June 24, 2012 Things that Go Bump in the Night

Mark 4:35-41

 One Sunday morning during the main service, a 2,000 member congregation was surprised to see two men enter, both covered from head to toe in black and carrying submachine guns. One of the men proclaimed, “Anyone willing to take a bullet for Christ, remain where you are.”

 Immediately, the choir fled, the deacons fled, and most of the congregation fled. Out of the 2,000 people present for worship that morning only 20 remained. The man who had spoken took off his hood, looked at the preacher and said, “Okay, pastor, I got rid of all the hypocrites. Now you may begin your service. Have a nice day!” And the two men turned and walked out.

We were going to try it at St. Johns First UMC but decided there were too many elderly who might succumb to heart attacks if we did. It probably wouldn’t work too well here either since we are a short distance from a police station and most of our doors remain locked to the sanctuary. With the current cultural bent toward bazar random acts of terror we would probably have a real disaster on our hands.

While this story has echoes of Columbine and the high school student named Cassie Bernard who professed her faith in Christ before being shot, there is something praiseworthy about thinking that you have enough faith to be willing to die for Jesus. Yet this story misses the point of faith and the church. It misses the point of Jesus and God’s kingdom on earth. The challenge is about *our* faith capacity! Who has the power? Who is really in charge here? We are days away from a pastoral transition. This congregation is far too familiar with pastoral transitions; but it begs honest consideration – who is really in charge here?

Remember the story of David and Goliath? The Israelite army had forgotten the truth about their faith. They forgot who had the ultimate power. They were paralyzed with fear. They wanted to bail out like the choir and the deacons. They saw the military superiority of the Philistines and were sure the Philistines had all the power. They knew the Philistines had the latest and most powerful weapons. As far as the Israelites were concerned they were on the verge of defeat. For their part, the Philistines knew they had the Herculean warrior, Goliath.

The Philistines offered the Israelites a challenge that would spare lives on both sides and pride-fully, assure them of a victory. “Choose someone to fight with Goliath and whoever is left standing alive will win the war.” After 40 days of fear, David, just a youth at that time, challenged that view. He stood up and came forward. He proclaimed that God has the power, God will prevail, and God will save!

King Saul was concerned for David and ordered he be dressed with the instruments of war. So they put Saul’s armor and helmet on David. They strapped Saul’s big heavy sword on him too but David couldn’t walk for all the weight. So he took off all these signs of military might. He took off the clothes of temporal power and authority. He went out to face Goliath with his familiar shepherd’s tools – his staff, his sling and some smooth stones in his pouch.

With trust in God, with direction from God, with courage from God, David strode to the battle lines to meet the giant Goliath. He stood calm against the taunting of Goliath. Taking a stone from his pouch, placing it in a sling, he slung it and killed Goliath. That was that! This victory was won because David responded faithfully to God’s call. *God has all the power.*

Turning to the New Testament the story in Mark’s Gospel occurs well into Jesus ministry. Jesus has already given ample examples of his power over demons and sin. The story of the storm and fearful disciples occurs after many months of trying to teach his disciples about faithful living. He teaches about what God’s kingdom is like using familiar examples of seeds planted in different soils, of being a lamp on a lamp stand, of the power of a tiny mustard seed. They hear the words about the kingdom of God being available to all who follow God’s will. Jesus not only has the power to calm the storm, but the power to bring peace to the soul. All the energy of the sea and chaos of nature bows to his will.

After a long day, Jesus had ordered the disciples to get into a boat to get to the other side for a time away from the crowd, a time for rest. Jesus curls up in the bow of the boat and quickly falls into a peaceful deep sleep from sheer exhaustion. In the midst of doing what the Lord commanded, in the midst of being faithful, a storm arose and Jesus seems disengaged…indeed, Jesus was asleep! The disciples are terrified and wake Jesus with, “Teacher, don’t you care if we drown?”

Sometimes in our lives – sometimes as we go forth in ministry answering what we are sure is the direction of Jesus – storms come up, difficulties arise, conflicts occur. And we, like the disciples, panic. We are sure this isn’t what God had in mind…that we drown…but it sure feels like that is what is about to happen. We tell ourselves that if we do what God wants, it is supposed to be clear sailing. Really? Clear sailing? That isn’t what happened that night on the lake, that isn’t what happens in our own life, and that isn’t what happens in our life together as the church. Even when we are obedient, storms come up and we, like those first disciples, may think that Jesus has abandoned us, that God must not care.

