

A Sermon Preached by Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian on February 20, 2022

THE STORY OF DAVID AND GOLIATH

Then David said to Saul, 'I cannot walk with these; for I am not used to them.' So David removed them. 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. I Samuel 17:39-40

Today we continue our series on the core stories from the life of King David. Last week we learned of Samuel anointing David to replace Saul as king. This did not happen immediately. David continued to live his life as a shepherd. Today's story takes place soon after his anointing. In a basic historical sense this story is really not important in the life of Israel, yet it may well be the favorite story of David's life. David's encounter with Goliath is one of the stories that almost every child who attended Sunday school can remember. It is a story to be appreciated at several levels.

On a very basic level it is a wonderful adventure story. Our passage for this morning included only a very small part of the tale. The story opens with two opposing camps of soldiers. On one side were the Philistines who had encroached on land belonging to the tribe of Judah. On the other side were the forces of Israel under the command of King Saul. They each camped on opposing mountains with a valley between them.

In the Philistine camp there was a huge impressive fighter by the name of Goliath. We are told that he was covered in a very expensive suit of armor. He has a spear that was heavy and lethal. Goliath was a man to be feared.

Goliath stepped forward and invited Israel to send out its own champion for man to man combat. There was a time that disputes between small nations or tribes were settled by single combat. Instead of risking the lives of all the men in the army there were times that each side would choose a champion. The two would fight and that would decide the issue.

In the conventions of warfare in those days it was a matter of honor that someone would take up the challenge. But Goliath seemed so fearsome that no one on Israel's side took up the challenge. It seemed all of King Saul's forces lacked courage.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, Jesse asked his young son David to take some supplies to his brothers who were a part of King Saul's army. The soldiers in those days supplied their own needs. So, Jesse gives David some grain and bread for his brothers. When he arrived at the camp the army was moving forward ready to do battle.

Just as David gets near the front Goliath steps forward to give his enemy one last chance to avoid a big battle by having a champion fight him. It is interesting that David does not immediately volunteer. He asks what the King would do for a person who took on this challenge. The people said the King would reward the person who battled Goliath.

David's eldest brother over hears him talking to the people and gets mad. In effect he asks why the heck is David here? He questions David as to whether David has abandoned his post as shepherd and had come to be a mere spectator at the battle. He is annoyed that his little brother has shown up and seems to be bragging about himself.

David then goes before Saul and volunteers to fight on Israel's behalf. He is willing to restore the honor of the people by taking up Goliath's challenge. King Saul is reluctant to let him fight. He notes that after all David is just a young shepherd boy who has not had any combat experience, while Goliath has been trained from his youth.

David responds that his resume as a shepherd included taking down bears and lions that came after the sheep. He says that since I have killed lions and bears this has prepared me to take on the giant. He says if God protected me from those beasts he will be with me in fighting for his people.

King Saul gives in and says yes. Saul tries to help David by giving him his armor. Saul is a big man and at the time David is small. We can almost see the picture in our minds. He must have looked a little like a ten-year-old dressing up in his or her parents' clothes. David almost could not move because it was so bulky and heavy. So instead he dresses like a shepherd and picks up stones to use with his sling shot.

Can you picture the scene: there are two opposing armies and two sides of a valley; in front of one is a Goliath, the huge champion with experience and power. Then the ranks part on the other side and out comes a young man dressed as a shepherd.

Goliath's first reaction is to feel insulted. He may have wondered if they were making sport with him. This is not a serious champion. It must be a joke when they send out a boy to do a man's job. He taunted David with all the things he would do to him including feeding the birds and animals with his flesh. David responded in kind telling Goliath that he would cut off his head. He says that he would show God's power by defeating him without the use of sword or spear.

So the two combatants approached each other. Before Goliath could close the distance between them David pulled a rock out of his pouch, whirled his sling shot and fired a bull's eye into Goliath's forehead. Goliath goes down completely unconscious. David ran over to Goliath and took his sword and cut off his head.

In light of this shocking development the Philistines flee in fear with the army of Israel in hot pursuit.

This is a wonderful story that sparks the imagination of elementary age children. But so what? Why is the story important? On a literal historical level this passage, while full of energy and color, has little importance. When Joshua led the people of Israel into the Promised Land it began a long struggle to gain control of the territory. Joshua gained only partial control of what we now call Israel. For several hundred years the leaders of Israel competed with other tribes, especially the Philistines, for control of the Promised Land. The story of David and Goliath is one minor example of this struggle. It did not start the struggle or end it. The story has almost no historical significance.

