CHUNKING ROCKS AND BAILING BOATS
Scripture: 1 Samuel 17 and Mark 4:35-41

FOCUS: We, like the Israelites, and like the disciples, are prone to fear and are called to do what we can to solve our problems together while allowing God take control.

Have you ever felt like just throwing in the towel? Sure you have! Perhaps it was as you struggled to perfect a craft that just wasn’t really in your skill set. Or maybe it was working a job where you were not given the respect you deserved. It might have been while in a relationship which just was not working out as you dreamed it would. It could have been as you struggled in vain to hear God’s voice in a particular church setting. Whatever the situation, all of us have been there.

In our lectionary texts for the morning we find stories about folks who were ready to give up, to throw in the towel, folks who couldn’t see a way out of the challenging situations in which they found themselves. In both stories we find that things were not actually as out of control as the people assumed them to be. Such is often the case with us when we think we are at the end of our rope. How many times have you worried or even despaired about things that never came about? Kathy will tell you that I can be, on occasion, be a bit like that. The word is pessimist. You got a glimpse of my failing here in the children’s moments. Rather than checking my pocket for the remote I immediately assumed that there was something wrong with the car. But the issue wasn’t with the car, it was with me. Rather than calmly assessing the situation, I went into panic mode and of course was ready to blame the dealership with whom I had been having a bit of a problem. Isn’t that what we often do is such situation, look for someone else to blame when all we really need to do is go and get the keys?

The Old Testament lectionary text for this morning is from 1 Samuel and is the familiar story of David and Goliath. Most everyone knows at least a bit of the story. Still today we refer to encounters between the powerful and the marginalized as David verses Goliath confrontations. But this is a story about much more than the victory of an underdog. It is a compelling drama wrapped in multiple layers of meaning.

From the time they first arrived in the Promised Land the Israelites had been in conflict with the Philistines, a people who had long been living on the Mediterranean coast when the Israelites arrived. As our story begins we find the Philistine and Israeli armies at a standoff. The two armies are rattling their sabers so to speak, their swords are drawn, but neither side is moving into attack mode. We read that the Philistines stood on the mountain on one side and Israel stood on the mountain on the other side, with a valley between them.

Enter Goliath. Suffice it to say his was an imposing figure, a gigantic presence honored and revered among the people of Philistia for his amazing size, strength and battlefield prowess. Not one to be intimidated by anything he boldly steps out of formation and moves toward the army of Israel. He is prepared to say the least. On his head was a bronze helmet, his protective coat of armor weighing well over a hundred pounds. Even his shins were covered with bronze guards. His spear was the size of a fence post and its tip alone weighed fifteen pounds. As if all that wasn’t enough a hapless shield bearer had been recruited to go out before him into harm’s way. This dude was ready. And his fellow soldiers were delighted that he was willing to go it alone, for none of them were interested in being in harm’s way. It was one thing to stand in formation on a hill shouting insults while safely separated from the enemy by an open valley. It was quite another to ponder actually going to battle.

As he steps forward Goliath’s booming voice rings out over the valley. ***“Hey, aren’t I enough of a Philistine by myself to stand for the whole battalion? Why fool with having a messy battle, just pick out your most impressive representative and let’s settle this thing once and for all with one on one combat. If your guy takes me out then we will be your servants. If I prevail you will be my servants. It’s as simple as that.”*** In response, from the side of the Israelites came deafening silence. We read that Saul and all the troops were terrified by the encounter. I imagine Goliath gloating. I’m reminded of Sargent Carter of Gomer Pile fame. Do you remember his patented response to quiet replies? Can’t you just hear that giant of a man in his impressive suit of armor calling out across the valley, ***“I can’t hear you!”*** Thisscene was repeated daily for forty days.

Enter David. As the youngest, even though he had been anointed as the future king, he was still just the youngest in the eyes of his family, he was tasked with the mundane and thankless tasks reserved for servants and youngest children. If the brothers knew of his anointing I am certain that the seven were more than a little resentful. David’s three oldest brothers were among the forces amassed on the hill opposite the Philistines. Jesse, their father would periodically send nourishment to his warrior sons by David who would deliver the care packages to his elders and then return to his responsibility of tending sheep.

One morning David arrived just as the troops were getting into battle formation, as they had been doing every morning for forty days. Scriptures says that the troops were fighting the Philistines, but then in reading on we discover that there was still no battle, they were shouting the war cry but were still just shouting as were, most likely, the Philistines. Again the familiar script played out, for the forty first time. Goliath comes forward all decked out in his finest combat gear, challenges the Israelites to send someone out for hand to hand combat and is greeted by silence and fear in response.

As the Israeli troops once again began to retreat, captivated by the whole scene, the young David in his innocence began to ask about the giant of a man who instilled such dread in the troops and whether there were any efforts being made to recruit someone to meet his challenge. He was told that the king had offered the one who would kill Goliath his daughter’s hand in marriage and promised to enrich the victorious one and his entire family. Whoever would rid them of the scourge would be set for life. But there were no takers. After all, who could possibly be bold enough to think they could defeat this larger than life presence?

David was intrigued. After all he had some experience with danger. Being a shepherd was often a mind numbingly boring job. But then there were those rare times when it was anything but. One of the responsibilities of the shepherd was to protect the defenseless sheep from becoming dinner for lions and bears.

