

WGUMC June 14, 2015
The Power of God and Our Problems
I Samuel 17:32-49; 2 Corinthians 6:1-13; Mark 4:35-41

Friday morning I was hiking at Henry Cowell when I got a text from my daughter saying that the youth group had missed their plane to Missouri for their mission trip. I can just imagine the prayers being prayed at the Oakland Airport that day: "Dear God, speed up the line!" "Delay the plane!" "Fix the problem!!!" And those were the adult prayers!

Even when we're old enough to know better, to know that God doesn't really work that way, we still want God to swoop down and save the day. Too many of us hold onto our childish notions of how God gets things done. Some want to think of God as a master puppeteer, pulling all the strings of creation, all the time. So every plane moves by the will of God or does not move by the will of God.

Others laugh at such a notion. God isn't a puppeteer. God is a clockmaker, and the world is a clock. After making the

parts, all God had to do was wind it up and let it go. When it left the shop, it was on its own.

But while a puppeteer is a little too entangled in the world, a clockmaker is a little too detached. So maybe God is more like a computer engineer who designs a robot that can make its own decisions and learn from its own mistakes, but still needs routine maintenance and, every once in awhile, a system upgrade.

I hate to say this, but I'm not sure an engineer is any better. Yet about all we can do to describe God's power in the world is to come up with half-baked analogies like these. And if you push them far enough they will all fail miserably. That's because we can only use words we know to describe a Power we do not know. But the authors of our Bible did the very same thing. In our Scriptures, God is a King, a Father, a Lord and Lawgiver, a General and a Judge.

These analogies are just as problematic as the others, because they are all based on false assumptions about God's power. First, they assume that God's power is top-down power. We are so very accustomed to thinking that God is over us and not in us. We also assume that God's power is absolute. God is in total control, so that our fate is forced upon us, and our resistance is futile. Furthermore, we get to thinking that God's power is found more in the violence than in the silence, more in the storm than in the stillness.

But if we read our texts for this morning, we find that all three Scripture lessons tweak these assumptions about God's power in ways that can make a difference in how we approach our problems.

Take the story of David and his problem, Goliath. Now, here's a story about power. At first glance, it's about military power. Goliath certainly has the upper hand. We are told that he is ten feet tall. He has a bronze helmet, a coat of mail

weighing a hundred and fifty pounds, and the shaft of his spear is as thick as a weaver's beam. Goliath has a shield-bearer and years of experience as a warrior.

The boy David is a shepherd. He has never fought a man, but he has wrestled wild animals. And so, he says, "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."

David is clear that "the battle is the Lord's." He knows that it's not up to him. And so he tries to psych out his opponent by telling him, "the Lord does not save by sword and spear." Reminds me of Psalm 33: "A king is not saved by his great army; a warrior is not delivered by his great strength. The warhorse is a vain hope for victory, and by its great might it cannot save. Truly the eye of the Lord is on those who fear God, on those who hope in God's steadfast love..."

With hope in God, David is confident, but Goliath is unimpressed. Goliath puts his trust in his own strength and his

superior weapons, thinking that those assets will prove that he has a superior god. Little David puts his trust in the God of Israel and with a few small stones, fells a giant.

Trusting in God, rather than in any of our possessions, is one sure way to tap into God's power to help us solve our problems. Seeing beyond the battle in this story, we see that Goliath had his spear, but David had the Spirit.

The Apostle Paul gives us another peek at God's power, and he suggests a different method of tapping into it. In his letter to the church in Corinth, Paul expresses his fear that people are beginning to fall away from the faith. But he doesn't threaten them with hellfire and damnation. He doesn't try to scare them with scenes of Armageddon.

Instead, he reminds them of how much he has suffered for them: afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, and hunger. [And I'm sure he walked to school 5 miles and it was uphill both

ways!] Then he lifts up what he has tried to model for them: purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God.

