

Goliath is Big (But God is Bigger)

1 Samuel 17:1a, 4-11, 19-24, 32-49; Mark 4:35-41

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A couple of weeks ago, I went to Six Flags Over Georgia. I had not been to Six Flags since I was in high school, and truthfully, I hadn't missed it. But my sister and brother and nephew were coming for a visit. So we sibs (at the urging of my mother, who spent the day at my air-conditioned home) decided to take my daughter, Katherine, and her cousin, Joshua, to Six Flags. It was hot. They've thoughtfully paved the streets of the park in black asphalt, so it is **really** hot. Of course, once you've ridden the venerable old Log Flume, plus Thunder River and Splashwater Falls, well, then you are...hot and soaking wet. But mostly Six Flags has roller coasters. A lot of them. My sister was traumatized as a child by the relatively tame Mine Train coaster, but we rode it together this time. We decided that was still about as daring as we cared to be.

My brother was not so lucky. Being a really great dad, he got on every roller coaster in the park Joshua wanted to ride. I'm glad to say that the only thing he lost on all those loops, back spins and heart-stopping drops were his keys. His keys to everything: car, house, church, even a file cabinet. The two of them rode the Scream Machine, the Cyclone, the Ninja (with five loops), the Mind Bender, and Batman (an inverted coaster). The one coaster even Joshua decided not to tackle was called...*Goliath*. The guide says: *Thrill level: Max. Two 17-story drops. 70 mph. What more can we say?* I knew what to say, "Forget it." Since we didn't ride it, we didn't visit *Goliath Gifts*, which apparently sells "An assortment of Goliath Souvenirs." I kind of wish now I'd bought something...a gift for David...like an "*I Survived Goliath*" T-shirt.

This biblical story is so well-known that a roller coaster in a secular amusement park can be named after one of its characters and a mass of hot, sticky people will get it.

The story of David and Goliath is the most detailed and lengthy story about David in the Bible; and it is told with characteristically artful skill by the writer of 1 and 2 Samuel. Here we have those terrible, relentless Philistines lined up on one ridge. Across a valley on the opposite ridge are Saul and the Israelite army. The fierce Philistines were one reason Israel begged God for a king in the first place...someone to lead them in battle against their enemies, especially *this* enemy. They got King Saul, who at the moment is quaking in his armor like the rest of his army. They are scared to death...scared *of* death as the giant Goliath is trash talking across the valley. Depending on the biblical scholar you read, Goliath is anywhere from 6'9" to 9'9", either way a giant, especially for that time period. And even though the Bible tells us Saul was also tall, he wasn't *that* tall. And at the moment, he isn't very tough either. Not when compared to Goliath, whose armor is told in incredible detail in verses 5-8. The writer paints a vivid picture of just how huge and tough and thick Goliath and his armor and weapons were.

That's when young David arrived in the camp. He was bringing bread and cheese to his three brothers who were serving in Saul's army. David was so eager to see what was happening that he left the food back with the baggage clerk and ran forward. What David saw were people scared to death of Goliath. David's future is painted in miniature right here. For it is David, only a boy out of all of them from king to soldiers, who goes boldly up to King Saul and it is David who speaks first, not the king. David says, "Don't let anyone's heart fail because of Goliath. I will fight him!" Saul tells him he can't possibly win...he is outmatched in size, age, weight, and experience. But David says that as a shepherd he has had to fight lions and bears to save his sheep. Surely, David says, I can defeat this man who has defied *the armies of the living God*. There, David is the only person—from king to foot soldier—who has mentioned God at all. David affirms his faith in the living God.

There is a moment of comic relief as Saul gives David his king's armor to wear. But David can't move in it. So he takes it off and says he'll

stick with his slingshot. David picks up five smooth stones, but he is only going to need one: one well-placed stone.

When Goliath saw the only one in Israel who dared to square off with him, he was insulted...even so, Goliath also couldn't help but notice how handsome David was! Still, he called David a "stick," and cursed David by his Philistine gods. Notice, though, his gods are left nameless...judged insignificant and ineffectual by the writer of 1 Samuel. That's when David said it: "You come to me with sword and spear and javelin; but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts...who does not save by sword and spear." Yet God saves nonetheless.

I can still remember watching a documentary on PBS back in the 1980s about apartheid in South Africa. There was a moment when Bishop Desmond Tutu was answering a question...probably something along the lines of how he kept going, kept his hopes up in the face of so much oppression and violence. And I can still see that eager smile, those dancing eyes, as Tutu said: "When the white man first came here, we had the land and they had the Bible. They said, 'Let us pray.' We closed our eyes and when we opened them again, they had the land and we had the Bible. I can tell you," he said, "which is the stronger. We have the Word of God. We will prevail. It is inevitable!" Desmond Tutu believed not just in some God in the heavens who cared in an ethereal sort of way. No, he believed in a *living* God. Who does not save by sword and spear. But who saves nonetheless.

