

FAITHFULNESS IN EVERY SEASON

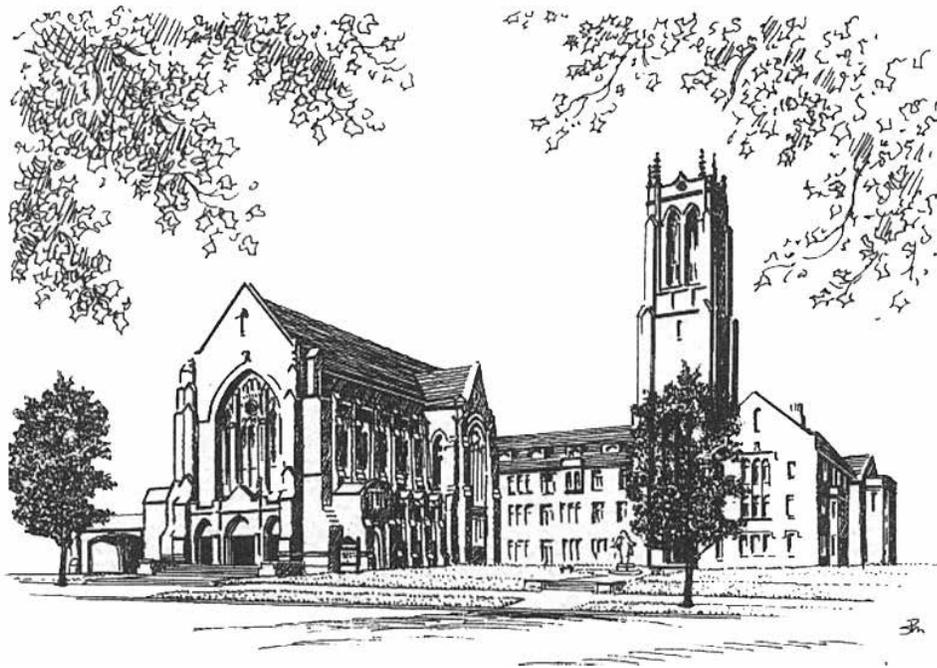
by

Rev. Thomas A. (Tommy) Williams

June 21, 2015

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

8:30 and 11:05 a.m.



ST. PAUL'S

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

5501 Main Street

Houston, Texas 77004-6917

713-528-0527

www.stpaulshouston.org

Texts: 1 Samuel 17:(1a, 4-11, 19-23) 32-49 • Psalm 9:9-20 • 2 Corinthians 6:1-13 • Mark 4:35-41

1 Samuel 17:(1a, 4-11, 19-23), 32-49

Now the Philistines gathered their armies for battle; ...And there came out from the camp of the Philistines a champion named Goliath, of Gath, whose height was six cubits and a span. He had a helmet of bronze on his head, and he was armed with a coat of mail; the weight of the coat was five thousand shekels of bronze. He had greaves of bronze on his legs and a javelin of bronze slung between his shoulders. The shaft of his spear was like a weaver's beam, and his spear's head weighed 600 shekels of iron; and his shield-bearer went before him.

He stood and shouted to the ranks of Israel, "Why have you come out to draw up for battle? Am I not a Philistine, and are you not servants of Saul? Choose a man for yourselves, and let him come down to me. If he is able to fight with me and kill me, then we will be your servants; but if I prevail against him and kill him, then you shall be our servants and serve us."

And the Philistine said, "Today I defy the ranks of Israel! Give me a man, that we may fight together."

When Saul and all Israel heard these words of the Philistine, they were dismayed and greatly afraid. ...

Now Saul, and they, and all the men of Israel, were in the valley of Elah, fighting with the Philistines. David rose early in the morning, left the sheep with a keeper, took the provisions, and went as Jesse had commanded him. He came to the encampment as the army was going forth to the battle line, shouting the war cry. Israel and the Philistines drew up for battle, army against army. David left the things in charge of the keeper of the baggage, ran to the ranks, and went and greeted his brothers. As he talked with them, the champion, the Philistine of Gath, Goliath by name, came up out of the ranks of the Philistines, and spoke the same words as before. And David heard him. ...

David said to Saul, "Let no one's heart fail because of him; your servant will go and fight with this Philistine."

Saul said to David, “You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him; for you are just a boy, and he has been a warrior from his youth.”

But David said to Saul, “Your servant used to keep sheep for his father; and whenever a lion or a bear came, and took a lamb from the flock, I went after it and struck it down, rescuing the lamb from its mouth; and if it turned against me, I would catch it by the jaw, strike it down, and kill it. Your servant has killed both lions and bears; and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them, since he has defied the armies of the living God.”

David said, “The Lord, who saved me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, will save me from the hand of this Philistine.”

So Saul said to David, “Go, and may the Lord be with you!”

Saul clothed David with his armor; he put a bronze helmet on his head and clothed him with a coat of mail. David strapped Saul’s sword over the armor, and he tried in vain to walk, for he was not used to them.

Then David said to Saul, “I cannot walk with these; for I am not used to them.”

So David removed them.

Then he took his staff in his hand, and chose five smooth stones from the wadi, and put them in his shepherd’s bag, in the pouch; his sling was in his hand, and he drew near to the Philistine. The Philistine came on and drew near to David, with his shield-bearer in front of him. When the Philistine looked and saw David, he disdained him, for he was only a youth, ruddy and handsome in appearance.

The Philistine said to David, “Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks?”

And the Philistine cursed David by his gods.

The Philistine said to David, “Come to me, and I will give your flesh to the birds of the air and to the wild animals of the field.”

