

God's Surprises

Rev. Dr. Scott Ramsey

1 Samuel 17:32-49; Mark 4:35-41
Lewinsville Presbyterian Church
June 20, 2021

Conventional wisdom is important. It is important to know how things are conventionally done. Conventional wisdom provides for reliable structures, for what can reasonably be expected in life. "If you do X, you will normally get Y." If you study hard, you will normally do better on a test. If you do *not* do the assignments, you will normally not do as well in the class. If you eat healthy foods and get good exercise, you will normally have a more vigorous life. If you eat a lot of junk food, get very little sleep, and live a sedentary lifestyle, you will normally have less vital energy.

Conventional wisdom is helpful. It is why cultures are able to develop proverbs of wisdom to pass along. "A stitch in time saves nine" is a useful English aphorism from the 18th century about the value of early and timely effort. "The wise are cautious and turn away from evil, but the fool throws off restraint and is careless" comes from Proverbs 14, and is an encouragement to be thoughtful and prudent and not reckless in life. These are the kinds of teachings that fathers and mothers can pass along to our children to help them succeed in life.

Conventional wisdom is helpful. But conventional wisdom can also be a straitjacket, confining the imagination to what is conventionally expected in a society. Conventional expectations tend to support and extend whatever is the status quo in a society. That's why they are "conventional." And of course, the status quo is not always life-giving for everyone in a society. Sometimes the status quo supports some people at the expense of other people. Conventional wisdom, after all, used to say that women were not fit to be leaders in the church, including in our Presbyterian church. Conventional wisdom, including in the Presbyterian church, used to say that people with dark skin were inferior to people with lighter skin, and were in fact fit to be enslaved by the lighter-skinned people.

So whenever we encounter a piece of conventional wisdom, whether it is coming from someone else, or whether it is coming out of our own mouth, whenever we hear some version of "Well, *everyone* knows that...", whenever we hear that, we would do well to ask the *sociological question* of whose interests are being served by this particular piece of conventional wisdom?

Part of the wonder of biblical faith is that the biblical literature gives us, in different places, texts and stories that endorse and promote the conventional wisdom in

a society, **as well as** texts and stories that subvert and surprise conventional wisdom. Some texts – often these are so-called ‘priestly texts’ of order and reliability - are supportive of the structures that are currently in place in society, and other texts intend to contest, or subvert, the structures in place in society. The resurrection, for example, upsets, in the deepest ways possible, the world’s conventional wisdom. This is why the Bible is so endlessly fascinating, and why the Bible requires and invites us to alert interpretation. When you’re reading a text, you might ask yourself, “Does this text intend to endorse and support current social structures? Or does this text intend to change current social structures?”

Our two lectionary texts today land on the side of God’s readiness to subvert conventional wisdom and deliver God’s surprises. The story of David and Goliath in 1 Samuel 17 is one of the best-known Bible stories around. People who don’t know anything else about the Bible will have a rough understanding of the outlines of the David and Goliath story. It is the paradigmatic underdog story. The reason that we delight in this story, in all of our familiarity with it, is that the commonly accepted, conventional wisdom would have been then – and still is today – that the Davids of the world do not stand a chance against a Goliath. The little people do not stand a chance against the empire. According to the conventional wisdom, the ones with the bigger weapons, the bigger athletes, the more charismatic leaders, the smarter people will always crush those who are humble and nonviolent, will burn past those who do not have advanced degrees, will dominate those who are small and weak. And a lot of the time, that can be true. But the David and Goliath story says, “Don’t always be so sure.” What we may imagine is that the Goliaths of the world will not pay much attention to this story, because Goliaths place their trust in their own strength and their own power. But this story isn’t for the Goliaths. This story intends to nurture the flame of courage in the heart of all of the David’s of the world, the knowledge that God is not just a passive spectator in the world, sitting passively on the sidelines watching them be taken advantage of. God is an actively engaged participant in the world, building the beloved community one small action at a time.

Mark 4 tells a similar story, except that the threatening foe is not a hulking bully named Goliath, but a windstorm on the sea of Galilee. And here, the conventional wisdom would say that you are only safe when the wind and waves are calm. This story can have special resonance for those of us who have issues with control - and with keeping things under control – or those of us who have issues with conflict, and who think that vigorous disagreements are just about the worst thing in the world. Those of us who have control issues and those of us who have conflict issues are both happiest when things are calm and predictable. We do not like surprises, and we do not like to be caught off guard. “You are only safe when the wind and the waves are calm.” As a result, we can spend large amounts of energy, trying to keep things under control in different, and in the process, we can do a lot of harm to the people and groups around us.

The disciples also wanted things to be under control. Which worked for them, until they got out on the sea, where they weren't in control, and a great windstorm arose.

Storms do that. They arise in life.

What Mark 4 teaches us is that the conventional wisdom is not always completely correct. There is a safety when the wind and waves are calm, but if we are only willing to live in calm conditions, then we may never venture forth onto the sea in our boats. We may never go anywhere new. And as the saying goes, "boats were not made to stay in the harbor." In this story, the wind and the waves are not calm, but Jesus is in the boat with them. And Jesus is not threatened by this storm, or by any storm that comes upon us. He is so not-threatened by the storm that he is actually asleep in the boat.

The life of discipleship to Jesus is a life that is aware of conventional wisdom, but that is not confined to conventional wisdom. Discipleship to Jesus lives, willingly and even joyfully, in the midst of the storms of life. Disciples who follow Jesus will find themselves facing their own storms, as well as standing with others in the midst of their storms. Disciples who follow Jesus will stand before their own Goliaths, and they will stand before the Goliaths who are trying to threaten and bully others. Conventional wisdom may tell them that only certain things are possible, that only certain conditions are conducive to well-being. But disciples who follow Jesus do not finally place their trust in conventional wisdom. Disciples who follow Jesus place their trust in him, and because of that, they know that the God of Jesus Christ always has surprises to offer that the world does not expect. To God and to God alone be all the glory, Amen.