

Be of Good Courage
I Samuel 17: 1-11, 19-23, 32-49
Saugatuck Congregational Church

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June 25, 2006

The story of David and Goliath. Read from *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* by Eugene H. Peterson

The Philistines drew up their troops for battle. Saul and the Israelites came together, camped at Oak Valley, and spread out their troops in battle readiness for the Philistines. The Philistines were on one hill, the Israelites on the opposing hill, with the valley between them. A giant nearly ten feet tall stepped out from the Philistine line into the open, Goliath from Gath. He had a bronze helmet on his head and was dressed in armor—126 pounds of it! He wore bronze shin guards and carried a bronze sword. His spear was like a fence rail—the spear tip alone weighed over fifteen pounds. His shield bearer walked ahead of him. Goliath stood there and called out to the Israelite troops, "Why bother using your whole army? Am I not Philistine enough for you? And you're all committed to Saul, aren't you? So pick your best fighter and pit him against me. If he gets the upper hand and kills me, the Philistines will all become your slaves. But if I get the upper hand and kill him, you'll all become our slaves and serve us. I challenge the troops of Israel this day. Give me a man. Let us fight it out together!" When Saul and his troops heard the Philistine's challenge, they were terrified and lost all hope.

Enter David. He was the son of Jesse the Ephrathite from Bethlehem in Judah. Jesse, the father of eight sons, was himself too old to join Saul's army. Jesse's three oldest sons had followed Saul to war. David was the youngest son. While his three oldest brothers went to war with Saul, David went back and forth from attending to Saul to tending his father's sheep in Bethlehem. Each morning and evening for forty days, Goliath took his stand and made his speech.

One day, Jesse told David his son, "Take this sack of cracked wheat and these ten loaves of bread and run them down to your brothers in the camp. And take these ten wedges of cheese to the captain of their division. Check in on your brothers to see whether they are getting along all right, and let me know how they're doing—Saul and your brothers, and all the Israelites in their war with the Philistines in the Oak Valley."

David was up at the crack of dawn and, having arranged for someone to tend his flock, took the food and was on his way just as Jesse had directed him. He arrived at the camp just as the army was moving into battle formation, shouting the war cry. Israel and the Philistines moved into position, facing each other, battle-ready. David left his bundles of food in the care of a sentry, ran to the troops who were deployed, and greeted his brothers. While they were talking together, the Philistine champion, Goliath of Gath, stepped out from the front lines of the Philistines, and gave his usual challenge. David heard him. The Israelites, to a man, fell back the moment they saw the giant—totally frightened. David, who was talking to the men standing around him asked, "What's in it for the man who kills that Philistine and gets rid of this ugly blot on Israel's honor? Who does he think he is, anyway, this uncircumcised Philistine, taunting the armies of God-Alive?" They told him what everyone was saying about what the king would do for the man who killed the Philistine.

The things David was saying were picked up and reported to Saul. Saul sent for him. "Master," said David, "don't give up hope. I'm ready to go and fight this Philistine." Saul answered David, "You can't go and fight this Philistine. You're too young and inexperienced—and he's been at this fighting business since before you were born."

David said, "I've been a shepherd, tending sheep for my father. Whenever a lion or bear came and took a lamb from the flock, I'd go after it, knock it down, and rescue the lamb. If it turned on me, I'd grab it by the throat, wring its neck, and kill it. Lion or bear, it made no difference—I killed it. And I'll do the same to this Philistine pig who is taunting the troops of God-Alive. GOD, who delivered me from the teeth of the lion and the claws of the bear, will deliver me from this Philistine."

Saul said, "Go. And GOD help you!" Then Saul outfitted David as a soldier in armor. He put his bronze helmet on his head and belted his sword on him over the armor. David tried to walk but he could hardly budge. David told Saul, "I can't even move with all this stuff on me. I'm not used to this." And he took it all off. Then David took his shepherd's staff, selected five smooth stones from the brook, and put them in the pocket of his shepherd's pack, and with his sling in his hand approached Goliath. As the Philistine paced back and forth, his shield bearer in front of him, he noticed David. He took one look down on him and sneered—a mere youngster, apple-cheeked and peach-fuzzed.

The Philistine ridiculed David. "Am I a dog that you come after me with a stick?" And he cursed him by his gods. "Come on," said the Philistine. "I'll make roadkill of you for the buzzards. I'll turn you into a tasty morsel for the field mice."

