



Westminster
Presbyterian Church
NACOGDOCHES, TEXAS

Goliath Never Had a Chance First Samuel 17

Believe it or not, I have never preached a sermon on David and Goliath, but now it seems that the time is right for such a sermon. The time is right for not only is First Samuel 17 the Old Testament lectionary text for today, but it seems the time is right because in the news we are reading about all the children who have been separated from their parents after crossing our southern border. It is debatable as to who is at fault for separating children from families, but it appears that we have a Goliath sized injustice that we have to face as a nation.

On the bulletin this morning are some selected verses from First Samuel 17. Maybe you have already read them as you prepared yourself for worship. I'm not going to read everything printed in the bulletin but I will be reading verses 10-11, then move down to verse 32.

To set the context, over a period of 40 days the champion of the Philistines, Goliath, has been asking for a one-on-one fight in a winner take all. The problem is that Goliath is armed to the teeth, and he is ten feet tall and all gristle. In modern warfare that is not all that intimidating, but when you have to face him one-on-one with only a sword or maybe a sling, well, that is another story.

¹⁰ And the Philistine said, "Today I defy the ranks of Israel! Give me a man that we may fight together."¹¹ When Saul and all Israel heard these words of the Philistine, they were dismayed and greatly afraid.

³² David said to Saul, "Let no one's heart fail because of him; your servant will go and fight with this Philistine."³³ Saul said to David, "You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him; for you are just a boy, and he has been a warrior from his youth."³⁴ But David said to 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,³⁵ I went after it and struck it down, rescuing the lamb from its mouth; and if it turned against me, I would catch it by the jaw, strike it down, and kill it."³⁶ Your servant has killed both lions and bears; and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them, since he has defied the armies of the living God."³⁷ David said, "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.” So Saul said to David, “Go, and may the LORD be with you!”

⁴⁸ When the Philistine drew nearer to meet David, David ran quickly toward the battle line to meet the Philistine. ⁴⁹ David put his hand in his bag, took out a stone, slung it, and struck the Philistine on his forehead; the stone sank into his forehead, and he fell face down on the ground.

We all love David and Goliath stories. I bet I have seen the movie *Rocky* 20 times. But of course I am more prone to watch baseball movies, and I recall a scene in *The Rookie*. The Big Lake Owls are the underdog in the district championship game. They only have eleven small, young, skinny players, compared to their opponents who are the twelve-time district champions. They have 25 players who are taller, stronger, faster and more talented. Each member of that opposing team has that intimidating unshaved look whereas the Owls all look like teenagers. Every player on the twelve-time district championship team looks like they are all in their twenties, and were on the team twelve years ago. But the Owls are motivated by their coach, though their odds of winning are 1000 to 1, yet somehow the skinny team wins the championship. And we more mature folks say, “Well, that’s just the movies.”

Goliath is like Saruman. Or I think it is Saruman, for I always get the characters in the Lord of the Rings trilogy mixed up. But Saruman, I think, is the horrifying figure in the opening scene of a battle. He appears to stand four times larger than the other soldiers, and that includes the orcs fighting with him. He is dressed in black. His helmet is huge and crowned with spikes and his eyes blaze from beneath. He has spikes covering his shoulders, feet and fingers. He carries a mace which ends the lives of ten to fifteen soldiers with each swing. And his sword is larger than any man.

That is how Goliath is presented to us. He is ten feet tall and covered with armor. His spear is the size of a telephone pole. Everything about him instills fear into the enemy. And the armies of Israel shake in their boots at his sight.

Every day for forty days, the giant marched to the battlefield and challenged anyone from Israel to meet him in a winner-take-all. If Goliath wins, and obviously he will, Israel will serve the Philistines. And if the Israelite wins, a ridiculous thought, then the Philistines will lay down their weapons and serve Israel. No one in Saul’s army has the courage to stand up to Goliath until the young shepherd David came along.

We all know David and Goliath stories. It seems that most of the books we read or movies we watch are based on David and Goliath -- the underdog beating the champion. And when we grow older and think about it we say, "Well, that's just a story. It only happens in the movies. It wouldn't happen in real life."

But the truth of the matter is, at least in the original David and Goliath account, there is no David versus Goliath confrontation. I know I just read it, but what I read is an account of Goliath versus the Sovereign God. The truth of the matter, if you think about, is Goliath never had a chance. He was doomed when he first stepped onto the battlefield challenging the armies of the living God.

Everyone in Israel was afraid. King Saul paced around his tent, wondering what to do. The soldiers trembled in their boots. And it is important for us to take note of the fear Goliath instills, for I understand the writer is reminding his readers that fear plays tricks on our perception of reality.

I have sometimes wondered if Goliath actually was a ten foot, four hundred pound warrior. Sometimes I wonder that maybe Goliath was the biggest man on the battlefield, but the fear he invokes in Saul's army made him grow larger. Fear does that to you. It makes the hard problems harder and unsolvable.

The spider under my bed was a foot long. The snake in the shed is fifteen feet long. The bully at school or at work cannot be stopped.

When I take our dog Opie for a walk, we often walk by a trailer where there is a dog chained to a tree. He sees us coming and starts barking and pulling on that chain with such violence that he makes the tree bend. This dog would make any junk yard dog seem tame. He is a killer. He foams at the mouth. He stands six feet tall on all fours. His teeth are two inches long and his bark is fierce. I worry that one of these days the chain is going to break and it will be the end of Opie and me.

The day came about a month ago when Opie and I walked by this dog I call "Cujo," and he was off his leash, and he came at us barking. The hair stood up on Opie's back as he cowered to the dog, and there was nothing I could do but stand my ground and tell the mangy dog to stop. And you know what, the dog stopped. He stopped his barking. He just stood there and obeyed my command, acting like he would enjoy a little scratch behind the ears. And suddenly Cujo became Lassie. Suddenly the dog was smaller than Opie, and his teeth shrank. Fear makes problems look bigger than they actually are, and when we face our fears, we start moving toward a solution to our problems.

