

First Congregational United Church of Christ  
Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost- September 10, 2023

Scripture lesson: I Samuel 17:4-11, 19-27, 31-41, 44-50

## FACING OUR GIANTS

In the preface to the Scripture that we just heard, Tamyra alluded to the fact that the story it tells is among the most famous in the whole Bible. Its main characters have become so familiar that their names are a part of the common vocabulary of our wider culture. Chances are good that a contest between someone who's small and seems to have no chance of winning and someone who's big and appears to have no chance of losing will be called "David versus Goliath". This morning, though, we'll aim to go deeper into the story than this bare plot line suggests.

It begins with Goliath. The Bible portrays him as the ultimate *intimidator*. A hulking giant of a man, he's covered from head-to-toe with armor and weapons. He comes out from the camp of the Philistines and taunts his Israelite foes, shouting, "Today I defy the ranks of Israel. Give me a man that we may fight together" (I Samuel 17, verse 10).

Israel's King Saul has been a mighty warrior, but he wants no part of Goliath. Neither does anyone else in Israel. I Samuel 17, verse 11 says, "When Saul and all Israel heard these words of the Philistine, they were dismayed and greatly afraid." They all cower in fear- except for David.

David will eventually become the king of Israel, but at this point, he's still a young shepherd boy. He's the baby among his father Jesse's eight sons, the three oldest of which, Eliab, Abinidab, and Shammah, have all joined Saul's army to fight against the Philistines. For his part, David is sent back and forth by Jesse from their hometown of Bethlehem to the army's encampment in the valley of Elah to bring food to his brothers and their fellow troops. Jesse also tells David to regularly bring back news of how the fight is going. In other words, at this stage David is neither the king nor a soldier. He's a sheepherder, a lunch delivery boy, and a messenger.

On one of his trips to the army's camp, David hears another one of Goliath's customary taunts, and he sees yet again how everyone cowers in fear. This both troubles David and puzzles him because he has a different angle on the whole situation. We learn of it as the Bible lets him speak for the first time in his own voice in I Samuel 17, verse 26: "David said to the men who stood by him, 'What shall be done for the man who kills this Philistine, and takes away this reproach from Israel? For who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?'"

David wants to know what's in it for him if he confronts and defeats Goliath. His angle on Israel's dilemma isn't *purely* selfless and God-centered, yet David *is* the first one to bring God into the picture at all. He asks his fellow Israelites, "Don't we think that the God whom we worship makes the difference here? We all remember that our God is the living God, right? Our God is the Creator and Ruler of all things and has made a special covenant with us as God's Chosen People. So, don't we think that this God will help us to defeat this bully who mocks us so much? Let's act with the courage and conviction of our faith!"

David's angle is right to the point for all of us who, as Christians, also claim to believe in God. We have no dearth of challenges in our lives whether from, for instance, cultural and political conflicts, church decline, work colleagues, personal friends, family members, health challenges, or our own inner life. We say that we believe in the God who's revealed to us in Jesus, but do we remember that this belief is meant to make a vital, practical difference in the way that we deal with the giants who confront us? Is our belief an actual faith that shapes the attitudes we take and the deeds we do or is it mostly a head game and a bit of lip service that we quickly forget as soon as we're faced with any real problems? Those are the questions David puts to his fellow Israelites, and to us.

Those who hear David's questions report to Saul on the angle that he's working, and Saul is intrigued. He calls David in for a talk. David's first words to him are, "Let no one's heart fail (for) . . . your servant will go and fight with this Philistine" (verse 32). Saul is undoubtedly impressed with David's courage, yet he quickly nixes the idea. He says, "You are not able . . . for you are just a boy and (Goliath's) been a warrior from his youth" (verse 33).

David is undeterred. He replies, "Your servant used to keep sheep for his father; and whenever a lion or a bear came and took a lamb from the flock, I went after it . . . (A)nd if it turned against me, I would catch it by the jaw, strike it down, and kill it. Your servant has killed both lions and bears and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them . . ." (verses 34-36).

David has real experience in fighting off wild animals to protect his family's sheep. But he still comes across to Saul as a naïve young man who doesn't understand the difference between even a lion or a bear and this giant Goliath. Goliath is a heavily armored behemoth who has fought in hand-to-hand combat for years. Saul thinks that David has no real clue about what he'll actually face if he takes him on.

Nevertheless, David keeps pressing his case. He has emphasized to Saul's soldiers that Goliath was "defy(ing) the armies of the living God". He stresses this same thing to Saul because he's completely confident that God will not allow Goliath to keep getting away with such arrogance for much longer. He's ready to trust instead that "The Lord who saved me from the paw of the lion and . . . of the bear will save me from the hand of this Philistine" (vv. 36-37).

