

THE STILL POINT

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Point Pleasant Presbyterian Church

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1 Samuel 17:1a, 4-11, 19-23, 32-49; Mark 4:35-41

“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

“The world looks different now.... Something is over. In the deepest levels of my existence, something is finished, done. My life is divided into before and after.”

So writes Nicholas Wolterstorff — once Professor of Philosophical Theology at Yale. What he’s writing about here is no great philosophical idea. It’s intensely personal.

Those lines come from a book of his called *Lament for a Son*. It’s a memoir of an event that changed his life: an event that seems to violate the natural order, the experience they say no parent should ever have to go through: burying one’s own child. Wolterstorff’s son, Eric, died at the age of 25, in a mountain-climbing accident.

“He was a gift to us for twenty-five years. When the gift was finally snatched away, I realized how great it was. Then I could not tell him.... I didn’t know how much I loved him until he was gone. Is love like that?”

Yes, I'm sorry to say: I think it very often is.

There are experiences in this life that change us. I suppose some episodes of joy do that, but I think more often than not it's the experiences of pain and struggle that mark us for life, that determine the course of all our days to come.

Crises, they're called. The word "crisis" comes from the Latin, and before that, the Greek. It's original meaning is "decision" — or we could say, "point of decision." In a crisis, events tumble in, fast and furious. You may just 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 — or I suppose we could say, in such a case not to choose is itself a choice.

General 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 plan today is better than a perfect plan tomorrow."

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

Both our scripture lessons today are stories of crises: the contest between David and Goliath from the Old Testament, and the story of Jesus calming the storm, from the New. Let's look at each of them and see what they can teach us about the resources faith can offer in such a time.

David's never seen so many soldiers in one place. The Philistine army's spread out across the battlefield, ready for action — all breastplates and helmets and leather and bronze. At the vanguard, his two mighty legs rooted to the ground like powerful tree trunks, stands Goliath, their champion. Goliath's the “shock and awe” guy of the Philistine army.

The shock and awe thing is working: the people 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's the son of a shepherd, a nobody.

Saul offered to loan David his kingly armor, and at first David took him up on it — but, when he saw how it just 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 sort of strap with a pouch at one end, designed to hold a single stone.

Goliath just can't take David seriously. It's true that a great many of the single-combat challenges Goliath has faced 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.

Well, 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 the five smooth stones he's chosen from a dry stream-bed that morning, and places it in his sling. Goliath is lumbering slowly towards him, all rage and bluster, but 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.

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, including lions and bears. He may have looked 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. His weapon is all the more dangerous because on advantage it has. A sling can kill before any other

weapon is in range — with the exception of a bow and arrow, and Goliath's more of a sword-and-javelin kind of guy.

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

Our second Bible story is, of course, the well-known tale of Jesus calming the storm. I expect you know how that one goes, too. The day starts off calm, as Jesus and his disciples embark on the sea in a small boat, but they're hit with a sudden squall. So high are the waves, whipped up by the wind, the disciples are convinced they won't live to see another sunrise.

“Should we wake our Master?” says one to the other — having noticed that Jesus, inexplicably, has been sleeping through all the terror. Jesus awakens, frowns, and says to the storm: “Peace, be still!”

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

Well, the story doesn't let us in on that particular detail, but I think we can figure it out. Mark's Gospel reports that the Lord's asleep on a cushion in the back of the boat while the storm's raging. Somehow, Jesus knows how to so focus his attention, that 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 the wind and waves to “be still” emerges.

So, that’s Jesus in a crisis. But what of giants and the storms that beset our lives? How do you and I discover that place of inner peace, and tap into its power?

You can find 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 talks to Saul with the utmost politeness and courtesy. 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 go up against the giant, David matter-of-factly relates his past experience protecting the sheep, 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 knows himself. He’s

confident in 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 that 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 thing — and this gets, now, into the nitty-gritty of mental preparation — David is able to find his focus, aiming single-mindedly at the thing he has to do, letting nothing else get in his way. 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's done hundreds of times before.

When faced with a daunting task, it's always 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's got 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 as no different than the wild beasts he's 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 as much,

several times, to King Saul — that the actions he's taking are for God's glory, not his own. David's aware that he's merely an actor in a much greater drama. He's not the director of that play. God is.