As he mulled over the situation in his mind David’s oldest brother, who had heard him asking about Goliath, tore into him. ***“What are you doing down here among the troops, you need to get back to the sheep where you belong. I know what you are doing, you are just down here to watch the action from a safe distance, to get a ringside seat for the battle. That is just pathetic.”***  Never mind that everybody pretty well knew there would be no battle, just as there had been none for forty days prior.

You have to love David’s moxie. ***“What’s the big deal, I was just asking a question.”*** Then, ignoring his brother, he turned away and again asked about the matter of Goliath’s challenge. When they began to sense that there was more than mere curiosity driving David some hopeful troops went to Saul and told him of the inquiry. By this time Saul was surely desperate. It was abundantly clear that none of his brave troops were going to volunteer for the task. So he send for David. David immediately took up the challenge. ***“Don’t give up hope, I may just be a shepherd boy but I have some skills and I am not about to let this heathen continue to make a laughing stock of the army of the Living God!”*** Saul protested, but not very much.

He really had no other option. Then he decked David out in full battle armor. And David could barely stand up, much less walk or do combat. So David took it all off, picked up five stones and his sling, received a call for God’s blessing from Saul and marched out to answer the challenge of Goliath. The rest is the part of the story everyone knows. David skillfully chunked a rock from his sling deep into the massive Philistine’s forehead and it was all done.

Now fast forward with me about a thousand years. Jesus has been teaching. The focus had been on faithfulness and God’s provision. His lesson plan inculde three parables about seeds, all of which emphasized that while scattering seeds is a mortal work, the growth is the work of God. There had been the parable about putting a lamp where its light can be seen rather than under a bushel. Jesus surely hoped the disciple would understand, would hear the call to trust and would answer the call to be about the work of scattering God’s grace.

Having finished his day of instruction Jesus and the disciples put out to cross the Sea of Galilee, most surely in search of some peace and quiet after an exhausting day. But the waves began to build and the wind whipped the sail. The water began to pour over the bow into the small craft. And the disciples panicked. It was one of those end of the rope, towel throwing in moments. Remember what I said earlier about our common response, to look for someone to blame in such times? Did you noticed that there was no mention of the disciples, twelve strong men, several of whom were skilled fishermen, making any attempt to bail out the boat?

Obviously irritated that Jesus was asleep in the midst of their crisis they place the blame on him, ***“Don’t you care that we could die here?”*** Having done nothing to save themselves, the disciples turn to Jesus. We are not told exactly what was on their minds. I would hope that the teaching they had received just hours before about trust and faithfulness must have been there somewhere. It does at least seem that they are assuming that Jesus is capable of doing something.

Going back to that standoff between the Philistines and the army of Israel we also find people of God who are not handling their end of the rope situation well at all. Theirs was a strong and successful army. God had been with them many times in the past and they had known victory. God had promised to be faithful. But now they were paralyzed by a single man. Sure he was almost bigger than life, but he was just a man. And we are told that over those forty days they would all break camp get in formation and raise the battle cry. But that was all they did. It was all noise and no action. None of those brave warriors were willing to do more than shout and hope someone would finally take up Goliath’s challenge and relieve them of any responsibility to deal with the enemy.

David did just that. He was not a mighty warrior. He didn’t have any of the tools of the warrior trade, couldn’t even walk when he was briefly decked out in them by Saul. All he had was five smooth stones, a slingshot, the skill to use them, and a willingness to do his part while trusting God to go with him. And as scores of strapping soldiers watched from a safe distance he defeated a mighty enemy. Like the disciples in that boat, when they came to the end of their rope the Israeli army looked to someone, anyone else to fight their battle for them. They had tools, they had God’s protection, but because things looked a bit less than ideal they chose to throw in the towel.

So what are the lessons we should take from these two very different yet strangely similar stories. First, we are called by them to recognize that it is our responsibility to chunk rocks when we have them and to bail boats when the water is coming over the bow. We need to remember what the disciples seem to have forgotten when we face difficulties in our lives. We need to remember that it is our job to sow seeds, that it is our task to use what gifts and abilities we have to both care for ourselves and to build up the kingdom of God. We need to recognize that when we arrive at the end of our rope it is generally because we slid down it on our own. And we must take responsibility for our predicament and must do all in our power to overcome it. That is the faithfulness part.

That having been said we must also recognize that we are in this thing called life together. It is one thing to seek out others to blame for our trials, it is quite another to band together with brothers and sisters in the faith to work for common good. Who knows what might have happened had the warriors chosen to call Goliath’s bluff? And I can’t help but wonder if twelve guys might not have been able to keep that boat afloat. Yet in both cases fear kept them from using the skills with which they had been gifted.

We are surely called to use every gift we have at our disposal. But we are not left on our own. We, like David, have the assurance that ours is a God in whom we can trust. And like those disciples in that small craft out on the Sea of Galilee we have a savior who speaks words of hope even as we prepare to throw in our towels. And he always say, ***“Why are you afraid? Have faith!”***

For your sake, for the sake of a crazy, out of control world and for the sake of the kingdom of the Prince of Peace, may we all be those who chunk rocks and bail boats while trusting in the one who is the Lord of life to empower us for service in His name. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN.