

The Odds Are Against It

1 Samuel 17: 32-49 Mark 4: 35-41

Everyone in this sanctuary is involved with gambling. No, I haven't been watching how many lottery tickets you buy at the Jiffy store, or if you play online slots or poker, or if you put set money for or against American Pharaoh. But I'm betting that you have insurance, like car insurance, home insurance, health insurance, and life insurance. Insurance is a wager between you and the insurer. The insurer has a gaggle of geeky accountants running spreadsheets and algorithms who are oddsmakers, like Jimmy the Greek, or as they're called in the profession "actuaries," which makes them sound very respectable. But actuaries are oddsmakers plain and simple.

Their book is to put the odds of an incident occurring, the costs of that incident, measured against others and the experience with them. They figure out how much it will cost you to play the game, calling your ante a better name like "premium." They bet there will be no incident, while you bet that there will be. If you win too much, the insurers are going to stop inviting you to play with them. If they win too much, you may decide to play with someone else who has a lower ante to play the game. Just as in Las Vegas, the oddsmakers in Hartford want to make sure that the house is the consistent, regular winner.

I just saw an article yesterday that asked the question of how insurers are going to deal with the coming revolution of driverless cars. How do you insure a driverless car? Well, I'm sure the house will figure the odds and make a book that will enable them to come out on top consistently, even if they can't up the ante.

However, gambling in this area of insurance is no fun really. That's why it's called insurance, not Las Vegas. For many folks who can't make it to Las Vegas, or are too inert even to make it to a Seminole casino, there is the state-run lottery system. Statisticians have shown that a person is more likely to survive 88 rounds of Russian roulette than to win a typical state lottery. Again, I think the lottery is going to be lot more fun for the player than Russian roulette. A person is seven times more likely to be hit by lightning (maybe even more so in our area) and one half million times more likely to die in a plane crash. Again, I think the lottery is going to be lot more fun than either of those options.

The typical odds against winning a state lottery are between 5-10 million to one. If a person buys fifty lottery tickets every week, the person will win on the average once in every 5000 years. Mark Twain was right when he said, "The best toss of the dice is to toss them away!"

Most of us are unlikely to wager much of *anything* at *any* time, certainly not on anything more than a special occasion. We don't depend on winning some wager to fund our next meal, or our retirement, or our kids' (grandkids') college education. In fact, I'd be willing to say that the odds are against it.

If we run into something where the odds don't look so good, we're not going to deal with it, period, if we can possibly avoid it. Fat and happy where we are and with what we've got, there's no need to risk on what doesn't look like a very good bet.

Such rational and reasoned thinking was evident on the battle line as the army of Israel faced off against the army of the Philistines. King Saul's warriors had received a challenge from the Philistines, to send their best warrior to fight one-on-one against the Philistines' best warrior, a huge tank of a man named Goliath. One look at Goliath and some quick calculations could be made that made the odds of survival pretty slim. The army of Israel looks at Goliath and we should imagine a slew of excuses come pouring out. "I think I ate something bad; I pulled a muscle; my hands have blisters ... from all the Philistines I've already killed; my sword has gone dull ... from all the Philistines I've killed" and on and on as it becomes clear that no one is stupid enough to think they can fight and win against Goliath.

In the meantime, young David has been sent by his father Jesse with some food for his brothers serving in the King's army. Young David quickly gets the scoop on Goliath. His eldest brother Eliab thinks David has contrived the whole visit in order to watch the battle. David continues trying to find out who will go to meet Goliath and claim the generous prize in victory, but he's dismayed to find that all the smart men have sized up their odds in a fight against Goliath and they've found the odds are against them.

On the other hand, David is an arrogant teenaged twerp who hasn't yet learned how to rationally calculate the odds. All teenagers to a certain degree think they're invincible and routinely miscalculate the odds, omitting inconvenient and disturbing details that would spoil the adventure, like weighing the consequences of trying to drive 100 mph *anywhere*, or jumping off a roof, or throwing a can of lighter fluid in a fire pit, or stopping eating that non-food item before vomiting. This is the stuff of painful YouTube videos that will likely appear on Tosh.o. There is one other thing that arrogant teens are prone to miscalculating; when to walk away from a fight.

King Saul hears about David and his boasting, and after hearing his zeal, decides to let the kid take his best shot at Goliath since no one else is going out there. To give this kid a decent chance of not dying instantly – trying to improve the kid's odds – a whole suit of armor is produced and a nice big sword handed to him.

