

So much to preach about this morning.

I could talk about the historic creation the new national holiday of Juneteenth, and the importance of taking another important step of coming to grips with our countries original sin of slavery.

I could talk about Father's Day and how the concept of fatherhood is changing for the better and how the image we have of our fathers and father figures shapes how we think about God.

But then I looked at our Bible readings for today and realized that I had no choice but to spend some time on two topics which they bring up and which we all struggle with--faith and fear.

Now a true confession: I am a very anxious person. I suspect like about a quarter of the people in this country I am affected with what is medically labeled Generalized Anxiety Disorder. That means I often feel fearful for no apparent reason. Now being afraid in dangerous situations is both normal and good. We were designed to be afraid when faced by a mountain lion or threatened by a forest fire. But it's unhealthy to lay awake at night worrying about all kinds of trivial stuff or to have our stomach tied in knots when we go to work or to suffer from a whole range of all manner of psychosomatic complaints like migraines or backaches. It doesn't help people like me to have friends and loved ones say, oh just relax, don't worry. For much of the time, we anxious people are not even sure about what we are worried about!

Now in our scripture lessons this morning we have two described, two very scary situations. The first is David confronting the giant Goliath; the second has to do with a bunch of seasick disciples caught in the midst of a violent storm. Their responses to the scary situations they face are different in some ways but similar in others--both approaches can be enormously helpful to us when we are afraid.

David, a teenage shepherd boy, found himself confronted with an enormous hunk of a warrior named Goliath. The bible says he was about 9 feet tall and had already scared the bejesus out of the entire Israelite army. Nobody was brave enough or foolish to answer his challenge to go mano a mano with him-- no one except David. No wonder Goliath laughed at his pipsqueak challenger. David was so little and puny that the armor

his brothers tried to put on him was too big. But David had faith in the promise that God had made that he was chosen to be victorious, and so it set the armor aside instead picked up the weapons he had at hand and was familiar with--his sling and five smooth stones from the riverbed. One stone was enough, for with a prayer and his well-honed skill he had learned from protecting his sheep, his sure shot hit the giant in the center of his forehead, dropping him to the ground where David finished him off by cutting off his head.

This victory did not mean that David was unafraid. I am sure he was shaking in his boots just as much as his brothers. As we learn from later stories about David when he became King, he was not even a particularly brave person. But he was faithful. He trusted in God's promise that God would deliver him. And he was faithful that his five smooth stones and the skills he knew would be enough to do the job.

Now we all have goliaths that we must face. For us those monsters often take the form of illness, grief, addiction, depression, or loneliness. The lesson for us here, is that God has promised us deliverance and that God has already given us simple but highly effective weapons with which to combat our own goliaths. God likes to do great things with little things - loaves and fishes, mustard seeds, a widow mite, a pregnant teenager, some rural shepherd boys, or some smelly fishermen. And here God is again, using a punk kid and slingshot to bring down the heavily armed champion of the Philistine army (Like writer Anne Lamott says, "God is such a showoff"). We too can use the simple things we have to overcome seemingly insurmountable threats. We already have at hand what we need to defeat such monsters. We have our own small smooth stones. They are things as simple as prayer, the support of family and friends, our own ability to practice self-care, which when needed can include appropriate diet and medication. Most importantly of all we have the promise of God's protective presence, always with us, never deserting us.

But what about those times when we do not feel that presence, when God seems absent or to have forgotten us? When fear is all around and reminders to have faith are not enough?

The Gospel text addresses just such questions. The disciples are being tossed in a violent storm in the Sea of Galilee. It's midnight and they are terrified. Most of us have never been in a storm at sea, but it must be

horrible. Maybe the modern equivalent would be riding in a plane when one of the engines catches fire. They thought they were going to die. You know what, we have all been there! I always think of the famous picture by Rembrandt of this scene. When we count the disciples in his painting there are 13 of them, and when you get even closer to the canvas, you can just make out that one of the disciples has the face of Rembrandt himself. He has painted himself into this group of panicked disciples! Not only was their boat sinking but the disciples must have thought that Jesus had abandoned them. You would have assumed that his presence would have somehow protected them! Where was he when they needed him. He was asleep for God's sake! Have you ever noticed that church buildings are shaped like boats? In fact, this part of the sanctuary is called the nave, where we get the word navy, it looks like the bottom of the boat. When we gather in church, it's like we are all sitting together in a big upside-down boat. So those of us in church would think - well if we show up for church, if we take the sacraments, if we read the bible, if we sit next to Jesus, well then nothing bad is going to happen, no storms are going to strike, there is no way our lives can be capsized - right? Well no, being in the nave with Jesus does not mean storms aren't going to happen, but it does mean that Jesus will be there with them, and that is enough. When they finally wake him up, what does he say? O ye of little faith - have faith not fear.

