

**“COURAGEOUS FAITH: IS IT IN US?”**  
**I Sam 17:1a, 4-11, 19-23, 32-50; Mark 4:26-34**  
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When Liz asked me if I would like to preach on this Sunday, it was Wednesday, a week and a half ago, the day before I left for a week in Washington, D. C. As I read the scriptures and pondered them in the context of our nation’s capital, I have to admit that many concerns have been racing through my brain and my heart. I took along on my trip for reading material Marcus Borg’s *The Heart of Christianity*, which looks at how we live our faith in these days, and Edward LeRoy Long, Jr.’s *Facing Terrorism: Responding as Christians*. I recommend both of these books to you if you are looking for guidance in a time when it feels difficult to discern a faithful path.

How often have we heard the David and Goliath story, either directly read from the Bible or in various edited versions that are used to make a point about the small guy standing up to the bully. Perhaps we’ve even referred to it ourselves when encouraging our kids or students. What struck me in considering this text in today’s context is the role of David’s faith, and the sobering realization that, depending upon the subject being considered, we may be either David or Goliath if we are honest with ourselves.

David was derided by his brothers for even being there: a young shepherd boy who just came to see what the battle was all about, eager for a taste of the action. What could a simple lad do in the face of an enemy who terrified all who saw him? But David knew in his heart that Goliath was challenging God’s army; and David, who had been saved from the grasp of bears and lions by God’s powerful arm, knew that God would save the people if they would trust God. David, in his utterly focused determination and his steadfast faith, refused the armor and the armaments of the military. He shunned the sword and took just his stones and his slingshot. What a fool he must have appeared to any who saw him. Small, young, ignorant, obviously. Even crazy, perhaps. But he managed to slay Goliath, the enormous enemy who had stopped all the army in its tracks.

David gave glory to God for the deliverance he was able to provide. He knew himself to be the vessel of God’s power, and at least at that point in his life he was a humble bearer of God’s will for the people.

Similarly, those disciples in the boat with Jesus learned a lesson about God’s power in Jesus Christ and the weakness of their own faith. While Jesus rested, unconcerned, a mighty storm arose, threatening to overwhelm them. These seasoned fishermen who had surely faced many storms at sea, feared for their lives. They were as lost as the men of Saul’s army. “What shall we do?” They awakened Jesus, who stilled the waters and wind, and they realized, once again, they were in the presence of God’s mighty power.

How often do we lose our own faith in the face of challenges, large and small, which threaten to overwhelm us? How often do we lose our bearing and retreat, fearing that the problems in our

families, our community, our world, are just too large to be faced with the few resources we have at hand? What these texts tell us, as people of faith, is that we have been claimed by God to face life with the power that God gives us. God's gifts are love, certainly; we are loved into new life. But with that new life comes the call to respond. We are God's, and we are here for a purpose. Dietrich Bonhoefer noted that we tend to see the Jesus of the stable, the gentle coming of God into human life; and we forget that power that he brought which left all who met him in awe. That power that David knew remains a force in this world, and we are called to believe in that power and allow it to work through us.

What these texts *don't* say is that nothing bad will ever happen or that God will always save us from the forces of nature. We have seen that so often in recent years that we know that God's promise is to be with us, in the midst of all that life brings. So what does faith mean in this day? What are courage and faith, really, and how do we live with courageous faith?

Marcus Borg writes extensively about what faith is in this 21st century. He reminds us that the faith of the New Testament was a matter of the heart, not an intellectual matter. He urges a *relational* understanding of faith. It is that absolute trust in God that casts out anxiety; and faith, as radical trust, has great transformative power. Faith also involves fidelity to God and to God's calling. To live this, we must pay attention to how we pray and worship and how we work for justice; Borg says this understanding of faith calls us to a life of compassion and justice, based on the First Commandment of the Hebrew Bible (to have no other gods besides God) and the Greatest Commandment of the New Testament, that we love God with our whole heart, mind, and strength, above all others. And then, that we love our neighbor as ourselves. And, finally, faith is a way of seeing the world from a larger perspective than our limited self-interest would provide. As we see, we must respond because God claims us for God's vision. William Sloane Coffin commented, "I love the recklessness of faith. First you leap, then you grow wings." Faith is an active, relational life in God's presence.

What then is courage? Coffin gives this perspective: "No one need be afraid of fear, only afraid that fear will stop him or her from doing what's right. Courage means being well aware of the worst that can happen, being scared almost to death, and then doing the right thing anyhow." Courage often looks like foolishness in the eyes of those who don't share the same faith or vision. But true courage involves considering issues deeply and acting out of one's deepest convictions about what is right. Counting the costs and being willing to pay them because the end fulfills what one understands to be God's call and vision for peace and justice and care for all of God's people and creation.

As I considered even just what I observed and heard and read this week, I found many examples of courageous faith. And many examples of a fear-driven life that prevents faith from being fully lived. In D. C. I was struck by all the changes that have occurred since 9/11. There are new barricades around buildings; there are gates at most government buildings; to enter our public museums, housing the precious history of our nation, every person must go through security checks and have their bags searched. There is awareness that there are cameras tucked in all the corners and outside on buildings. There is a sense of distrust and fear that is subtle if you aren't looking for it. People have to be careful what they say in public. But this is our free nation we

pride ourselves on. I found myself wondering what our forebears would think of this condition. I found it very sad. I loved the amazing diversity of language, dress, cuisine, and culture that mix in D. C. Why can't we learn to trust one another and care about each other more?