When David brought lunch for his brothers who were in Saul's army he heard about Goliath. He heard the fear in the voices of the soldiers. No one had the courage to challenge Goliath. And the shepherd boy David asked, "Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God? I'll take him on." And you know the story; David knew God was with him. He knew that the battle was not between himself and the giant, but it was the Lord's battle, and of course Goliath did not stand a chance.

I hope that when we are face to face with an evil, an injustice that must be righted, remember that the one favored to win is not the giant, but God is always the favorite. I'll say it again, Goliath never had a chance. David had an unfair advantage for God was with David.

Do you remember Ruby Bridges? She was the six-year-old old African-American girl who was the first student of her race to attend the all-white William Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans. The year was 1960.

Ruby remembers the day she walked alone, six years old, into an all-white school. She wrote about it:

"The morning of November 14 federal marshals drove my mother and me the five blocks to William Frantz. One of the men explained that when we arrived at the school two marshals would walk in front of us and two behind us. . . . It reminded me of what mama had taught us about God, that he is always there to protect us. 'Ruby Nell,' she said as we pulled up to my new school, 'don't be afraid. There might be some people upset outside, but I'll be with you.'

"Sure enough, people shouted and shook their fists when we got out of the car. . . . I held my mother's hand and followed the marshals through the crowd, up the steps into the school.

"The next morning my mother told me she couldn't go to school with me. She had to work and look after my brother and sister. 'The marshals will take good care of you, Ruby Nell,' Mama assured me. 'Remember, if you get afraid, say your prayers. You can pray to God anywhere. He will always hear you.'

"That was how I started praying on the way to school. The things people yelled at me didn't seem to touch me. Prayer was my protection."

After reading about Ruby, I imagine David like that – small, vulnerable, walking out onto the field to confront Goliath, absolutely sure of the righteousness of his cause, absolutely sure that he was not alone.

The truth of the story is David can face Goliath. Little six-year-old girls can overcome centuries of racism and the laws of the state, walking through crowds of adults, whose faces are contorted with hatred, cursing, spitting, and threatening, while the little girl prays.

David and Goliath is a wonderful story, but it is far more than a story. It is a gift from God. It is a gift that was passed down through generations of suffering people who still have the audacity to hope. It is a gift to people living in exile who have the vision of freedom.

David and Goliath have spoken to God's people for millenniums of the truth that God is on the side of the righteous. God helps those who seek justice. God is there for the weak and marginalized. It was Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. who said, "The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice."

And it is a very old story about an important truth—that God goes with us, walks beside us whenever we step out onto the field to go up against a powerful and intimidating foe.

Walter Brueggemann says Goliath is a symbol for everything that is fierce and intimidating and frightening. So let Goliath be whatever threatens you, whatever makes you feel small and weak and vulnerable, whatever immobilizes you. When you find yourself in a situation like the disciples of Jesus, in a boat in the middle of a storm so powerful, you can be paralyzed by fear or trust God.

There was a frightened child who woke up Wednesday morning in a strange place in Brownsville, Texas. A week ago her father put her on his back and said, "We have to go." What he did not tell her was that their lives were in danger from gang violence; he just picked her up, packed what little he could, and set out with his wife and other daughter.

They made it to the United States where the father and mother were arrested by the border patrol, and at their arrest the children were taken from their parents and placed in a holding facility.

You speak of a Goliath. It is not my purpose to judge who is at fault. Democrats blame Republicans, and Republicans seem to blame Democrats and Republicans. It is all a huge mess. But as I wrote this sermon, I was very glad that an executive order was signed to end child separations. I only hope it is true. I hope that another Goliath has been defeated. But maybe the church has to be a stronger voice when it comes to the Goliath of our nation's immigration policy

Goliaths come in all forms:

The disease you just learned about and now need to confront and contend with.

The serious surgery you are facing that understandably makes you afraid.

The loss of your job or the threat of unemployment, which undercuts your confidence and self-esteem.

The never-ending demands of parenting your children.

The loss of a friend, a loved one, a dear one.

The daily diminishment of aging, a very real giant.

Goliath is whatever immobilizes you in fear—fear of the future, fear of intimacy, fear of failure, fear of risk, fear of extending yourself, fear of loneliness.

Goliath is that final enemy—the power of death itself—and the fear behind every other fear; the fear of what the philosophers call “nonbeing,” which intrudes regularly into our consciousness.

Wade Kludt was a remarkable young man in his early thirties. He was married to the daughter of some of mine and Sally’s dear friends. Wade and his wife Debbie loved children, and unable have their own, they opened their home to foster children.

One day, Wade lost control of his car on a county road and hit an eighteen wheeler head on. At least Wade did not suffer. His death was in an instant.

Every minister who finds himself or herself in that situation agonizes over what to say. We all do. What possibly can we say that would be the slightest bit helpful? But the minister turned to a psalm to read to that family and congregation, a psalm attributed to David, a poem he perhaps composed years later in his own old age as he sat reminiscing, as the old do, thinking about, reliving that harrowing, frightening day long ago when, as a young boy, he stepped out onto the field to face the champion of the Philistines; a psalm to keep close to your heart in every moment of fear and threat; a “Psalm of David,” the Bible says. We know it by heart. Say it with me now, a Psalm of David:

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:

he leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul:

he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

I will fear no evil: for thou art with me;
thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me
 in the presence of mine enemies:
thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:
 and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Yes, there will come the day when we will seem to lose the battle with that ultimate Goliath, being death, but no God wins that battle as well, for we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Amen.