By faith Jesus does not mean intellectual belief. The problem with the Greek word faith is that he has about 60 different meanings in the Bible, so when we say I believe in God, we usually mean something like I can rationally understand or make sense of what the Bible teaches about God. But faith more often means trust. The focus is on our hearts rather than our brains.

I don't think that God cares that much if we give our intellectual assent everything the theologians say about God, but God does want us to trust God, for us to know that God loves us and would never do anything to let us down. We can depend on God.

So, when Jesus calls his followers ye of little faith, oligopistos in Greek, He does mean, don't you understand me, he means, don't you trust me? Trust me that I love you and will care for you always, even when, especially when, it looks like your boat is going to go down for the last time?

Fear comes from being out of control. When we are afraid it means that we can't call the shots, there is nothing we can do to make the bad diagnosis go away, to get our loved ones back to save our job. Fear comes when there is no back up, no one to help. The disciples were struggling, they were fighting to get their boat under control and to shore. Jesus' message was to them was to let go, to trust him, and when they did, then the winds ceased, and the waters calmed. The remedy to fear then is trust, a willingness to let go of trying to control the situation ourselves and to allow God to calm the waters for us, to remember that God is there with them, and that even though bad things might happen, he will never let them go or abandon them.

Now I know that this sounds like a lot of theological platitudes, but we all have had experiences like this of learning to trust when we are afraid. Since today is Father's Day I will share one such experience I had with my own dad when I was about 5 or 6 years old. It was a formative moment in my life when I learned what trust is all about.

My family, when I was growing up, used to go every week on Tuesday to the local YMCA for family swim night. The pool there had a high diving board. It was a ten-meter board; to for me it might as well have been ten miles high. I very much wanted to jump off this diving board, but each time I would climb those steps to the top and look over the edge, my knees shaking, I would think -- I can't do this. And so, to the guffaws and irritation of those waiting their turn to climb up the latter, I would make my ways back down the latter in disgrace. To make matters worse, my younger brother who was only four repeatedly jumped off the high dive with abandon, making me look all the more cowardly and foolish. Finally, my dad said, Look I will tread water below the board and when you jump off, I will catch you. And so, I tried again. His promise didn't help. How could I know he was telling the truth? Back and forth to the end of the board I went. My dad didn't lose his patience down treading water down below, but I am sure he got awfully tired. He said he would catch me, but how did I know for sure, but could I really trust him? I finally made that proverbial leap of faith - and sure enough, he did what he promised, he caught me.

If we can trust our parents and family and friends to catch us, surely, we can trust God who created us and loves us unconditionally and eternally to be there for us when we are afraid.

The theologian Alan Brehm puts this way in his book *The Waking Dreamer*.

- "We say we believe God is a God of love, and that God loves us unconditionally. But the real challenge is to entrust ourselves into the care of this loving God—especially when we're afraid. The only way to do this is to let go whatever it is we're afraid to lose. If the essence of fear is trying to control, the essence of faith is letting go."

Another famous spiritual director put this more simply when he was asked, "How would you sum up the Gospel in one word". He thought for moment and replied - "Relax". Jesus tells us it's going to be OK; I am with you whether you know or not. You can believe me, you can trust me, so fear not - relax.

There are lots of little ways we can learn to manage our fears and to confront the things that terrify us, the story of David and Goliath teaches us that. But ultimately the only real cure for our fearfulness is the awareness of the presence of a God who is with us in the dark and stormy times, who gets into the boat of life with us, who even when he seems absent or asleep is never far away. God's love is always than our little faith, for even the wind and storm obey him.