David was armed that day with a slingshot and a smooth stone, but what he really went out on was a firm confidence in the living God. All the action now moves to David, who is the subject of no less than fifteen verbs in verses 48-51. After so long and careful a build up and plot development, it is all over in the flick of a wrist...one well-placed stone kills Goliath. From that moment on, Saul's defeat is as certain as David's rise to power.

This story is not, of course, a model of non-violent resistance against threat. In fact, it gets pretty gory over the next few verses. But it teaches that David is nevertheless subversive in the face of oppressive power. You see, Saul and his army assumed that the power necessary for deliverance

must lie in military might. Force against force. Weapon against weapon. David alone is able to see that something as practical as his shepherding skills, in concert with the resources of the living God, are the real source of hope.

As Old Testament scholar Bruce Birch puts it: “Trust in God nurtures hope that there is a way out no way...a chink in the impregnable armor, that a well-placed stone of opposition can bring down impenetrable, giant systems of oppression.” David reminds us that the words we speak, as well as our actions, are important. His voiced affirmation of the “living God” enables him to go forth against “the technologies of death.” I have been following the events in Iran as closely as possible, given the suppression of news there. A report on Friday night said that groups of people supporting new leadership were crowding onto rooftops and shouting “Allah Akbar!” into the night skies: “God is great!” is their confident affirmation against the technologies of death.

Imagine the kind of courage it is requiring to protest in the streets in daylight when it means the police will break into their home at night and arrest and beat them. It reminds us of the iconic image from Tiananmen Square of the lone young man, holding his small bag of groceries, standing in front of the tank. Moving in concert with it to the right or to the left. Standing his ground in hope, ready for whatever consequence he might face. In this present conflict in Iran, one image has already become an early icon. It is the video of a young woman, perhaps only 16, lying dead, shot in the chest by security forces. Unconfirmed reports have named her “Neda,” a common female name in Iran, which one reporter says means, “Divine voice” or “message.”

Because “God does not save by sword and spear, we must be imaginative and resourceful in seeking alternatives to the intimidation of the powerful.” This was the problem with Saul and his army. They could think of “nothing more to do than to imitate poorly the very forces of oppressive power they opposed.” It took David, with his imagination and

resourcefulness, to come up with an alternative to the usual fight or flight. Imagination and resourcefulness enough to come up with an alternative...

I read recently about a woman in Africa named Maggie. She was a Tutsi who had adopted seven Hutu and Tutsi children. Hutus came to her village and killed most of Maggie's extended family and many of her friends. She and her children escaped and found refuge in a Catholic compound. Only there, a group of Tutsis came to kill Hutus, including Maggie's adopted Hutu children. She was forced to watch as they massacred 72 people. Later, she found all seven of her children alive, hiding in the church's sacristy. Maggie decided to rebuild her village as a place of peace.

She has built a place she calls Maison Shalom, House of Peace, and has adopted another 25 children. She built huts for children, developed a health clinic and a school, set up microfinance initiatives, and established business training in hair dressing, auto mechanics, and other fields. She taught sustainable agriculture and even built a pool and a film theater. When rebel soldiers demanded payment in exchange for not destroying the theater, Maggie invited them to watch movies instead. The rebels came to the movies. Now there is also a hospital and nursing school there.

Maggie says, "Love made me an inventor." She is convinced that God's love is more powerful than hatred and violence. Once a man came to Maison Shalom to kill Maggie. She talked him out of it, telling him he couldn't be happy being defined by hatred and violence. She invited him to come and live in her community, to be her driver and to help care for the children. And he did. (In *The Christian Century*, "Maison Shalom" by L. Gregory Jones, June 16, 2009, p. 29.)

As Bruce Birch says, we in the church too often clank around in the armor of Saul, trying to imitate and best oppression on its own terms. Or, to use our Gospel image today: We are disciples fearfully gripping the sides of the boat we're all in; elbowing Jesus whom we suspect is not so much a living Lord, but one asleep at the helm of the church, the world, our very lives. But what if we could be more imaginative and courageous and

resourceful in our mission and life together? What if we were not so overwhelmed and captivated by Goliath or the storm without, but confident in the living God in our midst?

Birch says that kind of faith requires of us “Faithful and truthful speech, courageous confrontation, and the trust that by God’s grace a well-placed stone might prove superior to the armor of a Goliath or a Saul.” (In his commentary in **The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary, Vol. II**, pp. 113-115.)

Maggie’s belief that there actually is a *living* God inspires her to faithful, truthful speech, courageous confrontation, and trust that God’s grace and well-placed effort on our part just might win out over hatred and violence. You and I in the church too often “clank around in Saul’s armor” or grip the sides of this boat saying we can’t do anything about even ordinary challenges before us like paying for building improvements or finding a church treasurer or beginning a new mission effort...much less tackling threats as big and dangerous as a Philistine giant.

So this week, it might serve us well to read and re-read the story of David and Goliath in order to find hope enough, imagination enough, resources enough to make us a little, maybe even a lot more subversive in the face of whatever obstacle seems overwhelming and powerful. Remember this: Goliath is big. But God is bigger. Can I get an Amen to that?