

“A Children’s Story”

I Samuel 16:7; 17: 3-11, 19-24, 32-49

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, (June 17) 2018

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This story from I Samuel is one of the best known children’s Bible stories. It ranks right up there with Daniel in the lion’s den and Jonah and the whale. It is a story loved by children because young David, almost a child in age and size goes up against great Goliath and defeats him with only a slingshot. Children, living in a world of thunder-speaking, oppressive giants delight at seeing little David giving the big bully Goliath what he deserves.

These days this children’s story takes on a new seriousness. Goliaths with ICE written in big, bold letters across their body armor are grabbing children from their parents and taking them to detention prisons. You perhaps remember over a year ago Sarah and Jose were given, with only a couple of hours notice, Kaylee, age 4 years, and Kaycee, 11 months. Two little girls taken from their parents who were deported. But now, while the parents are processed and deported, the children are seized and put in detention, in jails and cages and there is no promise they will be reunited with the parents. The children are not even given over to foster care. And this is official government policy.

There are giants in the land and children know it.

The narrator begins: “Now the Philistines gathered their armies for battle...” That by itself would be enough to strike fear in the hearts of the Israelites. You see,

there is no one who scares the Israelites more than the Philistines. Throughout this period of Israel's history, consistently it is the Philistines who give the Israelites trouble and Israel cannot get rid of them or defeat them in battle. Even when they do occasionally defeat them, it seems that they just keep coming back again and again. So to simply mention the name "Philistine" is to bring fear and even panic to Israel.

The story-teller continues, "And there came out from the camp of the Philistines a champion named Goliath," whose height was ten feet tall and his armor alone weighed hundreds of pounds. Just head of his spear weighed nineteen pounds. Also notice that it says that Goliath's spear-head was iron. You see the Philistines were just breaking into the Iron Age, while Israel was still in the Bronze Age. The iron spear points and iron swords could pierce the bronze armor of the Israelites. If you go back and look in Ch. 13 it tells us that the Philistines controlled this advanced technology and would not allow Israel to have access to it.

Anyway, the narrator lingers over the details of this giant of a man Goliath and the dimensions of his armament to impress us with what Israel is up against. Goliath walks out in the space separating the two armies and shouts and taunts the Israelites. "There is no need for our two armies to fight. Just send out your champion and let the two of us face off in battle. If he slays me, then we will serve you but if I kill him, you will be our servants. Come on! Send a real man, if you have any, to come and face me!" And the narrator says, "When Saul and all Israel heard these words of the Philistine, they were dismayed and greatly afraid."

While all of Israel is quaking in their sandals, David enters the story, the

youngest son of Jesse. Goliath demands a man, a champion, a warrior, and gets a kid, whose job is to watch over sheep. The only reason David was at the battlefield was to bring some food to his older brothers. Instead of armor and a spear, he has a sack lunch with him, and a slingshot, and his shepherd's staff.

Meanwhile, back in the headquarters' tent is King Saul. Saul was chosen king in the first place because he looked the part and had a reputation of being a good fighter. Tall, dark and handsome, King Saul was in his tent, paralyzed with fear. David walks in and says, "King, I'll fight Goliath."

Saul says, "You can't fight that gigantic and mighty warrior. Besides, he's mean and you're just a kid, and a skinny one at that."

David says that while he was guarding his father's flock of sheep he has become pretty good with a slingshot. On top of that, God watches over him. Even lions and bears have not hurt him because of God's care and this same God will protect him from Goliath (v. 37).

Note that this is the first time God has been mentioned in the story. Now we know that something more is going on here beyond a merely human schoolyard contest between a nice little boy and the school bully. God is in this story.

King Saul said, "Go for it, kid. It's your funeral. May God be with you." The only hope that David has is that God will be with him. And though King Saul talks a lot about God and quotes the Bible all the time, he puts his real trust in the same place as Goliath – in good armor and a sharp sword. Saul says he believes in God

but he has an open carry permit. As more than one theologian has pointed out, show me who you put your real trust in and I'll show you who you worship.

Both the king and the giant – one a braggart, the other a coward – trust in arms. Saul even offers David the use of his armor and his weapons. But David can't wear them; he says, "I'm not used to them." They don't fit. And they don't fit in this story not only because David is small. They don't fit because David's whole life has been shaped and formed by trusting God.

An interesting thing to think about: What if you received a concealed or open carry permit and when you strapped on your gun you discovered it would not fit because your whole life had been shaped by trusting God?

Anyway, you remember what happened. David decided to rely on his strengths. He goes out and approaches Goliath. The narrator says Goliath "disdained" young David and shouted, "Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks?" (17:43) You know, of course, why he said that? Because David was carrying his shepherd's staff along with his slingshot. Here's a lesson for giants: Beware of small people (and small churches) coming against you carrying shepherd's staffs.

