

"A Sure Bet."

1 Samuel 17;
Chapel Lane Presbyterian Church
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Each of us has a short list of stories from the Bible that stand out. There are those perennial favorites like Noah and Jonah and if we stay with a water theme, what about Jesus walking on the water or calming the stormy sea?

The story of David and Goliath usually makes the short list as well. It may have been a while since we heard it in its entirety and that is why I chose to read it today.

As is true with many of the "well-known" stories from the Bible (that we think we know so well), we may find new things that speak to us, new angles to pursue, new insights that did not come to us before. Perhaps that is so for you today.

What are some of the features of this story? At the outset we are confronted by the giant Goliath. He is the embodiment of all that strikes terror into our hearts. The narrator moves quickly from recording his 9 foot height to detailing his armor. Nothing is left out. We are given to believe that nothing is exaggerated either.

Here is someone who is "high tech" in every way, outfitted with the best that the Bronze Age can provide. And he is a force to be reckoned with. He cannot be ignored. There is no getting around him. For 40 days he has issued his challenge to Saul and the army of Israel.

For 40 days Saul and his men have cowered in fear and been immobilized by the sheer size, not to mention the self-assured bravado of this giant killing machine.

Many of us have Goliath-like adversaries that strike fear into our hearts. Is there a giant standing in your path, daring you to speak up or to fight? What is the giant's name?

Sometimes just naming the adversary is a step toward overcoming it. Sometimes speaking its name out loud lets others hear what it is that has paralyzed us with fear or caused our heart to melt. Sometimes finding our voice is key to letting whoever is "David" for us hear the name of our adversary and then speak the name of the living God, the Lord of Hosts, Maker of Heaven and Earth to remind us of who is on our side and has been on our side all along.

This is what happens in the story. David gets close enough to hear what is going on. With the innocence of youth, coupled with a sure reliance upon God, David starts asking questions, trying to find out what has been happening.

Everyone has forgotten the most important part of the equation. It is the Lord who is the deliverer. God is the one who saves. The race is not always to the swift, nor the fight to the strong. God, who looks upon the heart and gauges the inward being, is the one who cannot be left out of our clever calculations.

Until David arrives on the scene, God has been left out entirely. And the result is fearfulness and immobility.

David speaks up, he speaks up for God and God's power to redeem. He has all the self-assurance of youth, but as we will soon see, it is coupled with experience at handling adversity with skill and determination.

News of David's words reaches the ear of King Saul and he sends for him. Was Saul looking for a diversion? Was he grateful that finally,

somebody was voicing some courage and optimism? Did Saul just need to hear it for himself?

When Saul sends for David, David speaks first - maybe an indication of what is in store as David will ultimately supplant Saul and take first place in everything? It is not until David's speech to Saul that the name of the Lord is finally invoked as the God who delivered David from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear and who will deliver him from the hand of Goliath as well.

Once the name of the Lord is brought into the equation in such a powerful and faithful way, it is as if Saul finds his voice too. He says: "Go, and may the Lord be with you."

But immediately Saul compels David to fight Goliath on Goliath's own terms: using the best equipment and armament that money can buy.

For all his talk of relying on the Lord, neither Saul nor the rest of the army really believe in their own story of faith. They don't act as if God is a key player in the events of history. It is as if God is irrelevant to the outcome of this encounter, a non-player when someone like Goliath shows up.

I don't think God calls us to be foolish or to purposefully put ourselves at risk, just to prove how faithful we are. I also don't believe that just because we invoke the name of the Lord that God automatically has to be on our side or that the outcome we pray for will come to pass. Even Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane prayed: "Not my will, but thine be done."

I believe we are called to make good use of the tools at our disposal. This includes the latest in medical technology to combat the "Goliath" of cancer, the best that the behavioral sciences and drug therapies

have to offer to deal with the dark demons of depression and psychosis, the most effective protective gear necessary for performing dangerous jobs or for keeping our military personnel as safe as possible.

But, if these are the sum total of what we bring to the battle line, we are not much different from Saul and his army.

We dare not count God out! Without God in our thinking and our praying and our acting, we won't be able to stop the shaking in our knees, much less take the steps necessary to meet the challenges we face.

David was always insisting that God was in charge and God was at work in every aspect of life. And while he was willing to be obedient to his earthly king and that king's wisdom, as soon as Saul and Saul's armor was seen to be a hindrance rather than a help to him, David put on a different kind of armor, armor more in keeping with who he was and what he was used to.

He chose 5 smooth stones for his slingshot. Not just 1 stone. Why, 1 would be "cocky", wouldn't it? That would be like saying: "I can whip this guy with one hand tied behind my back and with a blindfold on." No. Not just 1 stone. That would be crossing the line and putting God to the test in a prideful way.

So too, choosing 20 stones wouldn't exactly be a statement of faith either! Not too many, nor too few. Just 5. It says: "I am trusting in God, but I also have a part to play and it may take some effort." It is a statement of faith coupled with humility: a good combination for going up against any of our "Goliaths".

And so David drew near to the battle line. Have you noticed how this story is overrun with speeches? The battle itself is almost over before it begins. It is in the speeches that we hear where the speakers are standing.

Are they standing on the promises of God their savior, or standing on some other ground? Are they striving to live in accordance with the faith that has nurtured them since their youth, or are they grasping after the latest the world has to offer in hopes that this is where their salvation and security will lie?

You don't need me to itemize the many points of crossover between this story and our stories, do you? We don't need to be reminded of the times when we have written God out of our story or failed to take into account the historic grace and mercy of God who, even today, is a very present help in times of trouble.

All those who would place their bets on the outcome of this encounter based on what they see would be wrong. The only sure bet is in God. The Heidelberg Catechism puts it this way in its opening question: "What is your only comfort, in life or in death?" And the answer: "That I, with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own, but belong unto my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ; who, with his precious blood, has fully satisfied for all my sins, and delivered me from all the power of the devil; and so preserves me that without the will of my heavenly Father, not a hair can fall from my head; yea, that all things must be subservient to my salvation, and therefore, by his Holy Spirit, He also assures me of eternal life, and makes me sincerely willing and ready, henceforth, to live unto him."

It is important for us to learn to express our faith in the living God and to act as if we believe what we say is true!

David lived his present out of his experience of God's grace and deliverance in the past. He did not let what he saw rob him of what he knew in his heart to be true.

The same can be true for us. We can live out of the strength of the knowledge of God's abundant grace and love, or we can choose to go it on our own, trusting that the "armor" we have always used will get us through....

What are you betting on? In whom have you put your trust? In the Living God or in some lesser deity?

The same God who was with David in his struggle with Goliath is the God who has won every other battle, including - and most especially - the battle with sin, won by Christ on the cross.

Now this same God is in a battle for our hearts, and not just our hearts but our heads as well. God asks for our trust in his power to save and to redeem - here and now - today!

And so, the battle lines are drawn once again.

Let us pray.

Merciful God, when we act in ways that contradict what we say we believe about you, when we take things into our own hands without first asking for your guidance and direction, when we shake with fear and are overcome by the "facts on the ground": strengthen our resolve to trust in you, give us eyes of faith to see that those who are with us are greater than those who are against us, and teach us patience in the face of seemingly unanswered prayer and unresolved dilemmas. Remind us of how you have been our companion, our advocate, our source of

wisdom, grace and love in times past. Help us to believe your promise that you are with us even now, and to the close of the age. Amen.