything on March Madness. But they both have something in common for me, unless a team is playing against Michigan, or the Detroit Pistons (if they actually made it), I'm rooting for the underdog.

This year, the NBA playoff quarterfinals featured a last eight with nothing but likeable underdog teams, with no team having won more than ONE championship in their history – and the others never winning one. There's something about the spirit of the underdog, ya know, that's actually kind of contagious. People who don't even watch basketball, can easily get caught up in the drama of it all – you might even hear a commentator liken a matchup between two teams to that of David & Goliath.

The story we dropped into this morning is a full on, Old Testament epic – and perhaps unusually, or not, it lives in the consciousness of most people. Not every story from the Bible is so widely known, but most everyone has heard of the shepherd boy going up against the Philistine mighty warrior, with a measly little sling and smooth stone.

Now, the Philistines aren't just an enormous military force, they are also an occupying force. They have stationed their soldiers on Israelite ground. And there's a stalemate of sorts. If one army marches down into the valley, they face a disadvantage approaching the other climbing up out of the valley.

So the Philistines, send their mighty warrior named Goliath. One commentator makes note that he “stood nearly seven feet tall, twirling his twenty-five-pound spear with the careless ease of a cheerleader twirling her baton.”¹ And Goliath's taunts terrify the Israelite army and leave them dismayed.

When David, the shepherd boy, seemingly comes out of nowhere, to volunteer and face Goliath, Saul and the other military leaders want to prepare him in the military way, giving him heavy armor and the tools of

¹ <https://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2016/9/15/goliath?rq=goliath>

might. But David sheds the heavy protection, grabs his sling and five smooth stones, his shepherds' staff and goes out to face Goliath.

In this underdog story, David approaches an impossible task, not with the tools of empire, but with the simple tools of his craft. He's a shepherd. He's trained to use a sling to protect his flock. He knows how to use his skills to take on this mighty warrior. But he also has something else.

He carries a deep trust. Trust in a God that stands in opposition to the mighty powers and technological resources of the kingdoms of earth. For David: "Trust in God nurtures hope that there is a way into the future, where there seems no way, that there may be a clink in the impregnable armor, that a well-placed stone of opposition can bring down seemingly impregnable systems of oppression that loom as armored giants."²

In our first reading from the Gospel of Mark, the disciples find themselves on the sea, in another storm, and Jesus is taking a nap.

The storm is a time of chaos, winds toss the boat and fill it with water. "When Jesus awakes, and encounters his disciples in fear, he not only stills the storm, he is also establishing himself as the Messiah who cares [deeply] about his disciples; he is also demonstrating that he is one with the Creator, who can quiet the waters." In the opposition of the oppressive forms of Empire, we face many giants – perhaps none bigger than fear.

It's tempting to try and use those same tools that mark the Empire – terror, violence, exclusion, greed, the power of the sword, and fear itself.

But in the chaos that threatens our lives, when we are rendered helpless in its grip by fear and seized by anxiety--"As people of faith, we cry out to the Jesus who promises to accompany us. And our cry sometimes reveals more about our fear than our faith."³

When Jesus quiets the waters, saying, "peace, be still," he is speaking, not just to the stormy waters, but to the disciple's fear, as well as our own. It's these words and how we learn to respond to them that shape our faith, and ability to embrace the many contours of our lives and whatever situations we might experience. No matter what we experience, or what threatens us during the day or keeps us up at night – even when our very lives are under threat – nothing can overcome the peace and strength that can only come from Christ. And like the shepherd boy, David, the God who routinely upends all that we expect, is able to transform our fear into courage.

² The New Interpreter's® Bible Commentary, 1 Samuel, pg. 1114.

³ Feasting on the Gospels – Mark: A Feasting on the Word Commentary, M. JAN HOLTON, Kindle Edition., 5146.

Smooth Stones, Choatic Waters, and the Kin-dom of God

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The Reverend Mark Mares, Minister for Youth and Family Ministries

One of my favorite musicals, *In the Heights*, which was recently adapted for film, follows the story of unbarrio, Washington Heights, during the warm summer days – in the midst of a blackout. There's this line that we hear again and again towards the end of the musical:

We are powerless.

Literally, there is no power. No lights, no air conditioning. It's a blackout. They are powerless. But there is also a double-meaning at play. The neighborhood, el barrio, is in the midst of many changes.

Gentrification is changing the very fabric and identity of this community. "Maybe we're powerless, a corner full of foreigners," one character says, "Maybe this neighborhood is changing forever."⁴

They feel powerless. And I'm sure many of us could describe what that feels like from moments we've experienced in life.

In the face of insurmountable odds,
with bills to pay,
medical diagnosis to navigate,
questions of what comes next after graduation.
Or in the valley of darkness,
learning how to walk in the dark,
handling life "after Covid," for you and your family,
all while Covid still exists in the world.
whether all seems lost,
when all you feel – is powerless;
these two stories
of a shepherd boy and his sling,
of disciples trapped in fear,
they invite us into a different kind of posture.

⁴ Miranda, Lin-Manuel, *In the Heights*. [New York, N.Y.] : Williamson Music ; Milwaukee, WI : Exclusively distributed by Hal Leonard, ©2008

A posture that relearns the lesson of God-Trusting-opposition to oppression, and any other giants, or the storms and chaos we encounter in our lives.

God's not beholden to the powers of the kingdoms of the world. In the person of Jesus Christ, we see a different reign. In his time on earth Jesus stood tall but not by making others feel weak. He had power but used it solely to empower others. He healed but with no strings attached. He competed with none, loved all, even when we were least lovable, even to the point of dying for us on the cross.

In the Gospels, Jesus describes the reign of God 37 times -- not once is it described like our earthly kingdoms and Empires.

Lamps and debt,
a friend in the night,
and a sower of seeds.
Bridesmaids and sheep,
workers and judges.

"37 times Jesus reshapes the imaginations of his followers. 37 times Jesus tells them a story to help them remake the only world that they know,"⁵ because the kingdom of God beats to a different drum.

And in the midst of the storm, or in the dark valley, facing a mighty warrior giant, the tools God gives us, aren't the tools of Empire or earthly kingdoms.

They're the tools of Kin-Dom. And this kin-dom, is shaped by a beloved community, where all are welcome to the table, where the first shall be last, and the last will be first; where those who are greatest among you, will be your servants, where all who exalt themselves, will be humbled, and all who humble themselves, will be exalted.

The theologian Walter Wink says, "History belongs to the intercessors -- those who believe and pray the future into being."

As we step into an unknown future, where we learn to do old things in new ways, may we do so as intercessors, praying the future into being, not as a people marked by Empire, but kin-dom, not as a people who are powerless, but powerful.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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⁵ This observation is taken directly from the wonderful pastor and preacher, Melissa Flo-Bixler. I definitely encourage you to read her piece: <https://sojo.net/articles/kin-dom-christ>