

An Old Person's Story

II Samuel 21:15-22

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, (July 8) 2014

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Know the Word, teach the Word, nurture the Word, preach the Word, defend the Word, incarnate the Word, do the Word, live the Word.

- William Stringfellow

Three weeks ago I preached a sermon called “A Children’s Story” about that beloved story of young David going up against the giant Goliath with nothing but his slingshot, a shepherd’s staff, and his faith in God. He defeated Goliath, the Philistines fled the field the battle, Israel rejoiced, David began his sure journey to becoming king, the sun set, and the credits came up to rousing music.

This was a “children’s story.” It was a children’s story because it is told and re-told to children and by children about a child defeating a giant. Yet, there is another reason I called it a “children’s story:” it has a fairy-tale kind of ending – the good defeats the bad, and the good wins decisively and conclusively and in a way we recognize.

Today is another David story. This one from the far end of his life, only a mere three chapters from the end of his life and reign and the end of I&II Samuel. Today we have a “an old person’s story,” because David is old but also because we are given a perspective on battling giants that speaks more to the experience of veterans of many battles with giants. Those giants just keep on a coming.

This story has none of the details of the battle with Goliath back when David was a boy. It is a terse story, more of a memo than a narrative, more of an “after-action report” put away in a filing cabinet by a bureaucrat in Israel’s “Pentagon” than a story told by people sitting around a campfire. Nevertheless, it is a story that Israel remembered and retold because it was important and essential to knowing who they were and what they were to do.

As in days of old, the Philistines are back and giving Israel trouble. These Philistines always return and it doesn’t matter to them that with David as the king of Israel, they always lose. This story reminds us all that enemies never quit.

And as in days of old, King David is out front leading the fight. With him in the vanguard, Israel is bold, courageous, aggressive, heroic, and victorious.

David leads the fight. But this time he gets into the battle and discovers that the Philistines have some more giants. David and Israel thought they had vanquished those giants long ago when he defeated Goliath. Come to find out, the giants just keep on coming and this time David cannot keep up. He grows weary. He gets tired. A giant name Ishbi-benob is after David, is determined to kill David and only by the intervention of one of David’s men is David saved and Ishbi-benob vanquished.

But that’s not all. The Philistines have three more giants who join the battle and one of them is even extra intimidating with six fingers on each hand and six toes on each foot. Yet each time, David’s men are able to defeat the giants. But just barely.

(1) This is an old person's story because they know we're in a fight and after long years of experience, they recognize a fight when they see one.

For many of us, our life-long habits have been to show up in church for an hour on Sunday, and hope that we get inspired, hear some good music, hear an interesting sermon (perhaps) and then go home. The rest of the week is about going to work, coming home and having dinner, watch a little TV, check email and Facebook, go to bed and read a little and then get some sleep and repeat all the next day. Fights are on the news or movies or happened in the past or somewhere else. And maybe, if we're really motivated we send \$5 to MoveOn by PayPal.

But through this old story I'm telling you that we're in a fight now. And you're on the front line. This is no longer an abstract fight. We're dealing with old simmering bigotry and racism that has erupted to the surface. We're in a struggle with powers that seek to diminish and dehumanize our neighbors and treat them as outcasts and deport them. We're battling principalities that care nothing about exploiting and destroying God's creation if it means making a quick profit. We're involved. We're in it.

There was a story in the Washington Post this past week about the Pay Day lenders that we see around town that look like fly-by-night-shoe-string-operations but are in reality backed by billion dollar hedge funds and big-money Wall Street firms. They make a lot of money off of the poor people in this town and every dollar they make is sucked out of our local economy faster than we can imagine. Meanwhile, our neighbors' lives are being destroyed, their families are broken, and they lose jobs, lose their cars and sometimes lose their homes. Injustice wins.

We're not going up against some guy in a cheesy movie about loan sharks. We're battling giants and they are right here.

But the giants show up in other forms too. We've not been feeling well and we go to the doctor, have tests, and a week later they tell us the dreaded word, "cancer." We're in shock, overwhelmed, and sick. And the battle begins – we try to make our way through the confusing maze of insurance (which seems to get harder and harder and more expensive and more expensive), try to make our way through the confusing modern medical industrial mega-plex and medical centers, doctors and tests, doctors and tests, treatments that come as close as possible to killing us in the hope of killing the cancer, all the while we are trying to keep ourselves from going bankrupt. And I did I mention that we're sick?

Oh yes, there are giants. And we're in a fight.

(2) This is an old person's story told by people who have fought a lot giants and they know that the giants will keep on coming. The giants might go by different names and sometimes they show up when we're not paying attention but they always keep on coming.

On V-E Day in 1945, J.R.R. Tolkien wrote in a letter, "Wars are always lost, and the War always goes on; and it is no good growing faint." Tolkien believed that the Shadow, as he put it, will always gather strength and return. All of life is an ongoing battle.

When David was a boy he thought that defeating Goliath meant that giants and Philistines were over and done with. But here in II Samuel 21 David has learned that fighting giants is a life-long struggle.

More than one of you has commented to me something like, “We march and hold rallies but nothing changes.” My response is that we’ll need to march some more and hold a lot more rallies. We need to vote and get out the vote. We’re going to have to learn to be creative and imaginative and never give up. We need to educate and teach and not assume that our children learn how to respect people who seem different just by breathing the air. Children are not raised in a value-free vacuum. They have to be taught how to love and serve and be merciful because they are plenty of giants who are ever teaching them how to be suspicious and cynical, fearful and even violent. This is why we’re doing VBS this week. It’s why you need to be at VBS.

