

1) There are some pictures you'd be happy to hang in your house if you could put them in *different rooms*; but you'd never hang them on the *same wall*, because they would create sheer sensory overload. Yet here, they are—right in front of us: two big pictures—each very familiar, both well loved: *David Slaying Goliath--Jesus Stilling a Storm*; side by side—what a sight for sore eyes! Who let the interior decorator loose on this sermon wall, anyway?

2) The culprit is Revised Common Lectionary—but it's a good culprit, actually—

- The old lectionary just plucked a picture from the OT that seems to fit nicely next to the Gospel;
- The RCL gives some of the great stories from the Hebrew Scriptures space to be seen and heard. So—fair warning--we'll see pictures of David and Jesus side by side for the next seven Sundays.

3) But knowing that doesn't make it any easier to look at them both at once, does it? These pictures come from different eras—they seem to have little in common

- A valley and a lake
- Soldiers and fishermen
- A military skirmish and a meteorological squall
- A political confrontation and a missionary venture

The only obvious common thread is that *neither* is a still life.

But our Wednesday noon group took a closer look, and saw some deeper connections:

- Both describe contests of power; and the power that prevails is not what conventional wisdom expects (Small stone wins out over huge sword/spear; simple words over shrieking winds)
- Both paint vivid images of folks overwhelmed with fear—rational, appropriate fear (Good soldiers and good fishermen know when they are out of their depth) What is curious, though, is that, once the threat is removed, the fear does *not* go away. (In the alternative reading: "*Saul was afraid of David*" – In the Gospel: Disciples "*feared a great fear*")
- Most important—appearances notwithstanding, neither story is an entertaining tale in which the Good Guys win, and everyone lives happily ever after— with a tidy "moral" attached to edify us for our own good.

4) Truth be told—we all get itchy for stories and morals like that now and then.

Both literature and the media offer lots of “the unlikely hero-beats-the-odds” sagas to scratch that itch— complete with moral marching orders: *So can we, so should we—by God, so shall we!*

The great narratives of Scripture seldom degenerate to that.

5) Let's be careful here:

The God of grace and power to which the Scriptures of both testaments bear witness *is* a God who can be depended on—trusted in—to meet us at the places of our deepest need.

The stories of David's giant slaying, and Jesus' storm stilling are prime examples of this:

- David's overcoming Goliath has served as a beacon of hope to marginalized people.
- Jesus' stilling of a raging storm has served as a centering source of deep peace for those in peril.

BUT—it is all too easy to turn these stories to self-serving, “poor little me” advantage:

- They are used to justify divinely sanctioned violence, against formidable adversities and fearful adversaries that do we need to wrestle with—but should not slay. (Think of the tragic recent killing of a gentle giant at the Holocaust Museum)
- They can lead us to seek escape from storms we need to weather, not pacify. (Think of crises in health care, financial oversight, and ecology our nation has put off)

Bluntly put, the stories of David and Goliath, Jesus and the Storm can be hijacked into religious versions of Jack and the Beanstalk, or Cinderella and her magic wand-waving Godmother.

A good friend of mine put it nicely in a conversation this week:

Religious talk too often emphasizes end states rather than processes

By that he meant that much religious chatter centers on “happily ever after” resolutions, rather than dealing substantively and systematically with the unremitting risks of life.

Eternal life, in other words, is all too often painted as though it were a *still* life.

6) So it’s instructive to set both of these two Bible stories in their broader narrative settings.

- David’s victory is a temporary triumph in the story of a protracted national tragedy.
 - Samuel implores the people not to seek a king—they demand it.
 - Samuel anoints Saul, who almost immediately abuses his power
 - Samuel “weeps all night” before going to anoint David as his successor.
 - David quickly forgets “that the Lord does not save by sword and spear” and wields both to his own destruction that that of his people.
- Jesus, who, in Mark’s Gospel, shows his power early on, progressively sets it aside, and, innocent though he is, dies as a common criminal. (Where is the “moral” in that?)

So—how do we make right use of these stories— not turning them into unrealistic religious entertainment, or worse, into demonic delusions?

7) Having heard/read these stories a hundred times, I was struck *this* time for the *first* time by another feature each has in common—the *questions* asked by characters in each drama:

- Goliath:
 - “*Why have you come out to draw up for battle?*”
 - “*Am I not a Philistine, and are you not servants of Saul?*”
 - “*Am I a dog that you come to me with sticks?*”

These are not questions that seek to learn or be open to anything new.

They are (as we say) rhetorical questions—A rhetoric of derision and disdain

- Disciples in a swamped boat on a storm tossed sea:
 - “*Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?*”

This also is a rhetorical question—A rhetoric of desperation and distress

In both scenarios, the rhetoric is a rhetoric of

“it’s already all over but the shouting”—a victory cheer, or a death shriek

- Goliath just knows he has the upper hand—end of story.
- The disciples just know that they are toast—end of story.
- But someone else asks questions in the second story—Jesus:
 - “*Why are you still afraid?*”
 - “*Have you still no faith?*”

Are those rhetorical questions also—

in this case, a rhetoric of censure and rebuke, of blame and shame?

You can read them that way. (Mark can’t rise up to object.)

But we have to ask, don’t we—is that *in* character for the character of Jesus?

The answer to *that* question, I suggest, is NO.

Jesus isn’t posing rhetorical questions, he is posing questions that probe for any possible opening in a hopeless end state created by incarcerating fear—terror does that to us, doesn’t it?

8) *Why are you still afraid? Have you still no faith?* These are grace-filled questions, questions gently inviting the disciples into the long, hard, careful work of deliberation and discernment (If the current leaders in Iran could stop and ask *those* questions, perhaps there would be less blood in the streets.)
Why are you still afraid? Have you still no faith?

What might happen if I asked those questions when I felt arrogant—self-satisfied—hopeless—terrified?

Such questions will not produce end state, still life, “happily ever after” answers.

Instead they create a “dead calm” in which we can see our lives in light of Eternal Life—a life that is *never* a still life.

9) There is one more question raised in the storm story—a question the disciples ask:

- “*Who then is this, that even the wind and sea obey him?*”

That is not a rhetorical question, either, I think.

I’m guessing that Jesus’ questions of discernment spark *this* discerning question from the disciples.

It is a question his disciples will keep right on asking until the very end of Mark’s Gospel—

which, as you will remember, from last Easter Sunday, is not an ending at all.

Mark’s Gospel ends with the disciples still in great fear, and still with a burning question:

- *Who then, is this,*
that neither the end state systems of politics or religion can keep entombed?

That is a scary question—a question worth sitting in holy fear with for a good long while.

But with that question, you will remember, there also comes a promise to the disciples—

that the Risen One, whom they have not yet seen, has gone before them into Galilee

Back into Galilee—back into the country where the storms kick up—*there* they will see him.

And so, I pray, will the people of Iran.

So, I believe, shall we.