After my graduation from seminary and my chaplaincy internship at Bronson Methodist Hospital, unforeseen circumstance closed all the doors to ministry for me. I couldn’t get a job because we had no residence and getting an apartment was closed because there was no job. It was a vicious cycle which left my son and me sleeping in an acquaintance’s apartment while she house-sat for one of her friends for the month of August. We had just one month. September 2, 1987 school had started for my son and I sat in payer saying “God, it was almost better when I thought you were dead, at least then I didn’t feel deserted, at least then there was no expectation that help should be a breath away.”

Someone finally took a chance on me with an apartment and closely after our moving in came two jobs with home-healthcare agencies. The path was continued to be dark and treacherous, even to the point of a complete dead-end by April of 1990 but…but a pastor who identified with my struggle came along side to open the doors for an appointment. I wrote “Thank you Lord for Ken and what you said to me through him ‘you have been given a church *by God*, trust him, you are not alone, you have his blessing.’”

God never let me go! Despite times of feeling abandoned and questioning the “what next” of life, God was always with me. From childhood to this very day, God has been my silent refuge, my ever present companion and guide, and my strength even in those times my heart and mind seemed blinded to his presence.

Jesus *always* answers our cry for help and calms the storm. It may not be in a manner we expected or could have ever imagined but the word “always” is sure. Trust and obey. Jesus comes to us to transform our fear into peace and tranquility. With hindsight we see that he has been beside us all the while. *God/Jesus has all the power.* Jesus…has…all…the…power. Can you say it with me? Jesus has the power! Jesus has the power to transform discord and create community. Jesus has the power to restore hope in us. Jesus has the power to see us through the worst storms of life.

Thousands of people have been frightened by stories of hell fire and tens of thousands have been told, “If you aren’t a good little girl or boy, mommy/daddy won’t love you anymore.” It doesn’t take much of a mental leap to link such a negative parental control with God, our Eternal Parent. God is powerful, but God is also compassionate, slow to anger and full of grace.

Leslie Weatherhead tells a story about a woman who had written him a letter. She had been told that thunder was God’s anger with her. She was so fearful that she would hide in a closet and sing hymns trying to appease this angry deity every time a storm passed through. One year she was told that God was so angry at her naughtiness he would probably not give her another year to try being good. She wrote, “I used to lie awake alone, and listen, and I remember the joy I experience when I heard the church bells ringing in the New Year – and I was still alive!”

Remember the church scene mentioned at the beginning of this sermon where the men in black threaten to kill anyone who professes faith in Jesus the Christ? Most of the parishioners gave the power to the gun; they gave the power to the men; they gave the power to fear and the forces of evil in the world. These parishioners made the same erroneous assumptions as the ancient Israelites when they covered David with the armor and weapons of war. These parishioners fled for what they thought was safety *rather than wake the Lord*. The exhausted Jesus, asleep in the bow of the boat, no doubt shakes his head in frustration at our slowness of understanding, but he *still* calms the storm, he *does* calm our fear.

Once a man applied for a job as a farm hand on a farm. The farmer asked him what his qualifications were and the man said, “Well, I can sleep through a storm.” The farmer thought that was a strange answer, but he hired the man. One night a few weeks later the farmer woke up to hear the rain pouring down and the wind howling. He got up and went to check on the farm. He found that the barn was closed up tightly and the animals were all safe. All the equipment was in the shed where it belonged, and in general, everything was in good order. It was then that he remembered what the farm hand had said, “I can sleep through a storm.” He had done his work well and was prepared for the any storm. You might say he trusted God and could sleep soundly in the bow of the boat.

When we accept Jesus and his sacrifice for our sins, we too claim the power over sin and death. He gives us grace. Jesus gives himself with the power to begin again, to believe, and to hope in tomorrow. With the power of God in Christ *we* have the power to see a new vision for the future.

What has the power in your life? Can you sleep soundly trusting in the power of God through Christ? What would your life be like if you acted as if God has all the power? What would we be like as a church if we truly believe that Jesus gives us the power? The good news for us is that the *miracle* of Jesus calming the storm *is not the message*. Fact is, we are not always going to get a miracle out of our mess, *but we will always find God’s presence for us in the mess*.

David told King Saul, “The Lord, who saved me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear, will save me from the hand of this Philistine.” Look back over your life. Jesus has been there from your first breath and will be with you to your last and beyond. If we can’t find Jesus…who moved?