

SLAYING GIANTS

TEXT: 1 Samuel 17:31-50

Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson on June 12, 2022

As communities are filled with the sounds of Pomp and Circumstance and graduates at all levels toss their caps into the air, we rightly focus on the achievements of those in caps and gowns. We see not just the diplomas, but the special awards and recognitions that will help bring resumes to the top when the time comes. There's a lot that could be said about those recognitions, including the fact that the greatest achievements are frequently never mentioned—the kid who barely passed and didn't know until last week whether or not they would walk across that stage; because his mental illness has made doing the work close to impossible; or because her father's imprisonment made it hard for her to get regular meals, which made it really hard to concentrate in class.

Heroes don't always wear capes, and sometimes they don't even wear caps and gowns, which is the first of the lessons about life that I find in the classic Bible story about David and Goliath. David is the youngest of eight sons. The oldest three brothers managed to get posts in Israel's army, serving under Saul, the first king of Israel. As the youngest son, David gets the least respected job. He tends his father's sheep. That was an important job in the family, since flocks and herds represented a family's wealth, but despite the fact that shepherds often had to risk their lives to save a sheep, shepherds as a class had no social standing. Their testimony was not even allowed in a court of law.

As the youngest son, David is also the errand boy, which is how he ends up on the front lines of battle, bringing provisions to his older brothers. And that's where he hears Goliath, who the Bible describes as being 10 ft. tall and wearing armor weighing about 150 pounds, mocking the God of Israel and challenging Israel's army to send out a champion to fight him and thereby determine the outcome of the battle. If Goliath wins, Israel will be enslaved to the Philistines. If Israel's champion wins, the Philistines will serve Israel. High stakes.

You've heard how the story plays out. But this first lesson is the recognition that David was not the kid in the cap and gown. His skill came from the hard-scrabble life of facing lethal threats in a disrespected job with only his wits and a slingshot and seven older brothers to keep him in his place. But it is David who is remembered. It is David who becomes king. It is David who is an ancestor of Jesus.

The Bible is full of stories and teaching that elevates those in lowly positions. The youngest is chosen over the eldest, the woman saves her people, the child is held up as the leader, the last shall become first, those who want to lead must serve, and to be king you need first to be willing to risk your life for a sheep.

That is not at all the way of the world. Power structures set up by human beings are the polar opposite. Which is the point. One of the most important themes in the Bible is the inversion of human systems of power. Virtually none of the heroes in the Bible wear capes. The intent of that message is not to disparage human achievement, but to point out that we routinely refuse to recognize or even look for our heroes outside of the halls of privilege.

The second lesson comes out of that. We can win the battle against the giants of our time, but only if we can learn to recognize our own strengths and weaknesses and prepare accordingly. When King Saul gives permission for David to take on the Philistine champion, Saul sends David the armor of a warrior. David puts it all on and then can hardly walk. You can just see it—the scrappy kid tripping over heavy armor that anchors him firmly to the ground and renders him useless.

If David didn't know his own gifts, he could have easily become discouraged. He could have been persuaded to think that he was not a warrior after all because he could barely stand up in a suit of armor. But, as David had already pointed out to Saul, he had rescued lambs out of the mouths of lions and had killed other predators.

David is not 10 feet tall, and he will fail if covered in heavy armor. But he knows that's not his strength. Instead, he is quick, nimble, and accurate with his sling. He casts aside the armor with confidence, not discouragement.

While David's claims may have sounded like false bravado to the rank and file, David was successful in part because he knew his strengths and refused attempts to make him fight in the same way everyone else did. In the armor he was offered, David would have been dead in an instant, and he knew it. On the flip side, Goliath lost because he did not recognize that he was vulnerable to a non-conventional fighter. He was so steeped in one form of warfare, that he didn't have the imagination to see how someone fighting differently could bring him down.

Both of those things are relevant to the giants facing us in 2022. From cyberwarfare to the collapse of ecosystems and an interconnected, global economy, we will find few answers in the rear-view mirror. Pandemics aren't new, but their ability to travel the globe in 24 hours is. Vaccines aren't new, but the technology to make and deploy them quickly is. Fascism and extremism aren't new, but the ability to radicalize millions all at once on social media is. Social justice movements aren't new, but the way they are organized is. If we show up to today's challenges in the armor built for old wars, we won't even be able to take to the field.

But I think the most important lesson in this story is found in what David himself credits for his success. Why is David so sure that Goliath will be like the lions and bears David has killed as a shepherd? Because Goliath has defied the armies of the living God." David says to King Saul, "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."

When David finally confronts Goliath, he returns to this point right before the contest is engaged: "You come to me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This very day the Lord will deliver you into my hand...so that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel and that all this assembly may know that the Lord does not save by sword and spear, for the battle is the Lord's, and he will give you into our hand."

