

“Crossing to the Other Side”

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

The sermon this morning is for graduates -- those who are graduating from high school or college this spring, those who graduated some time in the near or even distant past, those who came close to graduating, and those we all are hoping will be graduating some time in the future.

It is about crossing over to the other side, which could mean many different things. The imagery happens to come from both of our readings for this morning.

In the first reading it is a valley that gets crossed, a valley separating two armies poised for battle. On one side of this valley stands the army of the Philistines and, more importantly, one particular warrior, Goliath of Gath. A giant of a man, all decked out in the latest technologically advanced and seemingly impenetrable bronze armor. He is the ultimate fighting machine, the heavy weight champion of the Philistines, as one writer describes him, “standing ten feet tall in his stocking feet, with a size 20 collar, a 9 1/2 hat...a 52-inch belt...”¹

He wears a bronze helmet and bronze armor. His chest armor alone weighs somewhere in the neighborhood of 125 pounds. He has a bronze sword strapped to his back, and carries a spear the size of a semi truck axle, the iron head weighing more than 15 pounds. And whether you take the original Hebrew description (which sounds a bit exaggerated) or the version found in some other manuscripts (including the dead sea scrolls) which put his height more at just under 7 feet, still, for that culture he would have been an impressive figure, Shaquille O’Neill in a suit of armor.

On the other side of the valley stands the Israeli army, King Saul and all of his warriors. But more importantly, there is a young man named David, a boy, a teen-ager, eighth son of his father, the youngest, not yet old enough for his driver’s license let alone the draft board. He is not a soldier at all, but is there only because he has come to bring cheese, bread and eggs to his brothers. David’s skills so far include tending sheep, playing musical instruments and writing poetry. (And, oh yeah, he also managed to slay a few lions and bears who attacked the sheep.)

When Goliath stands in the valley and shouts out his challenge, all of the men of Israel tremble in their sandals. But when this kid, this shepherd poet, hears Goliath shouting his insults, he goes to King Saul and says, “I’ll go fight this Philistine.” Then there is a rather comical scene where David tries to put on Saul’s armor that is way too big for him and he can hardly move. So David walks down the hill on his side of the valley until he reaches the small stream separating the two armies. There he selects five smooth stones that he slips into his shepherd’s bag and crosses into enemy territory with nothing more than those stones and his shepherd’s staff and sling.

There are words between Goliath and David. Goliath is insulted that his enemies could not come up with a more worthy opponent, so he mocks David, saying something about how he plans to feed David’s flesh to the birds.

David has a nice little speech prepared also: “You come to me with sword and spear and javelin; but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the Lord will deliver you into my hand...so that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel...for the battle is the Lord’s and he will give you into our hand.”

And as every Sunday School child knows, when Goliath came forward, David reached into his shepherd's bag, took out a stone, and slung it, and struck the Philistine and he fell face down on the ground. And as one writer puts it, when Goliath hit the dirt, "windows rattled in their frames as far away as Ashkelon."²

It is a wonderful story, one that has inspired millions of people around the world -- the young shepherd boy without any armor or even a sword, defeating a seasoned warrior. For David it was a crossing. He crossed over a valley and a stream, yes, but he also crossed over from being a young sheep-herder, harp-player and poet, to being a warrior, a slayer of giants. His life was never the same after the victory that day, after winning that battle.

So too, crossing the stage in the high school or college auditorium or gymnasium is about much more than just picking up a diploma. It symbolizes a crossing from dependency to a measure of independence, the start of a new level of self-discovery and exploration.

But there are other crossings that happen in our lives. Any time we move from the comfortable place where we are to a new place, geographically, philosophically, emotionally, it is a crossing of a kind, and it can be fearful.

The other story is about Jesus and his disciples. What they cross is the lake, the Sea of Galilee. Jesus had been teaching the crowds much of the day. Mark tells us that so many people had gathered there on the shore that there was no place for Jesus to stand, and so he had gotten into one of the boats and from his seat on the boat he spoke to the people, telling his stories.

When evening had come, he said to the disciples, "Let us go across to the other side," and Mark says that they took him "just as he was," which seems to imply that Jesus was tired. Perhaps going to the other side of the lake was his only way of getting away from the crowds. But it was evening, which meant that it would be a night crossing, and it is always a little more uncertain being on the water at night. It is harder to find landmarks, harder to navigate.

Still, it would have been all right, except for the storm. Had they had Doppler radar, as we do today, they would have seen that storm cell moving in from the east and would never have started out. But, of course, they didn't have Doppler radar. And so the storm hit them hard. "A great windstorm," Mark says. Waves were coming in over the sides of the boat.

And now we discover just how exhausted Jesus must have been because Mark tells us that the disciples had to awaken him. He was sleeping through the storm. Teacher," they said, "do you not care that we are perishing?" I love that question the disciples ask. Mark is the only Gospel writer willing to allow this kind of talk to be directed at Jesus. By the time Matthew and Luke got a hold of this story and retold it, they softened the wording. Jesus had become more revered in the Christian community by this time and so in Matthew the disciples say, "Save, Lord; we perish," and in Luke, "Master, master, we perish." But I like the way Mark has told it. It seems more honest to me. Because that is how it is sometimes in our lives. Sometimes it feels that as though God has forgotten us, that Jesus doesn't care, that he has fallen asleep while we are in the midst of a storm.

But when the disciples awaken him, Jesus rebukes the wind and says to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" And when everything has calmed down again he asks the disciples, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"

They ask him, “don’t you care?” And he asks them, “Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?”

Both stories, the one about David and Goliath and this one about the storm on the lake, are about fear and about overcoming fear. Overcoming fear to face a giant. Sometimes it feels like that. It feels as though the challenge facing you is so enormous, so huge, so formidable, that you don’t have a chance. Remember David at times like that. Have courage, have faith.

The Korean peninsula that is in the news so much of late because of the saber rattling going on in North Korea, has a long history of unrest. The peninsula has been overrun, fought over and invaded countless times throughout its history. During one of the several times when Japan was the invader, the Japanese troops had marched half-way up the peninsula and were being continually supplied by the Japanese Navy. The Japanese warships were just too big, too powerful and too numerous for the Korean Navy.

But then one of the officers of the Korean Navy, an Admiral Yi, came up with a new design for a fighting ship. Instead of trying to make a ship that could stand up to the Japanese ships, he built one that could sail circles around them. He made it smaller and faster and he covered the top of the ship with wood and armor so that in the water it looked like a turtle, and in fact, became known as the “turtle ship.” Small and quick, it could out maneuver the more cumbersome Japanese ships. And when the Japanese cannonballs did hit, they simply rolled or bounced off the rounded, armored tops of the turtle ships.

So the small Korean Navy with their little turtle ships defeated the Japanese flotilla and cut off the supply line to the Japanese army. And at least for the time being, the country was saved from being taken over. And Admiral Yi became a national hero who is still remembered today.

Remember Admiral Yi. Remember the courage of a young shepherd boy with his shepherd’s bag and his five smooth stones as you make your own crossings. And remember the disciples crying out to Jesus, “don’t you care that we are perishing?”

I dare say that you will have some times in your life when you will feel awfully alone and awfully vulnerable. But remember what Jesus said to his disciples filled with fear: “Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?”

And remember too, what Ralph Waldo Emerson said: "He has not learned the lesson of life who does not every day surmount a fear."

So in the many crossings that you will navigate in your live, remember finally to have courage and to have faith.

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures*

² *Ibid.*