

Sermon “Giant Undertakings”

Scripture Reading – I Samuel 17:32-49, Mark 4:35-40

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Blythe Denham Kieffer, D.Min.

Westminster Presbyterian Church

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This week the lectionary readings offer two dramatic narratives depicting God’s powerful intrusion into the human arena to overcome forces of injustice and chaos. The narrative of David’s defeat of Goliath in I Samuel 17 is told by a nation of their hero king who reigned around 1000 BCE. This story presents David as a young adolescent of extraordinary courage and conviction. Yet, the energy of the story comes not from the actions of the hero alone, but from David’s relationship with God and reveals the unconventional means God uses to overcome injustice. We will read verses 32-49. Hear now the word of God.

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!” ³⁸ Saul clothed David with his armor; he put a bronze helmet on his head and clothed him with a coat of mail. ³⁹ David strapped Saul’s sword over the armor, and he tried in vain to walk, for he was not used to them. Then David said to Saul, “I cannot walk with these; for I am not used to them.” So David removed them. ⁴⁰ Then he took his staff in his hand, and chose five smooth stones from the wadi, and put them in his shepherd’s bag, in the pouch; his sling was in his hand, and he drew near to the Philistine. ⁴¹ The Philistine came on and drew near to David, with his shield-bearer in front of him. ⁴² When the Philistine looked and saw David, he disdained him, for he was only a youth, ruddy and handsome in appearance. ⁴³ The Philistine said to David, “Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks?” And the Philistine cursed David by his gods. ⁴⁴ The Philistine said to David, “Come to me, and I will give your flesh to the birds of the air and to the wild animals of the field.” ⁴⁵ But David said to the Philistine, “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. ⁴⁶ This very day the LORD will deliver you into my hand, and I will strike you down and cut off your head; and I will give the dead bodies of the Philistine army this very day to the birds of the air and to the wild animals of the earth, so that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, ⁴⁷ 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 God will give you into our hand.” 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. Amen.

In our second scripture reading, Mark 4:35-40, the plight of the disciples caught in a threatening storm and Jesus' action to bring calm dramatize the redemptive work of God, who rebukes chaotic forces and redeems frightened followers from a desperate situation. The miracle affirms that this One, like Yahweh who divided the waters of chaos in the crossing of the Red Sea, has the power to rescue us from the fear and disorder that are a part of the storms of life. Listen for God's Holy Word.

³⁵ On that day, when evening had come, Jesus said to them, "Let us go across to the other side." ³⁶ And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. ³⁷ A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. ³⁸ But Jesus was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" ³⁹ Jesus woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. ⁴⁰ He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" Amen.

The title of the sermon: "Giant Undertakings"

Text: Then David took his staff in his hand, and chose five smooth stones from the wadi, and put them in his shepherd's bag, in the pouch; his sling was in his hand, and he drew near to the Philistine. 1 Samuel 17:40

Let us pray. Holy and loving God, thank you for the creative and surprising ways you overcome injustice and chaos in our world and for the privilege of being your followers. Give each of us the faith, courage and wit of David to confront the giant undertakings we face. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

The story of David and Goliath has been passed on through the ages. In this delightful and beloved narrative, we learn an important lesson about life and faith. David, a boy too young to fight in battle and the youngest son of a relatively unknown Israelite family comes forward to remind King Saul and the whole Israelite army that their God Yahweh is the Living God who saves. A truth the king and his soldiers had surely known and celebrated at one time; however, over the years in the battles of their lives they had forgotten.

They had faced one too many bullies— "Goliaths" or "giants," that seemed insurmountable. Ironically, theologian Walter Brueggeman tells us in the Interpretation Commentary that although this Philistine was indeed a very large man, about 6'9" tall and his presence would be terribly intimidating, he was not a giant. Brueggeman explains that this tendency to exaggerate obstacles is true for all of us. Problems or obstacles that we face become larger than life itself. No, the Israelites were not the first or the last to develop tunnel vision preventing them from seeing creative solutions to a problem.

David's courage to face Goliath at all and his wit, his wisdom to face Goliath unconventionally, with five smooth stones and a sling teach us something about the unexpected and surprising ways of God. It is God who saves, but in ways that astonish us, in ways that are different from our usual means of measuring influence and power.

David brings a radically different understanding to power. God is the One in whom power has its origin. David demonstrates this claim by coming against Goliath not as a traditional warrior but with the skills, genius, and the tool of a shepherd; a sling with which a small boy could hurl a stone at over 75 mph to take down a lion, a bear or a brute giant. This scenario was in vivid contrast with Saul's plan to engage both armies in conventional battle.

This story embodies the hope for all of us who face overwhelming obstacles. This is a story of hope, especially for the weak, the oppressed, and the marginalized who understand better than most that the Philistines of this world cannot be beat on their own terms.

David's well-placed stone of opposition reminds us that there are chinks in all systems of oppression that loom over us as armored giants. The shepherd boy teaches us anew a lesson every generation of God's children must relearn, that is, we are all called to giant undertakings, to confronting the bullies of oppression. The giant will be defeated not because David is stronger and cleverer than the Philistine, but because Yahweh is both cleverer and stronger than either David or Goliath.

David's response is a statement reflecting the basic justice of Yahweh. The God of justice who calms the sea is committed to the preservation of faithful people and to the defense of those who cannot defend themselves. In each generation, God calls men and women, like David, to implement God's will on crucial matters of justice and equity.

Some of us may remember the 2008 March Madness College Basketball and the attention Davidson University received. This small Presbyterian college in North Carolina was working its way toward the finals and nicknamed David by commentators. When they played KU, the game was announced as "Davidson vs. Goliath." The team was led by Steph Curry, a young and slight African American student, who is now considered the best shooter in NBA history and who ironically went on to lead the most winning "Goliath" team, the 73-win Golden State Warriors within the NBA. When Steph attended Davidson, he wrote the numbers 4:13 on his basketball shoes, which refer to the scripture verse in Philippians: "I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me."

If it were not for another basketball story, Steph Curry may never have lived his. The story of Hall of Fame coach Don Haskins is told in the book and later, a movie, entitled "Glory Road." Coach Haskins led Texas Western University, a "David" in college basketball to victory against the giant, "Goliath," #1 ranked Kentucky in the National Championships in 1966. He did it unconventionally, with the first all African American line up in college basketball. In a turbulent time of social and political change, the young African-American men who played on this team faced ridicule, abuse and death threats. The stress of the oppression, injustice, and racism begins to affect the relationships among the players and their ability to play as a team.

The team finds themselves losing their first game on their way to the finals. Coach Haskins, talking to his team during halftime of this crucial game, reminds them of who they are:

What do you want to do? You want to quit.

They're trying to take our dignity away from us, Coach!

Your dignity is inside you. No one can take something away from you, you don't give to them.

*Hey, hold your heads up. You want to shake off that hate. It's your choice...Shut them up!
Win!!!*

They do go on to win, unconventionally, in what is described as the greatest upset in college basketball. Through their courage and dignity, these young men paved the way for greater justice within college sports, based on ability, not the color of one's skin.

Thank God for the "Davids" among us, men and women who continue to face the "giants" of injustice in our world, who listen to the voice of truth within, and who demonstrate the power and love of a just and gracious God.

Whether we are advocating for justice within our society or navigating stormy seas in the boat of life, may the giant undertaking of David be a reminder of the unexpected and unconventional ways God calls each of us to face injustices, obstacles, and unexpected winds. May they remind us of the unique gifts, strength and power we each bring to the task before us. And may we respond with courage, creativity, and wit to the call of the One who can turn the tide. Amen.