

“Faithful Valor”

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The Congregational Church of Hollis, U.C.C.

24 June, 2018

Proper 7B

1 Samuel 17:1a, 4-11, 19-23, 32-49

Of all the Bible stories or characters that get referenced in popular culture, David and Goliath may be the best-known. But the story as told in 1 Samuel certainly provides a great deal more nuance and complexity than we hear in the popular references to it in, say, sporting square-offs, or business dealings, or stories of the bully getting their come-uppance.

As I alluded to in our Introduction to the Theme, the story of David and Goliath encompasses much more than a show-down between a giant and a little guy, even though that’s how it usually gets boiled down. The popular version we usually hear referenced boils God right out of it.

It’s a story that encompasses so many themes:

It’s about politics. And it’s about faith. It’s about the ways in which faith and politics are inevitably intertwined, and about how our responses to political challenges reveal something about our faith.

It’s about the ways that people of faith tend to forget about God in situations of conflict, sometimes even pretending that God has no place in or bearing on the situation. (This, of course, flies in the face of what Jesus came to make clear to us—which is that God is entirely involved with *all* of human life, so we can’t neatly set God aside when things get a little bit messy.) The author of 1 Samuel reveals, even by the way he tells the story—the details he spends time on—just how fascinated, captivated we are by images of human strength and power, by military might, by weaponry and armor.

The story of David and Goliath is about how—particularly in politically tense situations—for whatever reason, even believers in God tend to place more faith or confidence in military might, charismatic rulers, and forceful leaders than we do in God’s power and tendency to exhibit divine strength through more modest means.

This morning’s lectionary text is as full of relevant lessons for today’s world as it was thousands of years ago. The chapter opens with the Philistines gathering for battle. They and the Israelites had been engaged in warfare for years, and this was just the latest skirmish. From the middle of the Philistine camp emerges a “champion” named Goliath of Gath—the Bible says, “his height was six cubits and a span.”¹ Frederick Buechner, in more contemporary language describes him this way: “[He] stood 10 feet tall in his stocking feet, wore a size 20 collar, a 9½-inch hat, and a 52-inch belt. When he put his full armor on, he looked like a Sherman tank”, and twirled his 25-pound spear “with the careless ease of a

¹ 1 Samuel 17:4.

cheerleader twirling her baton.” Goliath was big, and brassy, and armed to the teeth. He was, in short, a bully—and people responded to the bully in those days the same way they do today.

But in the scene that’s set for us, Goliath and the Philistines weren’t the only ones prepared to sort things out militarily. The second and third verses of Chapter 17 (which were omitted in our lectionary assignment) report, “Saul and the Israelites gathered and encamped in the valley of Elah, and formed ranks against the Philistines. The Philistines stood on the mountain on the one side, and Israel stood on the mountain on the other side, with a valley between them.” Of course, Saul and the Israelites all know they’re not very well prepared from a military standpoint; we heard how, after Goliath issues his challenge, “they were dismayed and greatly afraid.”²

Onto the scene strolls young David, following his father Jesse’s request to bring some provisions to his big brothers at the battlefield encampment. He’s surely aware of the tense setting, but he seems to be untroubled by all of it—his spirit is remarkably at peace.

Hearing the Philistine bully braying from the other side of the valley, the shepherd boy imagines the roar of the lions and bears he’s heard on a number of occasions, and he recalls that God has given him the strength and courage to defeat the wild beasts as he defended the vulnerable sheep under his watch. “Your Majesty,” he says, “this Philistine shouldn’t turn us into cowards. I’ll go out and fight him myself!”

“You don’t have a chance against him,” Saul replies. “You’re only a boy, and he’s been a soldier all his life.” But King Saul also knows they don’t have much time left before the Philistines just storm the valley and will easily take Israel by force, and so far, no other soldier in his entire army has stepped forward or demonstrated even a fraction of the courage or valor that this little guy was manifesting. This will at least make it look like they made *some* effort.

Before he became king, Saul had been a faithful believer in God, a real servant; he had worshiped Yahweh and trusted in God’s presence and guidance in his life. But years in power had changed him, and the things that Samuel—the priest and judge of the Israelites who had discouraged the people against their desire for a king—had warned the people a king would do (become self-indulgent, corrupted by the power, and forget the power and importance of God) had indeed come to pass in Saul.

But in that moment, as David testified to God’s faithfulness and power in and through him during other threatening moments, Saul was called back to his former self. The king tried to place his confidence in the LORD: “Go,” he told David, “and may the LORD be with you!” But in his very next breath, Saul established how undeniably his faith in God had been compromised, as he decked out the shepherd boy with military armor—not once considering how God might use the demonstrated skills and gifts that David already possessed to accomplish the victory.

² 1 Samuel 17:18.

David, however, was immediately aware of how profoundly the superficial, exterior shell that falsely proclaimed to the world, “I am strong!” effectively hobbled him. He couldn’t feel the source of his life and true strength beneath all that man-made armor.

