

Sermon
The Fifth Sunday After Pentecost
Sunday, June 23rd, 2024
Church of the Ascension, Ottawa
The Reverend Victoria Scott

Readings: 1 SAMUEL 17: 32-49; PSALM 9:9-20; 2 CORINTHIANS 6:1-13; MARK
4:35-41

The big picture. “You’ve got to look at the big picture” is one of my husband Randy’s favourite phrases. What does he mean? Usually when he says it, I’m facing a dilemma, a crisis even. We’re trying, together, to puzzle out a solution to something that seems to have no solution. We’re trying to understand something that challenges us, something that gives us pause. “You’ve got to look at the big picture” is an acknowledgement that there is more to it than we are seeing just then. It is the recognition that there are connections we haven’t yet identified, that there is a perspective that can be ours if we are willing to cast our gaze high and low, far and wide.

Our readings today invite us into a “big picture” perspective – and not just so that we can fit the giant, Goliath, into the frame! 😊

We’ve just heard from Mark’s Gospel about Jesus calming the storm. This episode also appears in Matthew and Luke. We’ve got a gale blowing, water, swamping the boat, and the disciples, terrified. And we’ve got Jesus, asleep!

In many places in scripture the sea is associated with chaos that only God can quell, and sleep is a typical posture of trust in God. (Genesis 1:2, 6–9; Job 38:8–11; Psalms 65:5–8; 93:3–4; Isaiah 51:10; Jeremiah 5:22; Job 11:18–19; Psalms 3:5; 4:8).¹

Anyone who has been at sea in a storm can understand how the disciples were terrified. How is it that Jesus could sleep? Jesus had the “big picture” in mind. That’s all well, and good that Jesus could keep the big picture in mind – of course he could. What about us, though?

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-12-2/commentary-on-mark-435-41-6>.

How would you describe Jesus in this scene in the boat? Some might say relaxed. Others would say detached, uncaring. The disciples cry "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" speaks to this. This is fear – of the elements, and fear that this teacher they have followed doesn't care. Fear narrows and constricts our hearts and minds. It brings our perspective to a pinpoint so that we can hardly see what is in front of us, never mind embrace a big picture view of our circumstances. Our minds and bodies churn with it, like the roiling of the sea. Jesus speaks into this fear. In this scene, he does it somewhat harshly. The verbs used are not gentle: they are the same words Jesus uses to silence antagonists and muzzle unclean spirits.

Mark sets this scene of the stilling of the storm in the evening. Jesus says "Let us go across to the other side." Why did they set off in the evening? The weather was likely to be more treacherous. There is mention that they took Jesus in the boat with them just as he was – this suggests that they hadn't taken special precautions for the journey. Was this an opportunity for a teachable moment? We might not like it, but in our humanity, it is often the crises, the struggles that teach us the most, that expand our hearts and minds...

After Jesus has stilled the sea, he says to the disciples "Why are you afraid? Do you still have no faith?"

"Do you *still* have no faith." This directs us to what has happened in Mark's Gospel before today's scene. Jesus is called "teacher" in today's scene, but in the scenes leading up to this perilous journey across the sea, he has been the healer. Mark has us experience Jesus as a healer, first, and then as a teacher. In their panic, the disciples don't remember the healings, the power they have seen come from Jesus. Jesus is saying to the disciples, don't you remember what you have seen leading up to this moment? Don't you trust me?

This is an important reminder for all of us not to let our most recent experience – of life, of Jesus, of God – be our whole picture. A big picture perspective reminds us that there is more than panic, more than fear. A big picture perspective has us see Jesus, with us, speaking peace into our deepest fears.

And then there is our story of David and Goliath. I can't help but think that David went into this with a big picture perspective! He trusts that God is with him as he

faces Goliath with only a sling and five smooth stones. This fortifies him to face what seemed impossible.

Our reading from Corinthians speaks of widening hearts. When we open our hearts and minds to more than what we see immediately before us, we enter into a big picture perspective.

Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong said this:

Christianity is, I believe, about expanded life, heightened consciousness and achieving a new humanity. It is not about closed minds, supernatural interventions, a fallen creation, guilt, original sin or divine rescue.²

Christianity *is* about expanded life! It is about widening our hearts and minds on this life's journey. It's about learning and growing. It's about, as I've said before, moving from fear to trust, not once, but again and again, and each time we do, we expand our lives and our consciousness, and we move closer to a new humanity.

June 20th was designated as World Refugee Day in 2001. We highlight that today, in our prayers, and at coffee hour after the service. According to the UN, World Refugee Day is a chance to champion refugees' right to safety, build support for their economic and social inclusion, and advocate for solutions to their unfortunate and often dangerous situations.

Ascension's refugee ministry is about the big picture. It's about seeing more than is immediately before us here in Canada, and recognizing the danger faced by so many in other countries. When we sponsor refugees, we speak solidarity in the face of danger, we speak peace into fear by widening the picture to include a way to safety, here.

The big picture. May our song and prayer and sacrament this morning expand our consciousness. May it remind us that when fear narrows our hearts and minds, Jesus is with us, loosening that grip of fear, and widening our perspectives. We are shown, in Jesus, that God's love is more than we can ask or imagine. This is our big picture as Christians! Soak that in this morning, let it saturate your fears.

² https://www.huffpost.com/entry/why-i-wrote-re-claiming-t_b_1007399

When you go back out into the world, remember the big picture, remember that there is more than fear in you, and let that guide you today, and every day. In Jesus name. Amen.