It is the last thing, the power of God, that enables Paul to be true, though he is treated as an imposter; to be well known, though regarded as a nobody; to be alive, though considered as good as dead; to be always rejoicing, though sorrowful; to be making many rich, though he is poor; to possess everything, even when he has nothing.

Paul is really something. He is a master at rhetoric. He is not trying to coerce them, but to persuade them. What he hopes to do for them is to remove all obstacles in the way. What he's saying is that there is no reason that today can't be your salvation day.

What we have in Paul's letter is an image of the persuasive power of God and the attractive power of the Gospel. Paul doesn't need any threats. He simply says, "our

heart is wide open to you. There is no restriction in our affections, but only in yours." Likewise, God's heart is wide open to us. There is no restriction in God's affections, only in ours. There's no wrath or violence in God's heart. Only in ours.

And so Paul's advice to the Corinthians is good advice for us. If we want to tap into the saving power of God and let it get to work in our lives, we can't sit around and wait for God to force salvation on us or impose a solution on our problems. The god of Goliath might do that, but not the God of David or the Son of David. We are going to have to "open wide our hearts."

So far, we've learned that we can tap into God's power by trusting God and not our person or possessions and also by opening wide our hearts, by giving up the restrictions on our affections. This is the only way God's power *over us* can become God's power *in us*.

But there's another perspective on power that is important for us. Jesus, in the Gospel of Mark, is the Power of

God in a human person. And in this story of a storm at sea, Jesus challenges human notions of God's power.

You know the story. Jesus is asleep in the stern when the storm comes and the boat begins to take on water. And the disciples are upset because he doesn't seem to care that they are about to drown. When all seems lost, Jesus wakes up. Then he rebukes the wind and says to the sea: "Peace! Be still!" The wind ceases. The sea is calm. And the disciples are amazed. "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

Now, remember, lots of ancient people had storm gods. The Greeks had Zeus. The Romans had Jupiter. The Egyptians had Set. Semitic peoples had Hadad. But Jesus as Lord of wind and water is not like the others. The storm gods often brought violence and destruction on human beings.

In our story, Jesus brings peace and life. The storm gods exercised their power over people with lots of sound and fury. Jesus shows us power that comes in the midst of the storm to

bring stillness and peace; in the throes of our fears to bring hope and faith; in the peril of death to bring salvation and life.

True, we'd like it to be easier. But God's ways are not our ways and God's power doesn't look like our power. Do we have a big problem? Our first impulse might be to get a big weapon. David says, we don't need a big weapon when we have the shield of faith, when we love God and put our whole trust in God.

Are we in conflict with someone? Our first impulse might be to break relationship with them, close off, shut down, and go looking for opportunities to get even. Paul says, "Don't shut down; open up. God's heart is wide open to you. And if you want a resolution to come from God's side, you're going to have to do something about all the restrictions you put on your side. God's power will not coerce you, but it can persuade you."

Is there a problem swamping our life boat? Or making us miss the boat? The email that came from Lisa said that they arrived at the airport 90 minutes early, but the line was so long that they still missed their plane. For an hour and a half Lisa thought they'd have to cancel the trip. There weren't any other flights. Chartering a bus was not an option. But then, in her words, "Southwest decided to help work with us miraculously with a complete change of heart. So we are flying on three different flights to LA today. Then all of us are flying out of LAX at 7:55 pm into Kansas City, MO arriving at 1:05 am. We will get our rental cars from the airport by 1:30 am and then drive to [the Hilton]. We are staying in 13 rooms there...Thank you for your prayers and thoughts. Your teens are safe, patient and flexible and I am grateful."

I wrote back to Lisa what Jesus says, "Peace! Be still!" You can ride out the storm by being faithful and being flexible. And perhaps that is the best thing we can say about the power

of God and our problems. We can say to our hearts, "Peace, be still." For God is even now working with us on our problems. We may have missed the plane and we can't see any other way to get where we need to go today. But we must remember that God is our destination. And wherever we are, today is our day of salvation. Thanks be to God!