David demonstrates for Saul one of the most basic practices of authentic faith in God. He looks back on the ways that God has acted on his behalf in the past, and this awakens his confidence in the ways that God will act for him in the future. Eventually, Saul *is* decisively impressed by this too and he finally takes up David's angle as his own. He says, "Go, and the Lord be with you.

The spiritual lesson that David teaches in this situation is simple and crucial. When we have faith in God, we carry with us a memory bank of things that God has done for us in our past. If we actively draw on those memories as David does here, it stimulates our faith in the goodness that God will show to us in the future.

So, as he receives Saul's blessing, David is confirmed in his resolve to take on Goliath. Saul, however, also decides that he now needs to specially prepare David for the fight, even though his efforts quickly turn comic. He dresses David up in Saul's own armor which is far too big. He gives David his helmet which slips down over David's eyes. He gives David his sword which is way too heavy for David to wield. Burdened with all of Saul's gear, David can't even walk.

The king's intentions are good, but the story demonstrates how important it is to fight giants in the way that fits our unique capacities. This doesn't mean that we refuse to learn from other people, or that we deny our need for their support, or that we foolishly go off half-cocked simply on the basis of whatever we feel strongly about. It does mean, though, that we act in accord with the particular gifts that God has given to *us* as individuals and as a distinct community.

For David this means first that he's dressed out with his faith in God. He's also suited up with the specific wisdom and skills that God has given to *him*. This helps him to see that fighting Goliath hand-to-hand while weighed down with Saul's armor would be a very bad idea. It also prevents him from becoming stupidly naïve, otherworldly, or otherwise reckless in his approach. He doesn't try to confront Goliath while immobilized in Saul's gear. Neither does he run up to the giant, kneel, fold his hands, and pray for God to strike his enemy down.

David knows that God doesn't work by magic, but instead through the down-to-earth means that God has given to him. He therefore chooses the weapon that *he* has mastered after long years of practice, the one that *he* knows from *his* direct experience will give *him* the best chance to strike a winning blow. Therefore, he takes off Saul's armor, grabs his slingshot, and goes to a nearby brook to pick up five smooth stones. Now *he, David, is ready.*

Again, his lesson for us is clear. In preparation for our battles, we're called, like David, to pray and think, pray and train, pray and plan, pray and work. We're called to put to full, wise, and courageous use the particular gifts that God has given *us* to fight *our* giants. We do all of that . . . and then leave the rest to God.

We need courage for both of these- courage both to do our best with everything that God has given us to work with AND courage to leave everything else in God's hands. Thankfully, this courage grows readily from our faith that, as St. Paul famously put it in his letter to the Romans, "if God is for us, who can be against us?" (8:31)

David knows the power of this truth to his core. He has the courage to face Goliath not only because he realizes that God has given him the gifts for it, but also, and more deeply, because he trusts that God is *for* him. He remembers God's covenant promises to Israel. He recalls God's presence with him when he has faced lions and bears. With his faith fortified through those memories, he boldly steps up and acts. He does his best with his God-given talents and he puts the rest into God's hands. The result is that Goliath falls.

William Wilberforce fought giants, too. You may have seen the fine film several years ago entitled, *Amazing Grace*, which portrays his extraordinary life and work. As a Christian, Wilberforce led a long and arduous struggle in Parliament against enormous odds in seeking to abolish England's slave trade in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

One night, tired and frustrated from yet another defeat of his efforts, he turned to his Bible, looking for fresh encouragement. A letter fell from it as he started to leaf through and Wilberforce felt the urge to read it again. He remembered that it had been sent to him by another great English Christian of that time, John Wesley, shortly before Wesley had died.

Wesley had written, "Wilberforce, unless the divine power has raised you up . . . I see not how you can go through your glorious enterprise in opposing that abominable practice of slavery, which is the scandal of religion, of England, and of human nature. Unless God has raised you up for this very thing, you will be worn out by the opposition of men and devils. But if God be for

you, who can be against you? Are all of them together stronger than God? Oh, be not weary of well-doing. Go on in the name of God, and in the power of God's might."

Which Wilberforce did. Through his tireless work, sustained by his faith for decades, the giant of England's slave trade eventually fell.

Which giants taunt each of us today? Are they family rifts, a bleak diagnosis that we didn't expect, sad regrets that trap us in our past, or wrong choices that appear to block off our future? Are they the dishonesty, division, greed, injustice, environmental crisis, oppression, violence, and war that loom large now as threats to our common life?

Whichever giants mock us today, we can dare to face them. None of us has to cower in fear because, like David, the shepherd boy, we've been given a different angle on the whole situation. We have faith in God.

We trust that God is committed to us, that God has acted on our behalf in the past, and that God has given each of us particular resources and skills to fight our giants now. We fortify our faith with memories of God's previous mercies to us. We step out to use God's present gifts as fully, wisely, and courageously as we can. We put everything else into God's hands, blessedly assured that if God is for us, who can be against us?

Ultimately, our giants will fall. Amen.