Please have a seat. I am Bill Powel and it’s good to be with you this morning, and thank you to Jeanne for inviting me back. I bring greetings from Bishop Hollingsworth, where I serve on the staff of the Diocese of Ohio as the Canon to the Ordinary. This is my fourth year working with clergy and lay leaders, as, essentially, the Chief of Staff to the Bishop.

Our big project is Bellwether Farm, the camp and retreat center, which many of you know is currently under construction. Before he became a ubiquitous presence on Good Morning America and MSNBC, not to mention handling the weather forecast for Al Roker on The Today Show, our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry dedicated the Bellwether facility during the Bicentennial Weekend in November. St. Paul’s has led the way in its generous support of the Bellwether Farm from the very beginning, and we thank you.

Next week, I and the other elected Deputies from the Diocese of Ohio will join 800 others in the House of Deputies, along with 300 members of the House of Bishops, at the triennial General Convention in Austin, Texas. That group will spend 11 days developing church policies, legislation and budget to guide The Episcopal Church over the next three years. Many of us will pause on Sunday, July 8 to allow participation in a prayer service outside an immigration detention center located near the City. We plan to report on the results of the General Convention in the fall.

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I am grateful for today’s familiar Bible readings: David and Goliath and Asleep in the Boat.

We all like the story of the proverbial underdog who triumphs over the heavily-favored Philistine. Insert here the names of several Cleveland sports teams in the role of underdog and other teams in the role of the villain: Yankees, Red Sox, Broncos, the Golden State Warriors—I could go on. At least we have one underdog story that we love to tell—even the sportscasters were referring to the Cavaliers championship in 2016 as a “David and Goliath” story.

Why are we drawn to that story line? Because we love to root for the under-resourced, undersized good guy, who defeats the weaponized and very intimidating bad guy. If there had been oddsmakers in Judah back in the day, I think most of the smart shekels would have been on the Philistine.

But the real message of this story is how David got to the battlefield—how he prepared. As the youngest of seven boys, David’s role was to be a shepherd. We heard David telling Saul what happened while he tended his father’s sheep. He describes how he protected lambs from predators—the lions and the bears—but it wasn’t his own
prowess that allowed him to do it. Instead, he says it was: “The Lord, who saved me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, [and he] will save me from the hand of this Philistine.” David acknowledges that when he was in the wilderness tending the sheep, God protected him. He had courage because of his confidence that God would be with him no matter what.

Although the David story is one of right over might, and of confidence in the face of challenge, it’s not David’s confidence in his abilities to defeat the enemy. It’s his trust in God that guides him. He is not fearful; he trusts God. It’s about trust in the face of fear.

I read the Forward Day by Day booklet as part of my daily prayers, and earlier this month, I read an entry by the Rev. Marshall Jolly, Rector of Grace Episcopal Church, in Morganton, North Carolina. He wrote that “The life of faith has never been marked by safety; rather it is marked by trust. Trust is more than the simple assurance that bad things will never happen to us. Trust is rooted in the fact that God prevails and remains faithful.”

I recently finished reading Jon Meacham’s “The Soul of America.” He describes the battle in this country’s history between the impulses of good and evil in the American Soul, for what Abraham Lincoln called on the eve of the Civil War “the better angels of our nature.” Meacham writes that these angels “have prevailed just often enough to keep the national enterprise alive.” The impulses of fear, he writes, are based on the fear of the unknown, as compared with hope, or trust in the future. The story of America, he says, is “how we have endured moments of madness and of injustice, giving the better angels a chance to prevail—and how we can again.” “Hope is sustaining. Fear can be overcome.”

After writing a first draft of this sermon, I tried to think of a time in my life where I trusted in God in the face of uncertainty—in other words, when I took a “leap of faith.” In 1991, I was finishing my masters’ degree in health care law in Chicago when my mother became ill with breast cancer and soon died. At the same time, the law firm where I was the newest partner voted me out because of a recession. It was the LIFO inventory accounting principle at work: “last in, first out.” With three children under the age of 6, I felt the pressure of family responsibility and I expanded my job search beyond Chicago. Facing the trifecta of a family loss, a job loss and a potential move, I was uncertain about the future. The good news was that my wife, Sandra, and I were involved at St. Chrysostom’s Church, and George Hull, the associate rector, knew about our situation and invited me to breakfast one day. After listening to my story, he said to remember that God loves me and is always with me, no matter what. I still remember that moment. He might have said “God Loves You. No Exceptions,” but Bishop Hollingsworth’s tag line wasn’t a bumper sticker yet!

A little later on, while I was considering whether to accept a job at University Hospitals here, I called my godfather for advice. He had lived in Shaker for a while, he said that moving to Cleveland would be an adventure and I’d never regret it. He was right, and so was George Hull. I wasn’t fighting off lions and bears in my personal
wilderness, but the fear of the responsibility and the unknown was holding me back from trusting God and surrendering to a new adventure.

In Mark’s Gospel, we read another familiar story of the disciples in the sinking boat. Actually, this is the first of two boat stories—the later one is where Jesus walks across the water; this one is where Jesus tells his disciples to “go across to the other side” of the lake, and he promptly falls asleep until the storm hits and the disciples wake him up.

Having grown up on Lake Michigan in the summers, I have great respect for the big lake. Although we sailed, swam and waterskied, we preferred staying on the much more tame, and smaller Lake Charlevoix. The big lake could get angry pretty fast, so we had to pick our times to venture out on Lake Michigan. One time, on a calm day, a group of families took our boats for a picnic on an island a short distance into Lake Michigan. We had our young children in the 20-foot runabout with some other families on their boats. The wind came up fast and before we knew it there were 3-6 foot waves. Fortunately, our children went home on a friend’s larger boat, but Sandra and I went home in ours by ourselves in high wind and waves, and it was a cold, wet, white-knuckle ride back to the small lake. I admit I was afraid, but we made it.

So it was on the Sea of Galilee, which, like Lake Erie, is relatively shallow, and is subject to quick-developing storms due to its location between two hill ranges. When the Gospel says that the wind came up, it probably did create an unexpected storm. The disciples wake Jesus up while the boat is sinking, and he scolds them: “Have you yet no faith?” “Don’t you trust me?” They had seen Jesus perform miracles, but they didn’t know what was going to happen to them on the water.

We never really see David’s fear when facing Goliath, although he may have been scared when he was out in the fields by himself, fending off the lions and bears from the sheep, but he knew God was with him. On the sinking boat, the disciples were scared, but Jesus tells them they should have faith. They show us there is a fine line between having faith and being afraid.

Our fears present themselves in different ways: fear of a diagnosis, fear of moving to a new city, fear of life after a career of work, or even fear of “crossing to the other side” to encounter people we don’t know or who may be different from us.

But like David, and the disciples on the boat, we know bad things can happen; the life of faith has never been marked by safety. But we also know that, even in the midst of difficult situations, God is with us, no matter what.

Amen.