

“small in the face of...”

Reflection: June 23, 2024 Rev'd Ian Brown

1 Sam 17: 32 – 49 & Mark 4:35-41

I had a great aunt who, in her later years may have suffered a little short term memory loss. You know how it is; every visit, the same stories of family history, same anecdotes of 60 years ago, same stories of friends or travels, sometimes in every second sentence. That's a form of dementia, but we revisit stories like those in the Bible for different reasons.

We retell our stories again and again. Not because it takes us so long to understand them, but so they find a way of speaking to us and our world today. The stories help us to be confronted by truth in the place we find ourselves now!

The gospel story of Jesus and the disciples all at sea, has one of those essential cries of the human condition; 'Lord don't you care?' We feel bereft and we are sinking; it's our health or our family or the state of the world, the cry of the refugee and the homeless and the poor. It's our cry when we find ourselves in conflict, 'Lord, don't you care?'

The Old Testament story has David stepping up to a challenge. The threat before the people was huge; a new monarchy, a risky alliance of tribes, against powerful and threatening neighbours. It looked like the Hebrews were small and vulnerable in the face of threat from over the border, a threat personified in Goliath! This is one almighty conflict and you can hear them quaking in their sandals, "Lord, don't you care?"

Thankfully, we don't often have neighbours rattling swords to menace our lives, but there are trends that do threaten our existence as church, that question our faith and so on. And very sadly there are tangible threats that push some to leave home and country for a better future, often by a risky journey at sea.

The feeling that we need help, that we are sinking, that we need help to get out of conflict or trouble is one that many feel. The fear of a real threat to life at the heart of today's gospel story too.

“A great windstorm arose and waves were beating into the boat, so that it was already being swamped.”

The disciples rouse Jesus, asleep in the stern, **“help, help we're going down!”** He saves them, then Jesus cuts to the heart of the matter and asks his frightened disciples, "why are you afraid, have you still no faith?"

The disciples are human, they are looking at the turmoil around them, they feel threatened and inadequate. You've heard before how storms could whip up suddenly on lake Galilee, the disciples were terrified - they knew what could happen.

As vulnerable humans we generally encourage the expression of fears - rather than bottling them up, we think it's good to recognize our inadequacy, be real about our limitations. We feel for the disciples on lake Galilee, their fishing boat was tiny. They were at sea, their position couldn't have been more vulnerable - and what else could anyone do? They cry out in fear for their lives!

Jesus doesn't fix the problem and say “there, there, everything's alright now, what a terrible storm.”

When the sleeping saviour stirs, in response to his disciples' cries, he doesn't tell them to have no fear. He instead invites them to examine why they are afraid—in essence, to consider how and why they have let the storm rule their reality—and calls on them to have a measure of faith that will accompany them in the midst of their fears.

So how's the weather in your world this week? Are there storms raging that have you feeling overwhelmed with anxiety or fear? Where might you find help amid the storm? How might God be inviting you to shift your attention in a way that helps you recognize that the storm does not have the final word?

Instead of experiencing fear and anxiety as bullies that leave us feeling helpless, how might it be to receive them as messengers who invite us to refocus our vision? How would it be to pray that God would turn fear into energy for moving forward?

The real issues here are not about the nature of miracles, or the explanation of how the wind died down, or how Goliath was beaten, but about faith. Faith may be small like the mustard seed, small in the face of the realities that impinge on us. But faith can make all the difference.

And the story questions us, are we like those early disciples in the boat of their everyday work, do we only focus on the natural or supernatural questions, conveniently sidestepping the real issues of faith in Jesus? This is the question that the story confronts us with.

Miracles, like this stilling of the storm point to the importance of a different reality, to the realm of faith - to setting sails of faith and meeting whatever may come.

If Mark wanted us to learn a lesson from his recounting of this story, I think perhaps it's that faith in Jesus can only be counted as real when it's practiced in the face of everyday life. Faith is not a warm emotional experience, not an understanding, not just a set of ideas in our heads. Mark learnt from the disciples that faith is about trust, even in the worst storms of life.

And we see that the disciples, even with Jesus right there, found this faith a difficult thing to have, even after they had seen healings and other miracles. The fact of miracles is that they **don't** produce faith! The disciples failed to exercise their faith with Jesus right there. They made mistakes time and time again, just like we do, it's a part of the journey we are called to take. It's about launching out into the deep, about failing and learning from mistakes. The truth of our reality is that we are small in the face of the world around us,

small and powerless in the face of issues like poverty and human meanness. Our lives are inconsequential in the face of human conflict, in the scope of the time we have and the effort we can give. Small, like David in the face of Goliath. But faith can make more difference than we can imagine.

Faith is in the way you face illness and go on in trust. Faith is in building family, though our results will never be perfect; in the work of the church, though it will be more seed planting than reaping; in the work with our groups and services – but with no guarantees.

This thing we call faith grows as we exercise it; getting in the boat with Jesus, being blown by the unpredictable winds of the Spirit. It's the getting on with the business of showing God's love and grace to others, being the church together, facing the storms of life.

Sometimes the things we confront are things inside us, they might have names like; fear, insecurity, guilt, anxiety. All of these make us battle to trust and have faith. They threaten the wholeness of our life. In the early days of the church, Jesus little band of disciples took on the giant of a hostile Roman Empire, and won. Not with the sword, but by launching out in faith and by putting love into action.

47 years ago this Uniting Church was born out of faith and a commitment to reverse the pattern of churches dividing and to seek to put some flesh on the notion of the unity we have in Christ. We are a people of faith, so may we all live out our calling, firm in our faith in the one who can calm the storms around us and who calls to account for our fears.

We, as individuals and as a church together are a people of faith, we launch out, we fear, we hoist the sails, we may sometimes tackle big issues and we look for the winds of the Spirit to empower us. May we be renewed to faithfully live out our calling, firm in our faith in Jesus. Amen