

FACING GIANT PROBLEMS
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I Samuel 17:32 - 37

There are challenges in our efforts to be responsible in this series because so much is left out of our lectionary texts. We ended last week with the sobering conclusion that **“The Lord was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel.”** (15:35) We have skipped over an important detail in chapter 16 where God’s rejection of Saul was followed by a secret anointing of David as the king-in-waiting – without Saul’s knowledge.

Chapter 17 brings us the well-known story of David and Goliath. The Philistine army is encamped on a mountain, and the Israelites are on another mountain, across a valley. Taunts are being thrown back and forth. Skipping over many interesting details for now, I am going to jump into the story with verse 32.

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This is not the first time you have heard of the story of David and Goliath. Most of us heard it as children. I loved the comic book version, and identified with David in much the same way as I identified with Superman. There is a reason why we tell this story to our children: we want them to be unafraid of the giants they will inevitably face in life. But like all good children’s stories, the power of this narrative doesn’t become evident until you are an adult.

After young David was anointed king by Samuel, it appeared that nothing had really changed. Samuel left Bethlehem and returned home. David returned to taking care of the sheep. Saul was still reigning as king. And the Philistines’ army was still threatening to overrun Israel.

A great decisive battle is about to begin in the Valley of Elah. The Philistine and Israelite soldiers are staring at each other. Down into the valley lumbers a huge man named Goliath. Frederick Beuchner writes that he stands **“seven feet tall, twirling his twenty-five pound spear with the careless ease of a cheerleader twirling her baton.”** He’s wearing a bronze helmet, and a coat of bronze mail.

Goliath cries out to the Hebrews, **“This day I defy the ranks of Israel! Give me a man and let us fight each other.”** (17:10) Then we are told, **“On hearing the Philistine’s words, Saul and all the Israelites were dismayed and terrified.”** (17:11)

Sooner or later, all of us face a giant. Maybe you are facing one today. Perhaps a giant tumor threatens your life, a giant hole in your broken heart, a giant problem in your marriage. Maybe there is a giant sin that you just keep committing over and over. And this giant leaves you **“dismayed and terrified.”**

Just as we face giant problems in our individual lives, collectively we face giant problems as well. As a church we keep confronting giant issues of racism, and systems that appear to be lacking a soul. We confront nationalism, and an ever widening gap between the rich and the poor. The list goes on and on. There is no question that these giant problems abound. The question is what will we do about it? Will we join Saul and his soldiers in being **“dismayed and terrified”**? Will we just be intimidated by Goliath

and hope someone else has the stomach for the battle? Or will we enter the fray with what we've got, and strive to make a difference?

It is in response to this critical question that David subtly enters the narrative. He arrives on the scene not as the hero, but as an errand boy sent by his father to bring supplies to his older brothers who were supposed to be fighting with Saul. But when David saw that the king and all his army were terrified of one man, he couldn't believe his eyes. Was there no one who would take on the giant? Maybe then David heard the familiar echo of the words Samuel once spoke in his ear when he was being anointed. **"You are the one."** Don't keep looking for someone else to fix your life or to take on the battle that is before you. **You are "the one."**

So David goes to Saul to offer his service. But the king responds: **"You are just a boy. He asked for a man to fight him. Who do you think you are? You are not able to go out against this Philistine and fight him."**

It is bad enough that Goliath scoffs at our attempts to make changes. But we are also belittled by those who are *supposed* to be on our side. They ask us: "Who are you to take on ICE? Who are you to challenge poverty? It's very complicated, and you don't have enough experience."

Notice that David *doesn't* assert that he is *qualified* to take on this giant. All he says is that the same God who allowed him as a shepherd to pull a lamb out of the mouth of the lion will deliver him again.

In a sense, it then gets worse. Saul goes from *ridiculing* David to *trying to help him*. He places his armor on David – his helmet, his coat of mail, and his huge sword. David literally cannot move under the weight of all this protection. Once you have decided to take on the giant in front of you, whether it is the giant in your own life or in our society, you'll soon discover that you are receiving a lot of advice. "You just have to read this book." "You have got to get political." "You have to fight fire with fire." But all of that armor will paralyze you.