With respect to Jesus sleeping in the back of the boat, then rousing himself to calm the storm, it's not so easy to speculate about his inner state of mind, because the biblical account's a bit sketchy. Yet, I'd imagine he was approaching that crisis in a very similar way. He's humble and realistic about his role, he knows himself, he's able to focus on the task at hand, and he trusts God. In any event, Jesus is surprisingly un-preoccupied with the facts of their predicament. He knows God is in control, one way or the other.

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

The poet Wendell Berry lays out what this mental focus is like in a little

poem from his book, *The Timbered Choir*:

**I go among trees and sit still.
All my stirring becomes quiet
around me like circles on water.
My tasks lie in their places
where I left them, asleep like cattle.
Then what is afraid of me comes
and lives a while in my sight.
What it fears in me leaves me,
and the fear of me leaves it.
It sings, and I hear its song.**

**Then what I am afraid of comes.
I live for a while in its sight.
What I fear in it leaves it,
and the fear of it leaves me.
It sings, and I hear its song.**

**After days of labor,
mute in my consternations,
I hear my song at last,
and I sing it. As we sing,
the day turns, the trees move.**

Maybe this is an imperfect analogy, but I think of the way I sought to get through a rather unpleasant medical test I've had a couple times now. It's known as a bone-marrow biopsy. The procedure's done in the doctor's office. They numb the skin of your hip with a local anesthetic, but you're completely awake for the procedure, as the doctor takes a little hand-held device that resembles a corkscrew — I kid you not — and slowly screws it down into your pelvic bone, to extract a sample of bone marrow. In the hands of a skilled practitioner — which my

oncologist was — it's not a terribly painful test, although you do experience a sort of relentless pressure that feels like it could break through into agonizing pain at any moment (such was my experience, anyway).

Somehow I knew that what I had to do was to focus my attention elsewhere, to mentally will myself to leave that procedure room and go to a place of peace and calm, a place where God feels close at hand. I remember doing that, in part, by thinking of a favorite Bible verse and repeating it silently to myself, over and over. I visualized myself lying not on the vinyl-covered examining-table, but in a place of beauty, a grassy meadow beside a flowing stream. It's not like I fell asleep or was unaware of what was happening with the test, step by step. If the doctor or nurse asked a question, I was right there with the answer. Somehow, though, I moved the part of my awareness where fear and anxiety dwells clean out of that room and sent it elsewhere for a few minutes. That may sound a little wacky, I know, but it's the best analogy I can find to describe it. It's like I found the still point, the place of calm, and went there.

This would have been much harder to do, had I not already been a person of prayer. The first time, I had no experience with bone-marrow biopsies, but I did have some experience in contemplative prayer. So, for me, it was a relatively easy thing to do, to adapt the mental and spiritual focus of that activity to the little room

in the doctor's office.

Prayer — especially silent, contemplative prayer — may seem to some to be a benignly useless activity. But believe me, there's a lot more going on beneath the surface. Regular prayer is a sort of spiritual agility training. Like the young David selecting his smooth stones and placing them, one by one, into his sling, then sending them sailing off one after another — dozens if not hundreds of times in practice — cultivating a regular prayer life is a way of developing a spiritual tool that's adaptable to all sorts of crisis situations.

So, I invite you: Don't wait for the spiritual crisis to come crashing down upon you. Get into the habit now of entering in regular conversation with the Lord, when times are good. You'll find the channel will be available all the more easily in the hour of your greatest need.

Our closing prayer is a poem entitled "Slow Me Down, Lord." I don't know the author, but I like it. Let us pray:

**Slow me down, Lord.
Ease the pounding of my heart
by the quieting of my mind.
Steady my hurried pace
with a vision of the eternal reach of time.
Give me, amid the confusion of the day,
the calmness of the everlasting hills.
Break the tensions of my nerves and muscles**

**with the soothing music of the singing streams
that live in my memory.
Help me to know the magical, restoring power of sleep.**

**Teach me the art of taking minute vacations
of slowing down to look at a flower,
to chat with a friend, to pat a dog,
to read a few lines from a good book.**

**Slow me down, Lord,
and inspire me to send my roots
deep into the soil of life's enduring values
that I may grow toward the stars of greater destiny.**

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