***I LOVE TO TELL THE STORY: DAVID AND GOLIATH***

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July 5, 2020

Texts: 1 Samuel 17:1-58 and Philippians 4:13

Over the next couple of months, Sarah and I will be preaching from some familiar biblical texts in a sermon series entitled: *I Love to Tell the Story*. Many of you began hearing some of these Bible stories before you could even read; they are told in children’s Sunday School classes, in our preschool chapel times, and at children’s bedsides before the “Now I lay me down to sleep” prayers and nightly lullaby. Some of these stories have inspired songs, works of art, and musicals; many of the characters have attained larger than life status. Most children and many parents have no idea where in the Bible the stories can be found, but they do know the stories – or at least a version of the stories as they were told to them. This summer we want to take a closer look at some of those stories, to read them as the biblical writers recorded them, and in so doing, we hope not only to bring back some fond memories for you, but also to consider whether they have anything relevant to say to us today. With that preface in mind, we begin this series on this 4th of July weekend with the story of David and Goliath as recorded in 1 Samuel, the 17th chapter:

[Read 1 Samuel 17:1-58]

The story of David and Goliath is the classic underdog story. On one side you have little David with his slingshot and five smooth stones, standing alone, barefooted, without armor or sword or even a Swiss army knife for protection. On the other side you have Goliath – a veteran warrior standing ten feet tall, clad in armor that weighed more than young David, and bearing a sword, shield, and spear whose tip alone weighed almost twenty pounds. Imagine Lebron James arriving at our doorstep in his uniform and game shoes to challenge Tucker Terry to a game of one-on-one basketball for the deed to the church. Tucker is good, but I doubt that any odds-makers in Vegas would accept wagers on the outcome! But it would be a mistake to read this story as a tale of the greatness of David as a youth, foreshadowing his military triumphs and ascension to the throne of Israel in later years. For this story is not really about David or Goliath; it is about God.

The people of Israel had been clamoring for a king; they had the Lord as their king, but they wanted a human king, a king they could see, a king like the rulers their neighbors had. So God relented and had Samuel anoint Saul as king, chosen by God to lead the people of Israel. Saul proved to be a great disappointment to God as Saul descended into madness and offered little leadership to the people or army. Nowhere among the army of Israel, including its king, could a warrior be found who would take on the Philistine Goliath. No one trusted God to deliver them. No one turned to God for help. The Israelites trembled in their sandals every time Goliath appeared, and King Saul – noting the overwhelming odds – did nothing.

To young David, the failure of any Israelite soldier to step forward showed a lack of faith in the Lord. God had saved the people from overwhelming odds throughout their history, most notably delivering them from bondage under the iron fist of mighty pharaoh in Egypt. In the challenge of Goliath David heard an insult, not just to the Israelites and their king, but to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Moses. For Saul this was a military crisis; for David it was a crisis of faith.

The Goliaths of the world have a nasty habit of provoking such crises among the people of God. They step forward to lay down their threats and challenges to your future and your faith; they dare you to respond, dare you to take them on with the smug assurance that they cannot be beaten. They are just too big and too bad! They come in various sizes and shapes:

the death of a spouse or child,

a bitter divorce,

cancer,

an addiction,

a pandemic.

For many people of color in our nation racism is one of those goliaths that just seem too big to be beaten. It has a long history of crushing people of color – sometimes with violence, sometimes with subtle discrimination, sometimes with empty promises, sometimes cloaked in societal structures and systems. The list of goliaths who would stand in the way of your joyful life is long and ugly. Each bears a challenge, not just to your life, but to your faith. Each dares you to step up and fight, and taunts you as you tremble in your boots, or sandals, or Nike basketball shoes – who will save you now? Where is your God? If the goliath wins, you become a slave to despair. Will you fight, and if you will not or cannot, then who will fight for you?

David seemed an unlikely choice to fight Goliath. His own brothers doubted and derided him as older brothers sometimes do, finding his boasts to be a lot of bluster from a boy who had come not to fight but to deliver some food and watch the battle. Saul dismissed him as *just a boy*! But David argued that the God who had protected him against lions and bears as he watched over the flock would save him from the hand of the Philistine. It seemed a big leap from a couple of wild animals to a trained warrior, but somehow Saul was persuaded. Maybe it was David’s argument that swayed him, but I doubt it. Perhaps Saul was momentarily inspired by God, or perhaps he just figured he had nothing to lose, or maybe Saul thought that someone else would surely step forward if he proposed to send this boy into battle with all their lives on the line. For whatever reason Saul sent David to fight for Israel with his blessing: “Go, and may the Lord be with you!” But the Lord was already with David, inspiring him to believe that with God all things were possible, all things! And so by the hand of a boy with a slingshot and a single well-aimed stone, David defeated Goliath and the Israelites routed the Philistines. The impossible happened: the underdog won!