I would suggest that what you have to do first is to renew your faith in the God who brought you to this giant. Secondly, you have to be sure that you are called to take on this giant. David did not battle all of the Philistines, but he knew that God had led him to this giant. Thirdly, you have to be you. So even though you and I might be concerned about the same injustices, don't expect me to act out that concern with the same style and strategy as you.

So David dumped all of the king's armor on the ground. He went to the brook that ran down into the valley, and he knelt down to pick up five smooth stones for his slingshot. This was something he had done over and over as a shepherd.

As I look at this through a poetic lens, could it be that in this humble posture, David demonstrates that he knows how to find his center. If you are going to take an audacious stand in life, you have to know where center is. Everyone else was allowing the giant problem to determine the center, which led to dismay and fear. Everyone else was just reacting, while this young man was about to change the history of Israel by getting down on his knees. As David collected each of these stones, he may have kept telling himself the same thing: **"The LORD who delivered me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will deliver me again. The LORD will deliver me again. The LORD deliver me again."** Do you see how this is a posture of prayer?

Likewise the Gospels present Jesus spending much time in prayer. Learn from Jesus' example. You and I could look pretty foolish by taking on these giant problems on our own power. If anything is going to change, it will have to be God who does it. Prayer, persistent prayer, is the means by which you remain centered in God. You have to kneel first if you want to take a stand.

When Goliath looked at David, he shouted out with scorn, "**Am I a dog, that you come at me with sticks?**" (17:43) But David said, "**You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the LORD . . .**" (17:45-46) If you are going after giants, you don't have to use their weapons to defeat them. You don't have to get angry and mean to challenge an angry, mean person. All you have to do is truly believe the battle is the Lord's.

This is not really a story about David, and it certainly isn't a story about Goliath. It is intended to be a story about the faithfulness of God. The point of the story is to claim that God was at the center of the Valley of Elah - just as God is at the center of every corner of the world, including your corner. God is at the center of the workplace where you will return tomorrow; God is in the doctor's office you'll visit tomorrow. It may not look like that, but it makes such a difference for those who truly believe that God is there. Those who can see that, find that their dismay and terror over giants has been replaced with courage.

David was so convinced of this truth that he didn't even think that he was the underdog. He ran toward the giant, slung a stone into his forehead, and the giant came crashing down. When the Philistines saw their giant was down, they turned and ran away.

With all of his training as a warrior, all of his bronze armor, and all of his weapons, it never occurred to Goliath that a simple slingshot would bring him down. God loves to use the foolish things of the world to bring about redemption – like an old nun from Calcutta named Teresa. Like a rabbi from Nazareth named Jesus. Or like you and whatever you are holding in your hand.

By way of a post script, have you ever wondered why David picked up five smooth stones? Apparently the first one did the trick. So why five stones? We are not told why, which I take as permission to speculate. My guess is that David picked up five stones because it is good to have a back-up plan, you know? Maybe all of those years of scaring off lions and bears taught him that sometimes it takes more than one stone. Sometimes it takes more than one round of chemo to get rid of the cancer. Sometimes it takes more than one petition or demonstration to make a change. Sometimes it takes more than one gesture to reconcile a broken relationship.

For those of you freaking out by the societal giants we are facing, let me close with the words that Diana Butler Bass tweeted on Thursday: **"Do not be overcome with anger, fear, and anxiety. Love your neighbor as YOURSELF. How are you treating yourself right now? Spiritual self-care -- practicing sabbath, rest, gratitude, prayer, discernment, holy reading, silence, meditation, contemplative prayer -- these things are NOT optional right now. They are key to acting justly. If you aren't taking care of yourself right now, you will burn out. You will lose focus. You won't be able to love your neighbor."**

I would add that if you kneel by the brook – the living water of spirituality – you will find your center. *Then* you can take a stand against the giants.

Amen.

I Samuel 17:32 - 37 (NRSV)

³²David said to Saul, **"Let no one's heart fail because of him; your servant will go and fight with this Philistine."** ³³Saul 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."** ³⁴But 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, ³⁵I 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. ³⁶Your 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. 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!"**