In the papers and radio and TV news, many items dealt with terrorism and this "war on terror" we must fight. It is purposely kept in front of us to keep us in fear. We are told we must fight terrorism with weapons and surveillance. Yet those who study the issue from a perspective of Christian faith, and, indeed of Muslim and Jewish faith as well, tell us that the only way to address terrorism is to address the root causes of the violence. And when we truly study terrorism, it is largely we, the First World powers, who have created the environment for the rise in both the severity and frequency of terrorist actions.

Terrorism is not new. But the numbers of people who feel so desperate that taking matters into their own hands, very violently, appears to them to be their only hope of changing the system, has increased dramatically in recent years. Why? If we are honest with ourselves, much of it is due to the way our country uses the resources of other countries to fuel our unrealistic standard of living and our nation's willingness to use force to protect our access to resources. When I look hard at that, I realize we are Goliath and the many men, women, and children who go hungry or fear for their lives when our government or corporations control their ability to work or grow crops are David. Do we wonder that some react with violence and hatred? Yet we know that those who seek violent response are a small minority of the population of any country, just as most of us seek to live peaceably with our sisters and brothers around the world. We haven't learned to use the tools that God gives us to do that, however, and we allow others to turn to swords when words and compassion are what are truly needed before all hope of peace is lost. Long tells us, "Facing terrorism involves not merely looking at the moral standing of efforts to defeat it but the development of attitudes that will help to mitigate its causes and to sustain a spiritually engendered poise in the face of its threats."

I have to tell you one story here that gave me hope. The hotel I stayed in had a great number of students from various areas of the Middle East and Africa staying there. They were off and on the elevator frequently. As I rode down one morning, I was the only American in the car. The young man next to me was talking with two of the women. They were joking and laughing. He then turned to me and said, "These are my friends. She is from Morocco, she's from Lebanon, he's from Pakistan, and I'm from Syria." I asked why they are all here. They are exchange students, just ending their time here and setting off back to their various homes. We agreed that if the rest of the world could learn to cooperate as they had, we would all be so much better off. So in the midst of my concerns, I found hope for the future as well.

Now, my reading and experiences this week led me to consider terrorism. And clearly, I believe that a faithful response to the very real threat of increasing terrorism is to address the poverty and economic disparity that exists around the world and in our own country. And since our government doesn't want to do that, it is up to us to make sure that becomes a priority for our leaders, even as we work in our own groups, in churches, in other nongovernmental organizations to meet those needs.

I looked at other areas where we may feel overwhelmed, as well. And I looked for examples of courageous faith. On the back of your bulletin this morning, our UCC President, John Thomas, writes of Jean Zaru, the clerk of the Friends' Meeting in the Palestinian city of Ramallah on the West Bank. She is the only "head of communion" among church leaders in Israel-Palestine who is a woman, leading one of the smallest active Christian communities in the Middle East. A Christian in a Muslim context. She understands what it means to be David facing Goliath, he says. Yet unlike David, she pursues her work committed to nonviolence; she faces many formidable foes, her life in danger, yet she remains there, courageous, with God's presence.

I learned of the courage of our sisters and brothers in the Episcopal Church, bravely electing my former colleague and friend, Katharine Jefferts Schori, to be their Presiding Bishop. She is the first woman to have such authority, in spite of her affirmative vote for Gene Robinson, the openly gay bishop. While others in the Anglican Communion are threatening to break away, I heard Katharine's calm voice proclaiming her faith that the church has faced difficult issues before and will face this one openly and prayerfully, as well. She is surely a woman of courageous faith, standing up for what she believes God is calling her to be and do, aware that she will face much anger in her tenure.

Our wonderful visit from Ali Nebot, of Puerto Rico, revealed a woman of courageous faith. Her stories of standing up to the US Navy when they had their bases on Vieques spoke of courage deeply rooted in her faith and God's call for justice for the people of that island. The churches gathered their people in witness to the power of the Davids of this world against the presumptive, arrogant power of the Goliaths. The Navy has returned the island to the people, although the cleanup has not been done. The tenacious, courageous faith of those who have little reveals God's power in the world.

When I was in D. C., Charles and I went to see the *Prairie Home Companion* movie. But prior to that we watched the trailer for [An Inconvenient Truth](#), Al Gore's movie about global warming. As much as I don't want to face this, I know that I must see that movie and accept both my own part in creating the problem and my responsibility in addressing it. The few scenes I saw were sobering and overwhelming. What that reminded me of is that we, unlike David but like those disciples in the boat, are not alone. We have each other, in this church and in congregations throughout this community and country, to respond together out of our faith. I suggest we gather people to watch the movie together and then meet for discussion and prayer, lest we become immobilized by the size of the challenge. We must not let our fear keep us from doing what is right.

Within this amazing congregation we have people with diverse talents and experience. Our role is to help each other discern what God is calling us to do, to encourage one another in responding faithfully, and to continue to call each other to courageous faith. When we begin to tire, let us remember God's call to the disciples. As William Sloane Coffin once wrote, "None of the 12 disciples had any of the so-called advantages: education, wealth, social status. They were as ordinary as they come, which makes the point that Christ is not looking for extraordinary people but for "ordinary people who do ordinary things extraordinarily well."

We are called to be the vessels, to allow God's power and Holy Spirit to work in and through us. We are each claimed by God. May we learn to graciously accept that gift and courageously accept the challenge that is placed before us, as well. We live in times that demand both humble confession and faithful action. May we have the faith of David, remembering that we are not alone but made one in Christ's love and sent out together.

Thanks be to God, Amen.