If on the plain level of history this story has little meaning, how are we to read it. It seems to me that the only way to gain real meaning from this passage is to use methods of interpretation used by Christians in the first 1400 years of Christian history. During most of Christian history, teachers and preachers knew that Scripture can speak on many levels. It may have no important historical meaning, but it can have great spiritual meaning. They

understood that certain passages could have deep meaning for the spiritual life if read as metaphor or allegory. I think there is great profit in looking at the story of David and Goliath as an allegory of our own spiritual struggles.

If one has tried to seriously follow Jesus, we soon discover that we seem to struggle with Goliaths in our own lives. When we seek to grow in faith there are all kinds of temptations, idols, and passions that can impede our growing in love for God and our neighbors. We each have giants that strike us with terror that can impede our spiritual progress.

There all kinds of fears that hinder our becoming more faithful. For some it may be the fear of failure. In the past they may have committed to reading the Bible every day or set aside a prayer time, or wanted to mend a broken relationship, or grown in sharing their resources with others. But it did not happen. So the fear of failing again keeps them from even trying.

For some the giant may be dealing with an addiction to alcohol or drugs or sex. These can so control one's life that one no longer seems to have any power to change. This giant puts fear into one's heart and can prevent or impede change.

For others it is the fear of rejection. We all to some extent want to fit in with people around us. It is important for us to be accepted by the folks with whom we live our day to day lives. We may wonder in this increasingly secular culture that if we truly give ourselves to following Jesus whether we will be thought odd and become marginalized.

For some the giant is greed. All of us have a desire to enjoy the goods of the created order. But for some it can be the driving force in their lives. They can become so driven to acquire the goods of the world that it drives out every other commitment whether to family, community or God. Many people make an idol out of money. The worry of not having enough keeps them from growing in faith.

For some it is death that becomes the adversary. For some the fear of death can shape every aspect of their lives. They work to stay young and fit. They avoid taking any risks. For some it means never talking or thinking about their mortal end. Denying death means usually avoiding the important questions about human existence.

I could go on and on listing various things that become giant impediments to spiritual growth.

How do we defeat our Goliaths? When Saul finally accepted David to be his champion, he gave him his armor. But David rejected them. The armor did not fit him and limited his mobility. Instead David used the weapons that he had practiced using as a shepherd. It was a sling shot that gave him victory over Goliath.

I believe that this story teaches us to use the spiritual weapons that work best for us. There are a whole host of spiritual weapons, which I would call practices, that are available to us. In the Bible and throughout Christian history followers of Jesus have developed a plethora of practices that they have found helpful in defeating those things which keep us from growing in faith.

One practice is reading the Bible. People have developed many different approaches to reading the Bible. Other practices include prayer. There are times people who are struggling with some giant are told to pray. This can be confusing because there are so many forms of prayer. If you want a short introduction to prayer the office has a copy of Judith's booklet Growing in Prayer.

There are many other practices found in the Bible and Christian tradition. These include fasting, forgiving, almsgiving and many others. All these practices become weapons, if you will, in the battle against those things that keep us from becoming the person God is calling us to be.

David rejected using Saul's armor. While Saul's armor and sword worked for him, it was not appropriate for David. He was too small to wield them. But David had practiced and used his sling shot against lions and bears while protecting the sheep. They worked for him.

Thus for us we need to explore those practices of the faith that work for us. Some of the practices fit our nature and temperament, but others just do not.

My favorite professor in Seminary was Diogenes Allen. Dick was a great teacher, but the giant he could not defeat was anger. If a student walked into class ten minutes late, you cannot imagine how he would tear into the tardy student.

I took a seminar with Dick on Plato. At each class a different student had to present a short paper on one of the dialogues of Plato. At one class a student did a less than perfect job. For some reason Dick lit into him. He really tore the paper apart. It was embarrassing to be present. At the next class he apologized for his inappropriate behavior. Anger was a giant he could not defeat.

Many years later I took a continuing education class at the Seminary. Dick was a changed person. His whole demeanor seemed to have changed. When some people acted or spoke in a way that in the past would have provoked his wrath, he responded with kindness. It was amazing.

One of the people at the program was brave enough to mention that he seemed much calmer than in years past. He replied that the secret was Lectio-divina. He said that several years before he started the practice of lectio. He read small passages of Scripture over several times. The first time asking what word stood out. The second time through focusing how does this word touch what is happening in his life right then. The third time through he asked is there an invitation for me in this passage.

Over time he said, "This practice drained away the anger that had been at the core of my being." This practice slayed the giant of anger that had controlled his response to others.

Today at home I ask you to ponder two questions.

What Giant keeps you from being the person that God wants you to be?

Then ask what spiritual practice would you arm yourself in fighting that Giant?