

“Crisis”

1 Samuel 17:31-49

Mark 4:35-41

There was a teenage dance club in Garfield Heights to which a teenage girl named Elizabeth Geiss was persuaded to go by her girlfriends. Doug showed up in the parking lot to pick-up a friend when he saw Elizabeth with her friends. Not being shy, Doug walked over and introduced himself. When he asked for her phone number, she reluctantly gave it to him. Doug began calling her and Elizabeth was bored with their telephone conversations. Her mom advised her to give him a chance. So, in 1999, Doug took her on their first date to Taco Bell and to see the movie, “Entrapment”.

John, her father, told me he was sitting in the stands at one of Alex’s fast-pitch games when this young man suddenly came and sat down next to him. Doug introduced himself. Shaking his head with a smile on his face, John said, “After that he wouldn’t go away!” But Doug had an “in” with John when they began golfing together and John learned that Doug, despite his size could “hit it a mile”.

So, the 10 years of dating began. Doug and Alex attempted going to Tri-C together, taking classes together, until she realized he was cheating off of her and she said, “never again”.

Doug and Elizabeth were joined together in the covenant of marriage on July 25, 2009.

Doug and Elizabeth embraced buying a fixer upper home. In 2012 and 2014, they embraced being blessed with the births of Arabella and Ethan, who quickly became Button and E.B. Doug’s greatest ambition in life, to be a Daddy, was fulfilled.

On a Friday night, this past May 7th, many of us gathered in Olmsted Township to remember and celebrate the life of Doug Kupniewski who had died of a heart attack in his sleep in the fateful early summer of 2020 at age 38. One year ago, it was not a good summer.

There are experiences in this life that change us. Some episodes of joy can have that effect, but it's often the experiences of pain and struggle that mark us for life and influence the course of all our days to come.

Crises, they're called. The word "crisis" comes from Latin, and before that, Greek. Its original meaning is "decision" ... or we could say, "point of decision." In a crisis, events tumble in, fast and furious. You may want to just go to bed and pull the covers up over your head. But, if it's a genuine crisis, that's impossible.

A crisis forces a decision. It may be the right one or the wrong one, but a decision must be made. Inaction is not an option. We could even say that not choosing a course of action is, itself, a choice.

Gen. George S. Patton knew something about crises. His experience as a combat general during World War II was one crisis after another. Sharing his own philosophy of dealing with crises, Patton had this to say: "A good solution applied with vigor now is better than a perfect solution applied 10 minutes later."

Spoken like a true crisis manager! Find yourself in a crisis, and you've got to act. Doing nothing is not an option.

Our Scripture lesson is an Old Testament story of crisis: the contest between David and Goliath. And we can also connect it to the New Testament text from today's lectionary

readings: Mark's account of Jesus calming the storm. Let's consider what both texts teach us about resources faith can offer in such a time.

David has never seen so many soldiers in one place. The Philistine army is spread out across the battlefield, ready for action: a sea of breastplates, helmets, leather, and bronze. At the vanguard stands Goliath, their champion, his two mighty legs rooted to the ground like powerful tree trunks. Goliath is the "shock and awe" of the Philistine army.

And the shock-and-awe thing is working. The soldiers of Judah can find no champion brave enough to take the field against him. Not even Saul, that miserable excuse for a king.

The one who steps forward, at last, is an odd choice. He's only a boy. His name is David: a shepherd who is the son of a shepherd. A nobody.

Saul had offered to loan David his kingly armor, and at first David took him up on it. But, when he saw how it hung down awkwardly from his much-smaller body, David cast it aside. As he takes the field, he's wearing only the homespun tunic of a shepherd. The only weapon that hangs from his hand is a simple leather sling: a strap with a pouch at one end, designed to hold a single stone.

Goliath can't take David seriously. It's true that a great many of the combat challenges Goliath has faced have ended with immediate surrender — the man is really that big — but not this time. Today, Goliath has an opponent if you can call him that.

We all know what happens. After an interlude of trash-talking by the Philistine colossus, David reaches into his shoulder-bag, pulls out one of five smooth stones he's chosen from a dry stream bed, and places it in his sling. Goliath is lumbering slowly towards him, all rage and bluster.

With a cry, David starts running rapidly in the giant's direction, swinging his sling around his head. Before his opponent can even figure out what's happening, David snaps his wrist and sends the stone hurtling into his enemy's forehead, killing him instantly.

It turns out this gangly teenager has been working as a shepherd for years. He's killed dozens of wild beasts with that sling of his. He may look like a comic figure, clad in Saul's oversized armor and holding a sword he barely knows how to use. But put a sling in David's hand with a smooth stone in it, and he's the master of a deadly weapon. A sling can kill before any other weapon is in range — with the possible exception of a bow and arrow, but Goliath is more of a sword-and-javelin guy.

In his moment of crisis, David knows exactly what to do. And he does it.

