



Slaying Giants

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

June 24th, 2018 ~ 12th Sunday in Ordinary Time

First Federated Church of Peoria, Illinois

The Rev. Dr. Forrest Krummel

Malcolm Gladwell described the scene like this:

At the heart of ancient Palestine is the region known as the Shephelah, a series of ridges and valleys connecting, the Judean Mountains to the east with the wide, flat expanse of the Mediterranean plain. It is an area of breathtaking beauty, home to vineyards and wheat fields and forests of sycamore and terebinth. It is also an area of great strategic importance.

Over the centuries, numerous battles have been fought for control of the region because the valleys rising from the Mediterranean plain offer those on the coast a clear path to the cities of Hebron, Bethlehem, and Jerusalem in the Judaeen highlands . . . the most storied valley is Elah. It is where Saladin faced off against the Knights of the Crusades in the 12th century. It played a central role in the Maccabean wars with Syria more than a thousand years before that, and, most famously, during the days of the Old Testament, it was where the fledgling Kingdom of Israel squared off against the armies of the Philistines.¹

It is in this valley that David met Goliath.

I invite you to consider with me “what happens when ordinary people confront giants” whether those giants are armies, circumstances, or challenges in life. Gladwell noted that more often than not, “giants are not what we think they are.” Their greatest strength is, in reality, frequently their greatest weakness.² Maybe that is what the apostle Paul meant when he wrote to the Corinthians,

For the wisdom of the world is foolishness in God's sight. (I Corinthians 3:19)

The story of David and Goliath encourages us to think outside of the proverbial box, to creatively use the gray matter that God placed between our ears. To be as Jesus once said, “wise as serpents and innocent as doves”. (Matthew 10:16) Accordingly, let's get our creative juices flowing.

Imagine this, if you will. You are driving your car on a stormy day. You drive by a bus stop and see three people waiting for the bus. The first is the person “of your dreams”; love at first sight. You made eye-contact and the sparks flew.

The second is an old friend who once saved your life.

The third is an elderly person with a walker.

If you only had one seat in your car, who would you give a ride to?

This question was once used as a part of a job application. Over 200 people answered this question, but the applicant who got the job, had an ingenious answer--or at least I think so.

That person would give the car keys to the old friend, letting him drive the elderly person home. Meanwhile, the car owner would stay behind and wait for the bus with the person of his dreams.³

The armies of Israel and the Philistines were at a standstill. The valley between the two armies was a kind of “no man’s land”. The Philistines challenged to what is called “single combat”. In single combat each side would choose a warrior to represent their side. The two warriors would fight to the death with “winner take all”. Single combat avoided carnage.

Israel had no warrior who could go against Goliath and hope to win. Or did they. They weren’t using their gray matter that resides between the ears. They were doing it the way that it had always been done. This is “inside the box” thinking. By the grace of God a shepherd stepped forward, one who had NOT be trained as a warrior.

David, the youngest son of Jesse, the one previously anointed by Samuel, had been sent to the front to take some food to his brothers. David stepped forward to fight Goliath but he would not fight the giant with sword and armor. David would use a “sling”.

In the ancient world there were three kinds of soldiers; the cavalry, the infantry and the “slingers”. According the Old Testament book of Judges, a slinger could hurl a stone at a hair and not miss.⁴ David was a slinger. He told King Saul.

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 and struck it down, rescuing the lamb from its mouth. . . . Your servant has killed lions and bears, and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them since he has defied the armies of the Living God....

The LORD, who saved me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, will save me from the hand of this Philistine.” (I Samuel 17: 34-37)

Goliath was surprised, to say the least, when David stepped forward to do battle. He expected a battle-hardened warrior similar to himself. He was prepared to go mano e’ mano, “hand to hand”. But David changed the game. He was going to fight Goliath the same way he fought lions and bears - as a projectile warrior. In reality, Goliath didn’t stand a chance.

David ran toward him with his leather sling and five smooth stones. Without heavy armor David had both speed and maneuverability. Twirling the sling above his head, he launched the first stone. It hit Goliath below the helmet line right between the eyes. The velocity of the stone would have been like getting hit in the head with a baseball thrown by a Major League pitcher. Goliath went down. The battle was over. David took home a trophy.

When Jesus told his disciples - those who would take him seriously - that they would need to be “as wise as serpents and innocent as doves” he didn’t mean that they should be as naive as Little Red Riding Hood. No. Christ’s Church is to be sharp-eyed and world-wise. After all, Jesus sends us out into the world as a “sheep among wolves”. We need to be smart sheep.

“Innocent people,” Frederick Buechner once wrote, “may be up to their necks in muck ... but the mark of their innocence is that it never seems to stick to them. Things may be rotten all around them, but they preserve a curious freshness. Even when, like the disciple Peter, they are guilty of tragic flaws and failures, you feel that some inner purity remains untouched.”⁵

We live in a world and time where news may be fake or not, reality is a matter of perspective, certainties are questioned, rights trump responsibilities, heroes are called cowards, and truth is a matter of opinion. This is nothing new. It has always been this way. The challenges before us, though, look like Goliath - too big to defeat. It is easy to become discouraged and to try to protect what we have and thus become small.

But we, like David, must remember who we are; baptized, adopted children of the Creator of the Universe, of all that Was and Is and Will Be.

We need to put on the big boy and big girl pants of our baptism and meet Today’s challenges as bravely and as boldly as David met Goliath thousands of years ago.

We are called upon to be slingers not warriors.

We are called to use the gray matter between our ears and remind ourselves that “God did not give us a spirit of timidity or cowardice or fear, but [has given us a spirit] of power and of love and of sound judgment and personal discipline [abilities that result in a calm, well-balanced mind and self-control]” (II Timothy 1:7)

The world begs for fresh approaches new realities. Old wineskins simply will not work.

The world begs for the Church of Jesus Christ to be the Church, for the glory of God. Amen.

1. quoted and paraphrase for ease of reading from Malcolm Gladwell’s David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits, and the Art of Battling Giants. c. 2013

2. *ibid.* pp 5&6

3. NTD Inspired Life

4. Judges 20:16 NRSV

5. Frederick Buechner, “Quote of the Day, June 4, 2018, “Innocence”, originally published in *Whistling in the Dark: A Doubter’s Dictionary*.