And maybe we’re going to have to learn how to do evangelism! Whoa! The dreaded “e” word! I’m not talking about getting someone saved by them asking Jesus into their hearts and then we go on to someone else. I mean evangelism in the fullest sense of sharing good news. By showing, embodying, and telling others that Jesus Christ is another Way from bigotry and fear. And if they think that being Christian is about upholding fear and guns, hatred and racism then they need to repent and change their ways.

Willie Jennings, an African-American theologian who teaches at Yale says that we had better remember that the blood of Jesus is to be more determinative than White Supremacy for shaping our worship, our reading of Scripture, our economic relationships, our political affiliations, our notions of what is beautiful,

even our preference in entertainment. He goes on, “The only force in the modern world that ever challenged the power of race was the evangelical conversion experience” (from Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, *Free to be Bound*, p. 133). We need to be converted from the tops of our heads down to our toenails and everything in between and we need to learn how to invite others to this calling of people to Jesus Christ away from racism and White Supremacy, away from misogyny, away from domination, away from violence, away from fear.

We’re in a long-haul fight because the giants just keep on coming.

(3) This is an old person’s story because we know we get weary. The key component in this story in II Samuel is the admission that David grew weary. Besides being the king for a long time, his life was humbled back in II Samuel 11 when he committed adultery with Bathsheba and then he had her husband Uriah executed in battle. The prophet Nathan confronted David and David’s eyes were opened to the enormity of what he had done. And though David repented, his life was never the same afterwards.

In II Samuel 14-18 David’s son Absalom rebelled against David and tried to seize the throne. Absalom failed but was killed while trying to escape from battle. Absalom’s rebellion and death nearly broke David. He never recovered from it.

David always wanted to build God a Temple. According to I Chronicles 22 God refused David saying that because David shed so much blood in war, God would allow David’s son, a man of peace, to build the Temple.

So by this time in our story, David was exhausted from a life of battles, brokenness, failure, and grief. And then, as an old man, he comes face to face with giants again. He is weary. And he retires from the battlefield.

An old person knows that we are not to fight every battle. Sometimes we need to rest, recover, and prepare to fight another day.

(4) This is an old person's story because we've learned that it all does not depend on us. Notice in verse 17 that David's men keep him from the battlefield because they say, "so that you do not quench the lamp of Israel." It seems that by this time, David was considered the "lamp of Israel." We're not sure if he considered himself the lamp or simply that everyone else did.

But this is a cautionary against ever thinking we're indispensable. David, as great as he was, was not the lamp of Israel. God was the lamp or light of Israel. There are many dangers of thinking we're the center of it all but part of the problem is that we feel like we have to fight every battle, fight every giant, and win every time.

It does not all depend on me, on you, on Austin Heights. Like God told the prophet Elijah on Mt. Horeb, there are yet "seven thousand in Israel who have not bowed the knee to Baal" (I Kings 19:18). In other words, there are many others you do not even know about who are fighting giants. There are other churches. There are people of other religions. And there are other people of goodwill. We're not alone. It does not all depend on us. God works through all kinds of people.

(5) All this means that this is an old person's story because we know we fight communally and not in single combat. As an eager-beaver shepherd boy David fought Goliath in heroic single combat but here, the community fights the giants. That means that we're all involved but not everyone fights in the same way and that on some days some of us are in the behind the lines while others of us are on the front lines. We all have a role but we support one another and fight together as a unit. As solitary individuals the giants easily pick us off so we stick together.

By the way, it is interesting that in the New Testament, the word "hero" is never used. Instead the word "saints" is used – 61 times. "Saints" mean the "holy ones" or those called by God. It means us; it means you and me. 61 times and not once, not ever is it used as singular. It is always plural. In the New Testament we stick together.

(6) Finally, and this is absolutely essential. This old person's story knows that we must fight with the weapons of the Spirit. We conduct ourselves with humility. We are not violent. We do not demonize people we disagree with. And as Paul says we put on the whole armor of God and our weapons are truth, righteousness and justice, peace, faith, salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God (Ephesians 6:10-17). Seeking to be faithful like Jesus we are to love our enemies. We immerse ourselves in prayer, worship, and Bible study not simply because they are about learning new information but because they are about walking with the living Christ. Confronting giants takes nothing less than being with the living Christ.

There is an old story from the Civil Rights Movement that I love. College students were gathered in a small church ready to march and face the dogs and the

barricades. It was hot and stuffy and they sang songs and hymns, pastors got up and prayed, and then they sang some more. This went on all day and the students complained about all the singing. The students said they were ready to go! A wise old pastor advised, “Son, we’ve been at this a long time. When you get out there, you better have more to back you up than good intentions. Keep singing” (from Will Willimon, *Who Lynched Willie Earle?* p. 118).

We face giants, and we need more to back us up than good intentions, better policy proposals, and nice candidates. This is a battle and it is a lot bigger and deeper than Democrats and Republicans. We need more than Band-Aids and an aspirin. More than clicking on a petition online.

“For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places” (Ephesians 6:12 KJV).

We must immerse ourselves in the living Christ.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.