David answered, "You come at me with sword and spear and battle-ax. I come at you in the name of GOD-of-the-Angel-Armies, the God of Israel's troops, whom you curse and mock. This very day GOD is handing you over to me. The whole earth will know that there's an extraordinary God in Israel. And everyone gathered here will learn that GOD doesn't save by means of sword or spear. The battle belongs to GOD—he's handing you to us on a platter!"

That roused the Philistine, and he started toward David. David took off from the front line, running toward the Philistine. David reached into his pocket for a stone, slung it, and hit the Philistine hard in the forehead, embedding the stone deeply. The Philistine crashed, face down in the dirt. That's how David beat the Philistine—with a sling and a stone. He hit him and he killed him.

When the Philistines saw that their great champion was dead, they scattered, running for their lives. The men of Israel and Judah were up on their feet, shouting! They chased the Philistines all the way to the outskirts of Gath and the gates of Ekron. I Samuel 17: 1-11, 19-23, 32-49

The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language by Eugene H. Peterson Navpress Publishing Group,

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The Israelites and the Philistines are both trying to establish themselves in Canaan, the Israelites, coming back into Canaan from Egypt; and the Philistines invading Sea Peoples, probably of Hellenic background. They are unevenly matched. The Philistines have garrisoned towns and they have metal, while in the whole Israelite army, only King Saul and his son Jonathan have swords or armour. Even their farm implements, the Israelites have to bring to the Philistines to have sharpened. I Kings 13:19-22

The most Israel has ever brought to battle was over 300,000 troops, but that has dwindled now to a few thousand; while scripture tells us, "The Philistines mustered to fight with Israel, thirty thousand chariots, and six thousand horsemen, and troops like the sand on the seashore." I Kings 13:5

Still, Israel has already won both skirmishes and battles. And while Israel is understandably daunted; the Philistines are hampered by the terrain, chariots and heavy armor are not necessarily a big advantage fighting uphill – ask the British at Bunker Hill. So there's a stand-off, the armies on opposing hills, with Goliath calling for a battle of champions, literally “stand-between” who come between the armies and fight it out one-on-one.

There is really no rational hope for Israel. They are vastly outnumbered, and Saul has lost both the trust of his troops and the charismatic Spirit that had marked his earlier days. He has displeased God and the Prophet Samuel has told Saul the kingship will be taken from him. Logically, Saul's best hope seems to be to stay the course, to go down with honor. There is no apparent way out with honor. While God has worked miracles before, no one seems to be counting on them now.

No one but David. By rights he shouldn't have been there. He's not even in the army. But Goliath makes his challenge once again, for the 41st time! And this time, David hears it. And he responds with an old perspective, absolute trust in the living God; and a new solution. He'll fight Goliath, but not on Goliath's terms. David can't wear Saul's armor, it doesn't fit, it doesn't work, he can hardly move. David proposes to go out with the strengths he does have, based on the experience he brings. It's improbable, implausible, nearly impossible. But David is persuasive; he hasn't been heard from before, but we see here his eloquence, his faithfulness, his energy, his confidence in both himself and God. He knows what he can do. And he trusts what God will do.

And amazingly, Saul agrees. This is no small act of faith on his part. David will be acting for the whole army of Israel. If he is defeated, (and how could he not be?), Israel will be even more demoralized, and the Philistines more emboldened. David is willing to take a risk, and so is Saul. And it's a big risk.

So David goes out, and he does it! Goliath is insulted even to see this puny boy come to challenge him. But he is vulnerable. Who would believe that what was needed was a boy's good aim, strong arm, hard courage, and faith that God would help him. It's a story for every age. Every generation faces huge challenges against what appear to be insurmountable odds. The old systems don't work, and there seems no way out.

What are your Goliaths? Iraq? The destruction and slow rebuilding in New Orleans? The growing National Debt? Global Warming? Dafur?

We need some Davids. We need to be Davids. We need to remember that amazing things have happened. Most of us here are old enough to have lived through the crumbling of the Berlin Wall. We have seen the end of Apartheid in South Africa, and more amazingly, we have seen there Truth and Reconciliation as the means of healing; not revenge, not force, but patient, persistent pursuit of a just society. We have seen the end of segregation in this country, not by force, but by persistent insistence on justice by people willing to risk bold action when the old ways weren't working; people who resisted returning evil for evil and so made us all into a more just nation.

We need to ask ourselves if we believe that God exists. And we need to ask if we believe God is active in the world, not magic, but active. David didn't say, let me pray to God and God will help. He didn't say, let me go down and make a sacrifice to win God's favor. David, said, let me go and do what I can do, in the name of the living God. If we believe God is active, then we have an antidote to despair in the face of long odds.