Goliath has mocked a God he neither understands nor knows. And, as David watches Saul's army cowering before Goliath, he can see clearly that they, too, have forgotten the nature of the God they profess to serve. Apart from the confidence David has in his own skill with a sling; he is more confident still that the battle is God's battle and victory is therefore assured.

It's a critical lesson, but also prone to abuse and misunderstanding. The longer we live, the more we recognize that the good guys don't win every battle; that just and righteous causes can go down in flames, and evil can flourish in their place. David himself will write songs about that, which we have recorded in the Psalms. Frequently the Psalms of David cry loudly to God asking why the wicked flourish while the righteous are going down the tubes.

As desperately as we want the world to reward the righteous and punish the wicked, there is no such guarantee. The biblical narrative as a whole, points us toward the ultimate triumph of love over hate; peace over war; life over death. But each individual story, song, and teaching has its own point to make. No one of them by itself can carry the nuance of all of them put together.

What I hear in this story are two messages: a religious message wrapped in a political one. The political message is to tell a hero story about Israel's king to inspire loyalty and trust both on and off the battlefield. There's actually another story in 2 Samuel 21:19 that puts Goliath at a different battle and, in that one, a guy named Elhanan, the son of a different guy from Bethlehem, is the one who kills him. With a story in two places about an Israelite who beats a giant in battle, it seems probable to me that there was some military encounter in Israel's history where the son of someone from Bethlehem took down a champion of the Philistines. And I find it far more likely that a relative unknown like Elhanan took him down and the story was credited to the king than the other way around. Happens all the time and not just with military exploits.

But the Bible is primarily a story of Israel's religious history and belief, seen through the eyes of those who compiled the stories in various places much later on. And, in addition to the political purpose of embellishing King David's resume, this story wants to have it be none other than the King of Israel's golden age who teaches Jews throughout the millennia that Israel's God doesn't work through the Department of Defense.

Hear again what David says to Goliath about why he will win, "That all this assembly may know that the Lord does not save by sword and spear, for the battle is the Lord's, and he will give you into our hand." That's the religious message. It needs the political wrapping, because the lesson of not relying on strength of arms, like the lesson of inverting systems of human power, is not one we swallow easily.

I mean, who would listen if Elhanan says that? Nobody. But David? Yeah, let's make him the hero of this story. Because the facts of who actually did the deed are as immaterial as the slingshot in David's hand. In fact, that's exactly the message of the story. The truth that the story wants us to hear is, "The Lord does not save by sword and spear, for the battle is the Lord's." The purpose of the story is to get people to understand that truth, not to provide a technical history of who did what. David is the best messenger, so David gets the story.

Many of the miraculous battle victories in the Bible make that point in one way or another. The enslaved Hebrews don't beat Pharaoh's army through military might. God parts the sea for the Israelites and then closes the sea over Pharaoh's chariots. The walls of Jericho fall with the sound of trumpets. When Gideon rallies troops to meet the Midianite army of 135,000, he gathers 32,000 men to fight, but despite already being 100,000 men short, God tells Gideon to send all but 300 men home. Those 300 then win by blowing trumpets, banging on clay pots, and scaring the Midianites out of their camp in a pre-dawn raid.

When David later, as king, takes a census of Israel (which was originally the way a nation knew how many people they could put on a battlefield) God is furious, because counting the people implies that David thinks winning battles depends on how big of an army he has.

The David and Goliath story is another story in that same vein. For the people of God, victory isn't determined by more and bigger weapons or armies. God's people are not called to witness to the importance of human force. When they received the Torah at Mt. Sinai and became God's covenant partner, Israel agreed that their witness to the world would be the keeping of the commandments, not might of arms.

The vision the prophets set before them was, in the words of Micah, to "turn swords into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore." Or Isaiah, "they shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain." In story after story, the goal was most decidedly not to perfect the art of war or to have the most elite fighting force in the world. To the extent Israel's enemies were to be afraid, it was because of the might of a righteous God, not Israel's own power or cleverness. The prophet Zechariah said it clearly in chapter 4:6, "Not by might, not by power, but by my Spirit says the Lord of hosts." And Micah reminded them that the only thing God required was "to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God."

Those graduating this year are entering adulthood at a time where there are about six world-threatening Goliaths taunting us from the field, leaving the majority cowering in their tents. Many have died and are dying this moment trying to take them down. The point of the David and Goliath story is not just that a shepherd boy can have capabilities no one saw coming, even though that may be the case. The truth of the story is that we should not be looking to sword and spear and javelin but to the power of God's Spirit to win our battles.

Look at Greta Thunberg taking on the Goliath of Climate change, Malala taking on the Goliath of religious extremists preventing girls from receiving an education, or Martin Luther King, Jr. taking on the Goliath of systemic racism. Not a one of them went to those battles with sword or spear or javelin, despite heavily armed enemies. They, and all who have ever faced down giants either before or since, stepped out when love was mocked and defied, with the sure and certain confidence that love would win the battle. The witness of this story is: that is enough. Amen.