The kid can hardly move, and can't even walk with all this gear. David decides that he isn't going to do battle with Goliath on his terms; David is going to take the fight to him on David's terms. You don't wrestle a bear or a lion (although David says he has) if you've got any brains. Sting the sucker with a shot from a sling, and they will move off fast. David has his strategy. And there is wisdom in picking the fight on terms where **he** is proficient and effective and experienced, not on Goliath's preferred terms.

Before David reached for his staff and slingshot, and the smooth round stones from the stream, David had reached into his youthful faith in God for his strategy for victory. David had earlier questioned his warrior brothers, *Who is this uncircumcised*

Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God? What David had cited – the armies of the living God – was exactly what the Israelite army had neglected, its basis in faith in their God who gave them their identity and their victory. God would shift the odds and become their equalizer.

David's declaration before Goliath's mocking taunts repeats that earlier claim to his brother: *You [Goliath] come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel whom you have defied. This day the Lord will hand you over to me....* Arrogant little brat was right, of course.

David knew that the strength needed for victory wasn't for him to wield. Faith was actually his best weapon, so to act faithfully would allow God the opportunity to hand him the victory. A well-thrown stone from his slingshot was all that was needed. Unlike inflicting deterrent pain on a bear or a lion with a slingshot stone, this needed to be a fatal blow and would have to find its mark just right. The odds don't look good, but by his courageous witness of faith, God becomes the equalizer and gives him the improbable victory.

Clearly, faithfulness to God, a strength in spiritual trust, can be decisive in turning the odds around to your favor. Inversely, failure to have faith in God, having a weak regard for spiritual trust, can be just as decisive in turning the odds against you.

Looking now at the passage in Mark 4, we find the first instance of the disciples in a boat and facing a storm. This is the first instance in Mark. The second one comes after the feeding of the five thousand when the disciples were unable to do anything, and the text says that the hearts of the disciples were hardened by that experience. Their failure on the water in the storm is symptomatic of the failure in faithfulness as disciples.

Here in the first story of the disciples in a boat during a fierce storm. These experienced fisherman have probably seen some pretty fierce storms in their time, but this one has them thinking that the odds are against them surviving if something doesn't change in a hurry.

The text says that, *Jesus 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?"* Of course he cares – he is in the same boat with them. Jesus thought they had faith enough to handle it themselves. Clearly, they didn't. Jesus, in the manner of casting out a demon, rebukes the storm and everything calms down.

Jesus then tells us the lesson of this tale, *Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?* The key word is "still," as in 'you were lacking faith when you started with me, and now you *still* have no faith.'

It might seem that Jesus was the one who improved their odds, who brought them through the storm, but the message is one of faith in God when the odds are

stacking up against them, or against us. Jesus is there not as superman, not as the one who commands the sea, even though the disciples will exclaim at the end, *Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?* That's simply further indication that the disciples don't get it. Rather Jesus is there as the witness to a strength of faith that equalizes the odds that are against his followers.

At the time Mark was written, at least two generations after the crucifixion and resurrection, the followers of Jesus in the churches were facing all kinds of storms, and sometimes had to contend with a Goliath like the power of the mighty Roman Empire itself. The story is meant to remind contemporary disciples that faith in God is the true source of their strength and peace. The odds may often be against the faithful, but the faithful who stand in their spiritual strength and rely on their witness of their God will find their true strength and genuine peace.

The ones who try to wear the armor of the world will find that it is ill-fitting and ultimately useless, just as David discovered. Meeting the challenges of living faithfully means confronting the world and its challenges on your own terms, on faith terms, standing in faithful witness to our God who is true strength and genuine peace. Then the giant can be taken down, and the storm made to dissipate.

In the RACES group this week, we looked at Dr. King's peaceful, non-violent civil disobedience. One of the key measures in preparation was what King called "self purification," or getting ready for the storm, putting on the armor of faith when met with batons, kicks, punches, fire hoses, dogs, and whatever else may be thrown at them. Faith in their God would be their strength.

In our everyday challenges, we're always measuring the odds, and may find them stacked against us. We might not be able to avoid the challenge and walk away from it as we'd prefer. In such times, we improve the odds by standing in our faithfulness and making our witness to the one who is our true strength and our genuine peace.