It is a victory that has inspired a lot of other stories and produced a host of cinematic heroes: the hobbit Frodo Baggins in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, Luke Skywalker in *Star Wars,* young wizard Harry Potter who defeats Lord Voldemort. The list goes on and on with new generations of Davids defeating new Goliaths, some in fiction and some in fact. In our American Revolution thirteen colonies with a ragtag army are given no chance to defeat mighty England – it is David versus Goliath again – but the David wins and the colonies gain their independence. Everyone loves the story of the triumph of the underdog – unless you are the goliath.

There was a time when the church was David battling the goliath of Rome, but with the ascension of Constantine and the increased power of popes, the church became more Goliath than David. History is full of its abuses: the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, the Salem witch trials, the abuse of children in missionary schools and in parishes by priests. This week in our study of *Waking Up White* we read about the Carlisle Indian School whose mission as stated by founder Richard Pratt was “to kill the Indian and save the man.” Avowedly Christian people kidnapped Native American children, scrubbed them with kerosene, chopped off their hair, gave them English names, taught them Christianity, and forbid them to speak any language but English lest they have their mouths washed out or receive a “snip of the tongue”![[1]](#endnote-1) Christians were at the forefront of the fight to abolish slavery but were also some of its fiercest defenders. If we wonder why the church has been abandoned by so many, it is in part because the church has failed to be the church Christ called us to be; we have been more Goliath than David!

Being Goliath is not just having great power; it is abusing that power for unholy purposes. Had Goliath been on the Lord’s side, he might be remembered like Samson as a powerful force used by God for the good of God’s people. But he defied the Lord and so learned the hard way that his military might and imposing size were useless against the hand of God at work in the hands of a boy with a slingshot! The Lord was on the side of Israel, for David chose to be on the side of the Lord!

Whose side are you on? Are you more David or Goliath? Do you trust, as David trusted, that with God all things are possible, and offer yourself to be the instrument of God’s good work, or like Saul does God not come to mind as you fret about what will happen next? In our study of this passage on Monday morning Frances Craig recalled an old hymn that seems rooted in this passage. It asks, “*Who is on the Lord’s side?”* And its rousing refrain offers the response: “*By Thy grace divine, we are on the Lord’s side, Savior, we are Thine!”[[2]](#endnote-2)*

To be on the Lord’s side is to offer ourselves in God’s service, to give ourselves to God for God’s good purposes. It is not to ask God to come over to our side. It is we who must move! At the height of the Civil War a dinner guest remarked to President Abraham Lincoln, “Isn’t it good that God is on the side of the North?” Lincoln replied, “Madam, it is not for God to be on our side, but for us to be on the side of God.”

On this weekend when we celebrate our nation’s birth, America is more Goliath than David today. We have the economic power and military might to threaten weaker nations and dare them to oppose us. We have a history of discrimination, broken promises, and persecution against people of color, be they Native Americans or those brought to these shores in chains, or immigrants seeking a home. If we are to avoid being Goliath, then we must stop taunting and threatening others with our military might and outsized economic power, and instead seek to serve as Christ calls us to serve – as instruments of ***God’s*** grace and ***God’s*** justice and ***God’s*** love. That work begins with you and me. It begins with choosing to be on God’s side, even if that side is not the popular side. We are a nation of the people, by the people, for the people, and *the people* are very diverse. Our call as American Christians is to love those people one and all, to lift up the values and policies we believe are faithful to God’s call in service not only to our American neighbors, not only to our Christian neighbors, but to all our neighbors. We do so only by giving ourselves to God and trusting that God can work through us, for we cannot do it alone! By the grace of God we live, we serve, and we take on the goliaths that challenge us. “I can do all things through him (the Lord) who strengthens me,” writes Paul. “Amen to that!” says David. What do you say? Amen

1. Debby Irving, *Waking Up White*, Elephant Room Press:2014, p.48-49 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. “Who Is on the Lord’s Side?”, Frances Ridley Havergal, 1877 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)