

1 Samuel 17:1-11, 31-49
Ephesians 6:10-20

Seventh Sunday After Pentecost
Midway Presbyterian Church
July 8, 2018

Battle in the Valley of Elah

Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson

Our Old Testament Lesson today presents one of the most well-known stories of the Bible. We may remember it from Sunday School or Vacation Bible School. It's the story of the young shepherd boy David confronting the Philistine giant Goliath. Though David has no armor and only a slingshot for a weapon, God is on his side, the side of the righteous weak, over the unrighteous powerful. Listen to these words from 1 Samuel 17:1-11 and 31-49...

Introduction to the Epistle Lesson

In our Epistle Lesson from Ephesians, Paul writes from prison, in bonds for his faith in Christ. The key thought of this letter is the gathering together of all things in Christ. Toward the end of the epistle, Paul reminds the church and its members of the source of their strength in combat with the forces of evil. In order to overcome, Christians need to put on the whole armor of God. Listen to these words from Ephesians 6:10-20...

Sermon

As noted in The Introduction, our Old Testament scripture today tells the story of young David facing the Philistine giant, Goliath. Gathered and encamped in the Valley of Elah, the Israelites were in the field preparing for battle against their enemies the Philistines, when the biggest, strongest Philistine of all stepped out from the gathered army and gave this challenge:

Today I defy the ranks of Israel!
Give me a man, that we may fight together. (17:10)

In those days when war was about to break out between nations, it was customary for two individuals to duel first in a fight to the death. This practice of deciding conflicts through individual combat could save lives or it could set the tone for the entire war.

King Saul and the Israeli army heard Goliath's challenge, but no one wanted to take on this huge warrior one-on-one. Imagine facing someone taller than Shaquille O'Neil, with a bronze helmet, covered in armor, and carrying a huge bronze spear. When the soldiers of the army of Israel heard Goliath's challenge, they were dismayed and greatly afraid.

But along came a young shepherd boy, a musician named David, the youngest of eight sons of Jesse. Amazingly, he volunteered to face the giant Philistine. King Saul appreciated the gesture, but tried to reason with David. Besides being a giant, Goliath was a professional soldier with all sorts of combat experience. David was too young to fight in battle. His menial task with the troops was carrying food and supplies.

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. (17:33)

But David was determined. And he was confident. Confident because he believed that God was on his side. And with God all things were possible. Like any job applicant, David listed his qualifications to Saul. As a shepherd whenever a lion or a bear posed a danger to his father's sheep, David would come to the rescue, going after the predator and striking it down.

In David's mind, fighting Goliath was little different from fighting a bear or a lion. As God had delivered him from the predatory lion and the bear, he believed God would do so with the Philistine giant. Goliath had defied the God of the armies of Israel. David would call on the name of the Lord—something everyone else had apparently forgot. David would not go into battle alone; the living God would be with him.

If we go back from 1 Samuel to the book of Joshua, in the first chapter we find that Moses is now dead. The great man of God who had echoed God's word, "Let my people go," had led them out of Egypt, out of the land of Pharaoh. Moses continued to guide the people in the wilderness. He received God's Commandments. But now he is gone and a new leader is needed. And God calls Joshua to be this person. And in this same first chapter God assures Joshua that,

No one shall be able to stand against you all the days of your life...Be strong and courageous; for you shall put this people in possession of the land that I swore to their ancestors to give them, being careful to act in accordance with all the law that my servant Moses commanded you... (Joshua 1:5a, 6, 7b)

Now Joshua might well have replied, "O Lord you tell me to have courage, but how? Where do I get the courage to lead your people in such a difficult time?" And God says:

I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go." (1:9)

Well, King Saul reluctantly agreed to allow David to fight Goliath, for no one else wanted to take him on. And the next scene is somewhat comical. David, the young shepherd boy, was suited up in King Saul's armor in preparation for battle. Saul

...clothed David with his armor; he put a bronze helmet on his head and clothed him with a coat of mail. 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. (1 Samuel 17: 38-39)

He didn't even take a sword or spear like the other soldiers. Instead he took his staff in his hand, and went to the stream where he picked out five smooth stones and put them in his shepherd's bag. His weapon would be—his sling shot. But it would turn out to be the only weapon he needed. And despite his apparent lack of readiness—no armor, and only a peasant's weapon—David was ready for his confrontation with the giant, because he had faith that the living God of Israel was with him and would deliver him.

While we may not picture the devil as having horns, red tights, and a pitch fork, we would agree that there is a real power of evil in the world. Robert Louis Stevenson once said:

You know the Caledonian Railway Station in Edinburgh? One cold, east windy morning I met Satan there.

While we don't know exactly what Stevenson's experience was, we may well relate to it. For we have all felt the force of evil, the force of temptation that seeks to make us sin.

Well, the young shepherd boy David, armed with his staff, his sling, and five smooth stones, goes out to fight the heavily armed giant Goliath. Walter Bruggemenn says that Goliath was better armed than the writer of Ephesians could imagine. He had the whole armor, but it was not the whole armor of God—it was the armor of man.

When Goliath saw David approaching, he

“disdained him for he was only a youth,
ruddy and handsome in appearance.” (42b)

Was there no one in the whole Israeli camp who would be a worthy opponent? Full of himself and overly confident, Goliath mockingly said, “Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks?” And he cursed David by his gods. He taunted him the way a bully would. He talked trash 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. (17:44)

This reminds me of a story from the Orient entitled, “Without Batting an Eye.”

When his advancing army stormed into a small town, the general called his scouts before him. “Where are the citizens of the village?” he demanded.

“They have all fled in fear,” the scouts replied.

“Is there no one left to pay tribute to me?” the general shouted.

“No one but the priest. He remains in the temple.”

Quickly the general marched to the temple, burst through the doors and demanded to see the priest. After a quick search, the priest was found reading quietly in his study. The general, angry that the cleric refused to greet him as a conqueror, shouted, “Don’t you know that you are looking at one who can run you through without batting an eye?”

“Don’t *you* know,” the priest replied, “that you are looking at one who can *be* run through without batting an eye?”

For a moment the soldier stared in disbelief at the priest. Then, slowly, a smile came to his face. He bowed low and left the temple.

Then David told Goliath,

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. This very day the Lord will deliver you into my hand.
(17:45)

The Israeli army had faced the Philistine threat in frozen fear. They acted as if God were irrelevant to the battle. For David, it was unthinkable to assess the battle or anything else apart from the strength of the living God of Israel.

The action in this battle is over almost as soon as it begins:

When the Philistine drew nearer to meet David, David ran quickly toward the battle line to meet the Philistine. David put his hand in his bag, took out a stone, slung it, and struck the Philistine on his forehead; and he fell face down on the ground. (17:48-49)

The story of David and Goliath is not a lesson on the power of positive thinking—as important as that may be. Neither is it a lesson on finding strength and courage within ourselves, or from those around us—as important as that might be. It is rather the story of a God who whispers

to us that His strength will be made perfect in our weakness. It is the story of a God who assures us that he is with us to help us to face and deal with the threatening giants that come our way, even though we walk through the valley of dark shadows, even the valley of the shadow of death.

Regardless of what threats we may face, may *we* know that the same living God who was with David, is with us in our own battles. May his perfect love overcome our fear.

Unto him who is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think,
to him be glory... (Eph. 3:20-21)

Amen.