

“FELLING THE GIANTS”

1 Samuel 17:1a, 4-11, 19-23, 32-49; Mark 4:35-41

June 21, 2009

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Forty days the stand-off had continued. Forty days the two armies had stood their ground on opposing hillsides, and every day of those forty, the great bullying giant Goliath had swaggered out into the valley separating them, and tossed his challenge at the army of Israel. “You don’t have to fight yet another battle,” he taunted them. “Just send one of your men, any of your men, out here alone to fight me.”

The portrait of the giant warrior is meticulously and terrifyingly drawn by the writer of first Samuel. His height was three cubits and a span, almost ten feet. He was covered head to toe in an armor coat of bronze weighing 175 pounds. The shaft of his spear was so large it would be difficult for an ordinary man to lift, much less manipulate, and it was tipped with a giant iron head itself weighing 15 pounds. Goliath of Gath, Goliath the terrifying. In the shadow of his presence, the whole army of Israel cowered, immobilized by fear, until small, young David stepped in to save the day.

When I was a child, I loved the story of David and Goliath. Though politically incorrect these days to expose children to stories of killing, I found this story not only untraumatizing but, in fact, comforting. Children are small; the world seems far out of their control. To read a story about a small boy, someone not quite a man yet, a lad brave enough to fight a giant and smart enough to fell him, it made me feel taller, stronger, more powerful. The story contains great lessons for children: that brains can be more effective than brawn; that bullies don’t always have to win; that the small are not necessarily powerless. And, of course, besides the lessons, the action is compelling: Big Goliath, small David; Goliath’s monster spear versus David’s five smooth pebbles. . .

But I admit, I haven’t given this story much theological thought since those days of childhood. Other than understanding it as a now iconic story of small triumphing over large, I’ve not pondered it much. So all week, I’ve been turning the story over in my mind trying to see if, as an adult, I could find more in it than my child’s imagination could understand. Being trained as a historian, I decided to find out more about the Israelites and the Philistines. The biblical books of Judges and Samuel are littered with stories of battles between Philistia and Israel, and these stories are some of the most brutal in all of scripture. It didn’t take much research to find out why. The Philistines occupied a territory on the Mediterranean coast completely surrounded by Israel. A wealthy, technologically advanced, seafaring nation, the bulk of Philistine wealth came from trade; but due to its position, many land-based trade routes were difficult for the Philistines to access unless, of course, they went through Israel, which would be much easier if they controlled Israel. So, for over 400 years, from the period of the Judges through the first two hundred years of Israelite monarchy, there was almost constant hostility between the two nations, from border skirmishes to all-out war. The two nations hated each other, demonized each other, lost no opportunity not only to conquer, but equally importantly, to humiliate each other. In a particularly brutal era of this region’s history, this one relationship stands out for both the length and depth of its enmity.

So is the story to be told about David and Goliath a story about the evils of war and violence, of greed and the quest for power? It’s an easy move to make, especially for us progressive Christians. Most of us start

out uncomfortable with any and all of the many battle stories of the Hebrew Bible. We flinch when the words “army” and “God” are used in the same paragraph, and not much work has been done to help us understand these stories in their context. It’s a great subject to talk about in church, because I think there are many who would prefer to just excise these passages from our scripture and not deal with them at all. However, with this morning’s lesson, despite the fact that the context of David and Goliath is war, I don’t think the story is about external war and conflict at all. This is an internal story about a struggle that goes on with an internal foe. David and Goliath leads us to the battle we join, the choices we make, when faced with the problem of fear.

Because fear is the problem in this story. The giant Goliath drawn so large, so fearsome, is a caricature of a warrior. The army of Israel dug in on its hillside for forty days. You always should pay attention in the Bible when something happens for forty days, whether it’s a deluge of rain or temptation in the wilderness or a military stand-off. If it happens for forty days, it’s important. We need to pay attention in this story to the fact that in forty days, the armies of Israel did nothing. They formulated no battle plans, considered no alternative strategies. All they did every morning was get up, go out to the battle line, and then stand motionless for the day after Goliath had issued his challenge. Day after day after day: no change. The army allowed its fear effectively to cut its legs out from beneath it until young David happened by.

David had come out to the battlefield at his father’s request to bring food to his brothers fighting there. He arrived just in time to hear Goliath issue his daily message. And then he, David, no soldier but a mere shepherd, offered to go and fight the Philistine.

What was the difference between David and the men of Israel? When Saul tells David that he cannot possibly go up against Goliath, David answers basically: I am a shepherd. When the wild beasts have come after my flock, I have gone after them. I have struggled before against fearful things and have prevailed. Therefore, I will go out and face this new challenge. Was David afraid? I would guess yes. But the difference between him and the men of Israel was that he did not let his fear control him. He summoned his brains and his guile, his courage and his faith, and importantly, his experience of facing down fear in the past, and he went out and defeated the monster.

Fear is a fact of life. Sometimes it is irrational, but more often for most people, we are afraid most of the time for good reason. There are things in life that are truly dangerous, truly scary; tasks and challenges that seem far larger than our abilities. Only fools are fearless in the face of such trials. And yet for most of us, I think that’s what we seek: fearlessness. We believe that conquering our fear means we should be able to make it go away. And when we find ourselves still fearful, then, like the army of Israel, the fear becomes the reason for stepping back or standing still, anything except moving forward.

But gaining victory over fear is not about making fear go away. Rather, it’s about not letting our fears incapacitate us, not allowing the fact that we are afraid to become the reason for lives lived smaller than they should be, or courageous deeds left untried. Fear feeds on itself. The more we let it control us, the more it will continue to control us. Conversely, when we face down our fear, and move forward despite it—holding to us instead our courage, our faith, our intelligence, sometimes just our plain old

stubbornness—every time we do that, we make it more possible to move through fear in the future. Like David, with the lion and the bear, and the giant Goliath.

Eleanor Roosevelt, another one of my childhood heroes, was reputed to be fond of saying, “You gain strength, courage, and confidence by every experience in which you stop to look fear in the face. You must do the thing which you think you cannot do.” So my questions for you all this morning are , “What are the things you think you can not do? How is fear making you smaller, less than you could and should be? What are your Goliaths?” The God of David is also our God, and David’s is only one of dozens of testimonies of faithful men and women in the Bible who overcame the weight of their fear, believing that their God would help them find the necessary resources to do what was good, and life-giving, and new. Trust the stories. Trust God. Gather your resources together and face your fears straight on. You too can fell the giants of your hearts. Thanks be to God. Amen.