At the conclusion of his battle with Goliath, David took home a hero’s medal. But his first demonstration of faithful valor was in that moment: when he courageously renounced the world’s political playbook that is so easily captivated by shows of brute strength and dominance, and submitted instead to God’s ways. As he shrugged off the king’s armor into a discarded heap, the boy felt free. And enormously powerful, with God’s own strength and presence.

Who in the world today recognizes that we are, in fact, stronger when we embrace our vulnerability? It’s something the apostle Paul wrote about in 2 Corinthians Chapter 12—it certainly isn’t an easy thing to do. Just think for a moment about Jesus’ greatest victories: were they characterized by armaments or military victories? That’s what the world and even his own disciples expected; but God’s ways are not our ways.

The Bible is clear that the way to valorous life that is truly, fully alive is one that does not need the wrappings and trappings of worldly fortitude, of military might, or any other show of force, but instead is rooted and firmly grounded in a trust in God for our strength and salvation.

David recognized that the only way he could be victorious was to confront the threat—the bully, the so-called “champion” who struck such fear into the hearts of all the people—he had to meet this Goliath with all the strength of his apparent vulnerability, confident that the God who had equipped him with everything he needed to get to where he was, was with him even now. And so, armed (to all visible appearances) with nothing but five smooth stones and a simple slingshot, David walked down to that valley—the valley of the shadow of death—to meet Goliath, fearing no evil because he knew God was with him.

Who or what is *your* Goliath? What is it that intimidates you, makes you feel fearful, inadequate, disempowered?

Who or what are the Goliaths of our day? What are the forces that intimidate, disempower, and dehumanize others?

Some of the giants that menace God’s people are societal and structural rather than personal. Homelessness, hunger, poverty, violence, and neglect—all of these intimidate God’s people across the globe, especially when these societal issues turn up on our doorstep or at our borders. Racism, xenophobia, homophobia, and transphobia—various expressions of fear or hatred toward “foreigners” or “outsiders”, rejection of those who fail to conform to our preferences or biases: these, too, seem to stand at least ten feet tall in our society.

Now, think about how our society often responds to such threats. Just as the Israelites responded to Philistine force by trying to arm a young shepherd to the hilt, we, too, are inclined as a first reaction to respond to force with force.

We feel overwhelmed and threatened by the masses of brown-skinned people from foreign places who come with needs and traumas that seem, on the surface, greater than our ability (or maybe our will) to minister to. We're not sure what to do with them, how to stem the tide which feels great and threatening. So we arm ourselves with a zero-tolerance policy that's designed to resist and intimidate—to push back with equal or greater force against the tide that feels like such a threat.

And what happens in the push- and push-back is that we lose sight of each other's humanity. We forget that people on both "sides" are beloved children of God, called to care for and dignify one another—especially those of us who are striving to live after the example Jesus set.

As we consider the Goliaths of our day, we need to be asking ourselves what faithful valor—courage that engages our faith in God's ability to accomplish tide-turning things through ordinary people—asks us to do. How would the LORD of all life want us to respond?

It's not lost on me that many in this community and region are employed by industries and institutions that support our military, and many have served in our U.S. military—the most robust, formidable military power the world has ever known. And given that many of us have discerned that these are the places where God wants us to employ the gifts and skills we were endowed with in this world, it would make sense if a few people here are feeling a bit defensive this morning (no pun intended!), given the potential implications. So let me be clear: I don't think the ultimate take-away here is that God despises our militaries. But there's no doubt that God grieves, and even despises *our lack of faith* when we place more confidence in what we have created to protect ourselves, than we place in God's presence and protection in a more ultimate sense; when we devote more time, energy, and focus on the material structures and systems that we help to create, than we invest in the One who ultimately saves us.

We're living in a deeply polarized time, one characterized by much fear and suspicion of the "other", and it is easy to get caught up in the ages-old practice of trusting weapons, tribalism, and human shows of force more than seeking first the ways and means by which God would respond to the situation.

"It takes the David on whom everyone seems to look down to re-inject the living God into 1 Samuel 17's conversation. Seven times in verses 45-47 the young shepherd refers to the God who he believes will deliver him from this 'champion.'"³ Where, in the midst of our contemporary battles against formidable foes, looming threats, and brassy bullies, is our

³ Doug Bratt, http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/proper-7b-2/?type=old_testament_lectionary

conversation about the living God—and how are we working to understand and reveal God's desired outcome?

How will we demonstrate faithful valor? It certainly won't be by promoting grand demonstrations of puffed-up, decked-out, weaponized force that aims to show the world how intimidating and mighty we are. That's never been God's way. But as we march forward into our own valleys, as we confront the shadows of death in our day, faithful valor may best be displayed by courageously resisting the world's ways and responding instead with a willingness to approach our threats with the *appearance* of vulnerability, leading instead with our humanity, all the while deeply aware of God's faithful protection, strength, and ultimate salvation. May God help us, and may we be found faithful. Amen.