And since he was so good with a slingshot, David paused at the creek bed and picked up five smooth stones. But David knew his strength was not in his shepherd's staff and was not in his slingshot; David knew his strength was in Almighty God, the Creator of the heavens and the earth; the God of Abraham, Sarah, Jacob, Joseph, and Moses. God was his strength.

With God going before him, David goes up against Goliath. And sure enough, David's stone finds its mark and great, big Goliath falls dead at David's feet and the rest of the Philistine army flees in panic.

Now we've been hearing this story since we were kids. But pause a little this morning and think about this old, old story. Who tells and remembers this story besides children in this world of ours? This story is not told by giants. Giants, those with power and those who like to strut and puff up about all their armor not only do not tell this story, they don't like this story. No, this story is told and retold by those without power, on the bottom. It is remembered by folk who have no armor, no resources, no influence, and no safety net.

Overwhelmed parents and their terrified children going up against ICE, remember this story.

Young people from Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School, and teens from all over this country, including Nacogdoches, who are standing up for gun safety remember this story. And they are standing against the power and wealth of the National Rifle Association and those who do their bidding in Washington and Austin. These young people know they are up against giants.

Those of us standing against bigotry and racism, misogyny and abuse – know that we're up against giants.

Going down to Houston and walking into MD Anderson, the doctor just

having told you a few days before that you have cancer – we know we’re going up against giants.

Don’t tell me there are not giants in the land.

From Nacogdoches to Houston to Austin to Washington, and all in between, there are giants in the land and they are running things. The issues discussed are not the issues that concern young shepherds without power. The issues discussed are the issues that giants care about.

We are a church who has a long history of going up against giants. But going up against giants has worn us down. We are tired, exhausted and verging on despair, even depression. How many times do we have to get stepped on, and ground down in the dirt? We are worn-out and after doing all we can at our work, often swimming against the stream, we come dragging home and don’t want to do anything but sit down in front of the TV or look at our iPads until our eyes glaze over.

If King Saul was paralyzed by fear when facing Goliath, we are more likely paralyzed by despair and exhaustion. William Stringfellow said that part of the work of the giants is to demoralize us. We reach a point where we have “lost any expectations for society;” we have no stamina left for confronting the principalities; we “are reduced to docility, lassitude, torpor, profound apathy, and default. The demoralization of human beings in this fashion greatly conveniences the totalitarianism of the demonic powers since the need to resort to persecutions or imprisonment is obviated, as the people are already captive” (*Ethic* p. 106).

This is what that old giant Pharaoh worked for in Egypt. If he could keep the Israelites tired enough and desperate enough for long enough, then eventually they would shut up and just go along. But Exodus tells us that the Israelites continued to cry out to God! As long as we cry out, then there is still hope! It is when we give up in silence that the Pharaohs, the Caesars, the giants win.

Unlike King Saul, David did not hunker down in his tent playing on his phone. No, David trusts God! David acts! He risks! He is willing to sacrifice. He is creative, refusing to fight Goliath's battle, instead, he fights the way God has trained him – not as a soldier, but as a shepherd who trusts God – and by God's grace, it is enough.

Remember that part of the story of David is the assertion that David was a man after God's own heart. What that means is that David was a person formed deeply by his trusting relationship with God. Formed profoundly by the worship of God, he thinks outside the box, he reacts differently, he imagines differently, he fights differently. His roots were down deep in God. And only someone who has roots down deep like David, whose heart is like God's own heart, and whose mind is creative like God's is able to go up against giants and not have the giants get you.

Looking down from the hills above the Valley of Elah, it looks like what we expect: Well-armed with glittering armor, and powerful Goliaths on one side, and paralyzed and well-armed King Sauls on the other; it looks like the giants will triumph once again. Same old story with the same old ending.

But... But there is another factor. There is another participant in this battle. Someone else moving into the fight. And I'm not talking about brash, young David. I'm talking about God. The God who is determined not to leave the field to the big and powerful. The God who is busy prodding little shepherds, little people, little churches into the fray.

As long as there is God, there are surprising twists to our story; the world is not yet fixed and finished. That little church in Le Chambon, France stood against the Nazis to protect and shelter Jews, hide Jews in their basements and attics, give them sanctuary, because they knew God was at work. Black teenagers in the spring of 1963 in Birmingham marched forward facing Bull Connor and his dogs and fire hoses and jails, knew that God was at work.

So listen up small church and pay attention small people. Even the small, those without power, can make a difference, because God is at work! We do not give up! But more, we had better get ready! God is at work!

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