But David said to the Philistine, “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 very day the Lord will deliver you into my hand, and I will strike you down and cut off your head; and I will give the dead bodies of the Philistine army this very day to the birds of the air and to the wild

animals of the earth, so that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, and that all this assembly may know that the Lord does not save by sword and spear; for the battle is the Lord's and he will give you into our hand."

When the Philistine drew nearer to meet David, David ran quickly toward the battle line to meet the Philistine. David put his hand in his bag, took out a stone, slung it, and struck the Philistine on his forehead; the stone sank into his forehead, and he fell face down on the ground.

Psalm 9:9-20

The Lord is a stronghold for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble. And those who know your name put their trust in you, for you, O Lord, have not forsaken those who seek you.

Sing praises to the Lord, who dwells in Zion. Declare his deeds among the peoples.

For he who avenges blood is mindful of them; he does not forget the cry of the afflicted.

Be gracious to me, O Lord. See what I suffer from those who hate me; you are the one who lifts me up from the gates of death, so that I may recount all your praises, and, in the gates of daughter Zion, rejoice in your deliverance.

The nations have sunk in the pit that they made; in the net that they hid has their own foot been caught.

The Lord has made himself known, he has executed judgment; the wicked are snared in the work of their own hands. Higgaiion. Selah

The wicked shall depart to Sheol, all the nations that forget God.

For the needy shall not always be forgotten, nor the hope of the poor perish forever.

Rise up, O Lord! Do not let mortals prevail; let the nations be judged before you.

Put them in fear, O Lord; let the nations know that they are only human. Selah

2 Corinthians 6:1-13

As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says, “At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you.”

See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! We are putting no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see — we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

We have spoken frankly to you Corinthians; our heart is wide open to you. There is no restriction in our affections, but only in yours. In return—I speak as to children—open wide your hearts also.

Mark 4:35-41

On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, “Let us go across to the other side.”

And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped.

But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?”

He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!”

Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?”

And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

I’ve learned a new word in context this week – squall. A *squall* is a sudden, sharp increase in wind speed that usually is associated with active weather, such as rain showers, thunderstorms, or heavy snow.

Maybe you knew this word, but I didn’t. Our meteorologists taught me this word this week.

We have had all too many examples of squall — literally and metaphorically — this week and recently. Sudden and sharp winds of change.

You know this feeling. These squalls devastated many of your homes through storms and wind. Another form of squall might be a personal for you. A sudden and swift change...an unforeseen divorce, a diagnosis, a depression that came upon you suddenly, loneliness. As we remember fathers today, it can conjure up all kinds of memories for us.

And of course in Charleston. At the Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church on Wednesday evening, a squall of a certain kind swept through the church taking the lives of nine people, including their pastor.

I guess a squall is what Jesus and the disciples might have been experiencing here in Mark.

From the creation story in Genesis, to the crossing of the Red Sea in Exodus, the sea is the location of chaos. In that creation, one of the first acts of God is to sweep over the waters and bring order and calm.

And the disciples want that, too, in our story.

I wonder if their question for Jesus might have been the most disturbing to Jesus: “Do you not care that we are perishing?”

Do you not care, Jesus?

And many would like to join their voices this week in the face of tragedy and say, “Do you not care Jesus?”

I wonder if that question was what cut Jesus to the quick?

It would me. If anything I would always want people to know that I care and you do too.

We want others to know we care, regardless of outcome or result, we would want others to know we care.

I am convinced that the faithfulness Jesus ultimately calls them to is not stoicism or a faith that somehow denies fears, but a faith that serves to manage our fears.

The great Jewish philosopher Abraham Joshua Heschel defined faith as “faithfulness to the times when we had faith.”

“Faith is faithfulness to the times when we had faith.”

That is to say that sometimes fear is strong and faith is weak and so faithfulness is remembering the moments when we trust, recalling those moments and letting them carry us through.

This is why we gather for communal worship. We need each other to lift each other up. It is the faithfulness of the people that can help us to be faithful.

On October 17, 1735, John Wesley and his brother Charles set sail from England to Savannah, Georgia. John’s goal was to preach to the Indians and lead them to Christ. On the four-month-long trip, a storm came up suddenly and broke the main mast. While the Englishmen were crying, a group of Moravians calmly sang hymns and prayed. John Wesley was impressed by their personal faith in the face of a dangerous, life-threatening storm. He became convinced of his inner weakness while the Moravians seemed to possess an inner strength he did not. He later wrote in his journal, “It was then that I realized that mine was a dry land, fair weather faith.”

Sometimes it is the job of a preacher to point to signs of faithfulness and lift them up. And this is what we are doing with our departed sisters and brothers in the AME church this week in Charleston.

This young man sat in this Bible study for nearly an hour. They opened their hearts wide, in the words of 2 Corinthians today. They opened their hearts to him and were then gunned down by fear.

How does someone only 21 years of age be filled with such hatred so young?

The contrast is striking. Did you hear the relatives of the young man accused are so angry at their loved one that one volunteered to “press the button” for his execution.

Contrast that with those victimized. Those who have lost mothers and fathers and pastor who gathered in a courtroom not 72 hours after this violent squall of a tragedy and testified to their pain; and after so doing, inexplicably forgave this young man!

How is it that those victimized have the power to forgive?

We know. We have heard the same Gospel. That when Jesus himself was a victim, he forgave the ones who were killing him saying from the cross - “Forgive them.”

Who is this that even the winds and the seas obey?

Maybe that is the seminal question we seek to address every week in worship — in word and song and silence.

Who is this that can forgive his own persecutors?

Who is this Jesus?

We worship this Jesus today together with brothers and sisters all across the globe.