

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd. Ronald Royce Miller
The Fourth Sunday After Pentecost
21 June 2015

Scripture readings:

I Samuel 17:1a, 4-11, 19-23, 32-49 Psalm 9:9-20 II Corinthians 6:1-13 Mark 4:35-41

The images of cutting people's heads off and feeding their bodies to the birds and the animals is an extraordinary one. It wasn't many years ago that I heard friends of mine talking about what the fields at Gettysburg looked like after the battle. They were black with crows - just eating human flesh. But the salient piece of the first story, which at least by virtue of length could pass for the sermon, is not so much "might proves right," it seems to me, but is buried way at the end of the story when we hear these refreshing words: "...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."

Amid all of that talk about how big one's spear is and how much it weighs, and armor and shields and helmets, and the comedy of David getting dressed up in all of this stuff and not being able to walk. I mean it's laughable! It reminded me of my older brother who fought in Viet Nam, and only once did I ever see a home movie of him there. We were in my father's house after my father's death, and this film occurred. I never saw it before or since. But my brother drove a track with a howitzer on it in Viet Nam, and there was a protective metal shield around it which he took off so that he could see better. He's lost his hearing because of that and now fights with the Veterans Administration to get hearing aids and so forth.

But anyway, I think it's important for us to remember that the message of this story is 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.*" Well, that's the righteous speaking, that even though God won't do it with swords and spears, we'll win! Nice missionary attitude, isn't it!

But now I'm more interested in the Gospel and just a couple words from the Gospel which I've always thought it engaging when I read or hear this section of scripture read. From Mark, chapter 4, speaking about the Lord when he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion or pillow. Now why does that little datum perdure through two thousand years of Christian history? Who cares what he was sitting on? Doesn't that fascinate you?

Look at the back wall. (It's polite now to turn around.) There you see two icons: one on the left of the *Hodigitria* icon, Mary pointing the way to her son, and the other is Jesus the *Pantocrator*. They're both enthroned, but do you see what's behind them? A cushion, a sort of bolster. My guess, and I would hate to have to prove this, but my guess is that the importance of this cushion in today's Gospel is a suggestion about the enthronement of Jesus in the back of the bus or boat or whatever conveyance you find yourself in in your journey through life.

Here is this small craft being swamped by all of the forces of nature. Now any sailor knows, when he or she sets out, something about the vagaries of traveling on water. The sea is not always calm. The wind is not always still. These are not surprising realities, but they *are* difficulties. And these are difficulties which they're experiencing at the moment *in extremis*, at the very limit. The boat is being swamped. They are about to sink, and it occurs to them at that time that the teacher is in the back of the boat *asleep*. And they complain to him: "*Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?*" ***Get up! We're in trouble!***

I guess the first question we ask is why in the world was he asleep. I don't usually fall asleep when I'm engaged in conversation. [Laughter] I can fall asleep in the back of a car if the conversation's happening in the front seat and I'm not a part of it. I think that's the situation in which we find Jesus in this small craft. He's not a part of the conversation, and in this craft all of the vagaries of life are being experienced, and the solution is not found among those who are experiencing the water and the wind. Never does it say that Jesus isn't in the boat. Never does it suggest that Jesus isn't even enthroned, but we know *where* he is enthroned. He is in the stern.

None of you are old enough to remember rumble seats. [Laughter] I've caught you all! Do you ever think of how dangerous they were? Those were the days before seatbelts, my friends! But there's Jesus in the rumble, and it occurs to them at some point to call his attention to their situation which they are beginning to believe is extraordinarily dangerous and life-threatening. And their entreaty of him involves, in my reading of it, an accusation that it's partly his fault for being asleep. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Whose fault is that? Not *my* fault! *Your* fault!

So God's not absent. God is even enthroned. But the conversation doesn't include Jesus. So he is perceived by the storyteller to have fallen asleep on his throne. And, by the way, it's probably the best seat in the house because it's got a cushion. Now I wonder whether or not two thousand years ago that was a flotation device. [Laughter] But that's neither here nor there. It certainly *became* a flotation device, didn't it. If not the cushion, the person on it.

Now I'm not one to get too excited about when Christians speak of the power of prayer, meaning the magic we can do by what it is we say to God. You know what I mean? I pray and it gets better. You pray and it gets better. You pray and it changes. You know all of the health miracle stories. What about those who pray really hard and maybe even more sincerely and the situation *doesn't* change. Could we, for a moment, pause and think of another story of a tiny boat afloat on the sea that *did* sink - the *Titanic*. There were prayers said then, and do we believe, teach and confess that the Lord was there? But this story is asking us to understand, I believe, that the Lord, who is perceived to have fallen asleep but maybe hasn't.

I remember I used to say to James, "You're sleeping at the table." "No, I'm not. I'm resting my eyes." [Laughter] I don't doubt that he was. I don't doubt that God can rest her eyes either. Sometimes it's just not worth paying attention to, is it? But aware.