“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?’” —Mark 4:38

Our second Bible story is the familiar tale of Jesus calming the storm. The day starts off well enough with Jesus and his disciples embarking in a small boat, but they're hit by a sudden squall. The wind-whipped waves are so high that the disciples are convinced the boat will be swamped and they won't see another sunrise.

“Should we wake our Master?” says one to the other (Jesus, inexplicably, is sleeping through all the terror). Jesus awakens, frowns, and says to the storm: “Peace, be still!”

You'd think Jesus would be just a little bit rattled by the life-threatening emergency, but he's cool as a cucumber. Where does he find the presence of mind to keep it all together like that?

The story doesn't let us in on that particular detail, but it's not hard to figure out. Mark reports that the Lord is asleep on a cushion in the back of the boat. Somehow, Jesus knows how to focus his attention. He takes his every thought (even the most troubling) and concentrates them all into a single, still point. There, at the moment of mortal peril, he creates an island of calm and peace — the eye of the hurricane, if you will. It is from that place of quiet, resolute calm that his command to “be still” emerges. That's Jesus in a crisis.

What about the giants and storms that beset our own lives? How do we discover that place of inner peace and tap into its power? There are several pointers in the story of David and Goliath.

First is the matter of **humility**. Say what you want about the mature King David — the narcissist who shamefully seduces Bathsheba and all but murders her husband — but *young* David is different. He doesn't put on airs. Even though the prophet Samuel has already anointed him as king in a semi-secret ceremony, David speaks to Saul with the utmost politeness and obedience. In no way does he put himself forward as the savior of his people, nor does he try to match Goliath in the trash-talking department. When Saul expresses skepticism that young David has what it takes to contend with the giant, David matter-of-factly relates his past experience protecting the sheep and killing wild beasts with his sling. There's an easy confidence there, but no sense of trying to lord it over others.

The second thing we can say about David is that he's **confident**. He knows himself and the skills he has, but he doesn't aspire to be an expert in everything. When Saul offers to loan him his armor and weapons, David admits they're not for him. David's going to do this thing his own way, following methods he knows to be tried and true.

The third point — and this gets into the nitty-gritty of mental preparation — is David's ability to **focus**, aiming single-mindedly at the thing he has to do. All the other Judeans are quaking in terror at the approach of Goliath, but not David. David's thinking only about choosing just the right size and shape of stone, and about how the action he must take to launch it is no different than what he has done hundreds of times before. When faced with a daunting task, it's helpful to look at it not in its entirety, but to break it down into smaller, manageable steps. David knows what sort of stone he needs and exactly what sort of warm-up swing will get his arm and shoulder muscles limbered up. He knows he has the eye-hand coordination. He knows he can assess the direction and speed. When the bellowing giant starts to lumber towards him, David sees him no differently than the wild beasts he killed in the past. Focus on the task at hand. Let everything else go.

Fourth, David clearly **trusts God**. He's aware God has chosen him as the anointed king. It's a promise he can rely on. He also knows — and says several times to King Saul — that he's all about God's glory, not his own. David knows he's merely an actor in a much greater drama. He's not the director of that play. God is.

It's not as easy to speculate about Jesus' inner state of mind when he was awakened from his nap in the boat and greeted by a raging storm. The biblical account is a bit sketchy. But it's easy to imagine him approaching the crisis in a similar way. He's humble and realistic about his role. He knows himself and acts confidently. He's able to focus on the task at hand. Most importantly, he trusts God. Jesus seems surprisingly unconcerned about the facts of their predicament. He knows God is present, one way or the other.

Facing chaotic times, one of the most fruitful things we can do is seek a still point in the midst of the storm and dwell there for a few moments. In the case of David, we can imagine him strolling down to the wadi (the dry creek-bed), because that's where he'll find the smoothest stones. Picture him softly humming to himself as he goes about the familiar business of loading up his pouch. In the case of Jesus, it takes the form of napping in the back of the boat as waves break over the side.

Prayer — especially silent, contemplative prayer — may seem like a benignly useless activity. But those who practice meditative prayer know there's a lot more going on beneath the surface. Regular prayer is a sort of spiritual agility training. Like David the young shepherd — alone in the hills looking for smooth stones, placing them into his sling, and practicing sending them sailing off, one after another — cultivating a regular prayer life is a way of developing a spiritual tool that's adaptable to all sorts of crisis situations.

We are all well-advised to not wait for the spiritual crisis to come crashing down upon us. If we get in the habit now — when times are good — of entering into regular conversation with the Lord, we'll find the channel is available all the more easily in the hour of our greatest need.

Elizabeth and her children, Arabella, and Ethan, with the support of family and friends, are weathering the storm of the sudden and unexpected death of Doug last year. Like David and Jesus in a crisis, their faith and love will get them through.

May the peace of God . . .

#755 – Jesus, Savior, Pilot Me