We talked in prayer group about how hard it is to even read the news. We want to turn away. It's so depressing. There seem no solutions sufficient for the tasks.

My solution is to pray the news. I pray at least to be able to bear witness, not to just turn aside. I pray for those in the news, for every service person listed as killed, by name, for their families, for the people in Iraq in each incident reported, for all caught up in tragedies, Prayer helps me bear to be a witness,

Of course, prayer reflects my deep belief that God is part of the equation as I read, as the old hymn sings,

*Though the cause of evil prosper, yet behind the dim unknown,
Standeth God within the shadow, keeping watch above His own.*

Believing that we are not alone, praying the news helps me. But it does not exonerate me. Abraham Heschel, the Great Jewish scholar and activist, wrote, "Unless the outer life expresses the inner life, piety stagnates and intention decays...we must live what we pray." ¹

The best solution to despair in the face of all that confronts us is to pray and then do what we can do. God was with David, but David was essential: is faithfulness, his truth telling, his courage, his skill, his persuasiveness were necessary for God to be able to act through him.

We need Davids in our time. We need to be Davids. We need to speak the truth we know persuasively, to take risks. We need to use the tools we have, and the experience we have been given, to make a difference. Or it doesn't matter if we are not alone. If we won't act, God is alone, and the world suffers. Then we are like Saul and the armies of Israel, defeated before we begin, scared and depressed. We need to find Davids for our time. We need to be Davids. We need to support the Davids that do come, to do what they can do.

Maybe we need, as my friends tell me, to stop the insanity of "doing the same things over and over and over again expecting different results." In a democracy, our biggest problems are all in some part political problems. If some of our Goliaths are political problems, maybe we need to look for leadership in unexpected places. David was the 8th son, of an unimportant man, of dubious lineage in a small town. We have huge issues that confront us and confound us. Where are the Davids?

When I pray the news, I pray for courage to change the things I can, and for vision about what I can do, what we can do. And sometimes God sends an answer. When I was in Vermont two weeks ago the Burlington Free Press was full of the story of two high school Seniors, Brian and Ben, who had learned about the genocide in Dafur in their Jewish youth group, and who felt compelled to act.

"Within the Jewish consciousness," Brian said, "the word 'genocide' strikes a very deep chord." "It was of crucial importance, they thought, "for more people to learn about the killings in Darfur." They were struck by how little their peers, and even adults, knew about the conflict. "Kids had no idea what Darfur was." Brian said. "The level of awareness was painfully low."²

Brian presented a Darfur lesson in social studies, but there were only seven kids in class. He organized Darfur Day at Essex High School, but had a feeling that wasn't enough." When plans to attend a Save Darfur rally in Washington fell through, "the idea struck: Let's hold a rally in Burlington." "When you catch an idea, you've got to run with it," Ben said.²

They started with an idea, and lots of rejections. They chose a name, "Vermont Speaks Up!" and a date. They designed a web-site to look more official and rented a P.O. Box for an official address. They went to business after business for sponsorship money, approaching 20 or 30, and got turned down by every one. Finally, a family from their synagogue gave \$500, wanting to encourage kids who were trying to do the right thing.²

That gave them the money to bring to VT a keynote speaker from Darfur Peace and Development, a humanitarian group based in Indiana. And it gave them momentum.² Their high school took up a collection and raised \$1000. T-shirt sales added \$600. Ben and Brian got a park permit, and rented a tent. Politicians who been unavailable called and asked to speak. Hundreds turned out for the rally; it made every news program in VT and got big press coverage. They raised over \$4000 for the U.N, Food Program on the spot.³

"We're two slacker high school students, and we managed to pull this off,"² they said. "We made a difference, and that's what our goal was, to draw attention to what is going on in Darfur."³

They faced the same depressing news we read. But they made a difference. Two Davids facing the Goliath of Dafur with energy, and the skills they had, and they helped a whole state to feel more involved, to Speak Up, to make a difference. Why not here? Why not me? Why not you? Why not us?

If we won't act, God is alone, and the world suffers. The only antidote to despair in the face of the Goliaths of our time is to do what we can with the tools and skills we have been given.

We need some Davids. We need to encourage the David's who step forward. We need to be Davids. God is with us. And God needs us. Now. Amen.

¹ p.93-94 *Quest for God: Studies in Prayer and Symbolism*, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Crossroad Publishing, 1993

² Sally Pollack, June 11, Living, *Burlington Free Press*

³ Sally Pollack, June 12, *Burlington Free Press*