And there he was, and things started to change when those *in extremis* decided to engage the enthroned Almighty in the back of the bus as a part of the conversation. And the response from Jesus seems to me perhaps to be misunderstood. You'll forgive me for one-upping the Gospel writer, won't you? "He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea..." Could we just say "He woke up" and delete "and rebuked the wind and sea" and move to "He woke up and said..." "He woke up and said, Peace! Be still!" Could it be that Jesus was talking to the people in the boat with him who were turbulent themselves, who were wind themselves - a lot of it hot air - who were swamping their own situation with their own concerns, and that he addresses them and says, "Peace! Be still!" And go ahead, you scriptural people, add the next couple words: "And know that I am God." "Peace! Be still! And know that I am God!" The power of prayer. I don't know that it changes things, perhaps, as much as it might change people.

Last evening I attended a graduation party at the Petersons' home on Hilltop, and their next-door neighbor Ruby Burchell, who was baptized here a couple Easter Vigils ago, attended the party. I was told she often says she'll come but doesn't. She always sends something to eat but never shows. Well, there she was! And I walked in, and Ruby and I express our affection for each other by exchanging rudenesses. [Laughter] Can you imagine? Oxygen cannula notwithstanding, we engaged in a large embrace and she told me she prays for me every morning. It made a difference in *me*. Not a situation, but me. And you do that all the time. All the time.

This morning the intention to let people you do not know in South Carolina know of your concern makes not only a difference for them, friends, but will make a difference for us. And we have the courage and nerve to do that because somewhere in our crippled little ideas, theologies and ecclesiologies we all know that God is enthroned on a cushion in the back of the bus. The young man who went into that church last week - could we call him a child; he certainly looks like one - went there filled with fear and hatred and prejudice and ignorance and histories and economies and lessons that he was taught. We know for a fact that prejudice of that sort is not natural to human beings. We are not born that way. Take a room full of children of all different varieties, sizes, shapes, colors, preferences and whatever else, and they'll get along. Of course they'll kill each other, but they'll get along as kids do. And not on the basis of those differences. And now the world and the family and the society and the economy and the culture which taught him that, will sit back and watch him

burn for their ugliness which they gave to him. They watched him use the firearms which they gave to him, and they will take no responsibility for that. And he will swing in the wind because he believed what he was taught which was a lie, inappropriate, sinful, ugly, filled with fear and hatred and ignorance.

Now before we got a little too self-righteous, I do attend the conventions of this Diocese and at the last convention of the Diocese of Bethlehem the only black persons there were Lee and Melvina Black. Now that's what's called *de facto*, and it is that kind of lack of pro-active concern about what we look like as an organization, and none of them are excused - least of all our nation, our society, our culture, our churches, whatever. That kind of *de facto* participation in racist societies and organizations contributes, friends, to this kind of horror. Don't you agree? We are *all* implicated in this! And part of what we mourn for is that in ourselves - that in ourselves which would rather carry on the chatter in the front of the boat and forget that a silent God is enthroned in the stern and when engaged in the conversation can, in fact, make the situation different by making us different.

Our president - and I don't care whether or not you like him - said a mouthful when, as an embarrassed world leader, he said, "*This happens more in our country than elsewhere.*" Can you hear that? Can you also hear that the greatest societies in western Europe administer justice without capital punishment?

We started by thinking of the story of David and Goliath and the fields filled with crows at Gettysburg in the Civil War. And we get so excited and upset when people are beheaded. Well, how about electrocuting people? What's the difference? Or injecting them with poison or shooting them or hanging them or keeping them in solitary confinement for years on end or unfairly imprisoned.

We act, it seems to me, as if our boat doesn't even have a cushion, much less a Lord on it. We don't even have a flag, much less a present God. And if we do, it's about time, I suppose, that we engage in the conversation, the self-changing business of prayer, so that we can know what it means when God says to us, "*Peace! Be still!*"

When I think of what that young man in South Carolina was gypped of, from knowing the people he hated without coming to know them, my heart breaks beyond description.

In the past I remember going yearly to Carnegie Hall in New York to hear Leontyne Price sing her birthday concert, and the place was filled with absolutely extraordinary music - extraordinary music and grateful hearers and it abounded with the realities of racial histories and segregation and all the rest of it. At the end of those concerts she always sang her mother's favorite spiritual: "*This Little Light of Mine.*" And I always came away from those concerts thinking, "*What have we as a society and a culture been denied by refusing to allow people to read, to live, to produce, to create art and to share it because they were black or Jewish or Muslim.*" You know we're doing it still today. What is it we have gypped ourselves out of with these behaviors which we so often piously defend or, worse yet, ignore? Why should the only black faces in this Diocese which gathers to do its business be from a godforsaken little box like this one in the Poconos? Yes, I'll take some pride in that. But, my God, friends, it's the 21st century and where are we? Where are we? We are in the middle of a storm-tossed sea and the boat is being swamped, and unless we pay attention to the Lord in the back of the boat on the cushion, we will surely go down.

There is hope, but I suppose we'd better pay attention to it. There is possibility, but I suppose we ought to make sure that it flourishes. There is joy to be celebrated, but as long as we're afraid of each other and hate each other and believe that somebody else is taking rather than seeing somebody else as a partner with whom to share, we are of all people most miserable. And by now we need to know that nothing will answer these problems other than with the help of God who is not asleep but resting her eyes in the back of the boat, waiting to hear from us. It was thousands of years ago that the writer of I Samuel admitted, "*The Lord does not save by sword and spear, for the battle is the Lord's.*" Well, we'll never believe that if we don't have the conversation with the Lord.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.