

The Reverend Heather T. Schoenewolf
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1 Samuel 17
Encounters with Giants: Fear and Faith

Everybody loves the underdog. Well, everybody loves a good story about an underdog who hails victorious at the end. We are inspired by unlikely heroes, filled with hope when someone's struggle pays off, reminded that there is still some magic in the world when we witness an unexpected victory. Viewers across the country sat amazed as they watched footage of Jason McElwain, a high school senior from Rochester NY, sink 6 3-point shots and one regular basket scoring 20 pts in one game. Jason was the manager of the team, not a regular player. And Jason has autism. We cheered at his accomplishment, celebrated his victory – and maybe thought to ourselves if an unlikely hero like Jason could have such a profound victory, maybe we could too.

Today's story is a story of an unlikely hero, a victorious underdog: David son of Jesse. A young, ruddy, shepherd boy, he is pretty much ignored until in his youthful exuberance he volunteers to stand up to Goliath – the Philistine warrior who has been taunting the Israelites for 40 days, challenging them to end the conflict between the Philistines and Israelites once and for all by sending one man into combat with himself. Every time he calls out, the army of Israelites run in fear, but David is unfazed.

Honestly, it strikes me as odd that anyone would think David's offer is acceptable. He is young and small and by their standards unprepared. Even if the crowds had found his argument acceptable – that he had fought off bears and lions who have come after his sheep - it seems to me that anyone in their right mind would have stopped him when he decides to shed Saul's armor and chooses five stones for weapons. Perhaps everyone is so worn out from fear and the battles that have been waged, that they aren't thinking straight. Or perhaps they see David as so insignificant, a potentially acceptable casualty in this ongoing war. Regardless of their motives, they send him forth – the hope of a nation resting on him.

And in pure Hollywood drama, David reigns victorious – evoking the power of God and slinging one stone right into the forehead of this mammoth man. The loser has won and the winner has lost; the underdog becomes the top dog.

Now at this point of my sermon it is tempting to preach about God's favor for the underdog, and how this story is just one more chapter in the story of God's surprising plan of making the last first and the first last. It is tempting to recount the litany of scriptural references of those unlikely characters through whom God works in the world; to remind us of Jacob or Isaac; of Ruth and Esther; and then reminding us of God's amazing love made incarnate in a poor baby born in a stable. But I'm not going to do that.

Instead, I'm going to talk about Goliath. Now, clearly Goliath is not the hero of the story. In fact he is the one we dislike – and he is so dis-like-able. Goliath seems to embody all the things that are crass, super-sized, overdone, arrogant, haughty, and self-serving in the world. When I read this story, I do not want to identify with Goliath. I'm glad I'm not a giant – and maybe even a little glad that I had to have a platform put back in this pulpit so that I could see over the pulpit when I stand here today. When I read about Goliath, I don't mind my weaknesses because somehow my weaknesses seem noble. Against the backdrop of Goliath's outrageous strength and anticipated success, I get the feeling that there is something not quite so good about being powerful or strong or a born winner.

But I have to say, that in the end, I feel sorry for Goliath. He was just being what everyone wanted him to be. And he was using his strength to defend HIS nation, his people. He thought, he really did, that what he was doing was right. It wasn't just about him – in fact, he steps forward away from his army, willing to be the one to engage in the defining battle of the war, hoping to “take one for the team.” And what happens? He gets overconfident. He barks up the wrong tree. He relies on his own strength, trusts only himself, fails to see the bigger picture.

See, it is easy when we read this story, to get caught in something of a labeling game. Why? Because it is so easy to see this story through the lens of dualism: winner and loser; Israelite and Philistine, giant and vertically-challenged; faithful and faithless. And then we translate those dualisms into our day: winner and loser; sheep and goats; elect and condemned; welcome and unwelcome; man and woman; straight and gay; believer and unbeliever...and if we're honest with ourselves, we will admit that just as we show a preference for the young Israelite shepherd in today's story, we likewise have biases that inform our interactions with others even today. We are Democrat or Republican, a Progressive or an Evangelical, ...And it doesn't take long for a story like this to become a *text of terror* because we start to see God as the one who assigns *divine* labels, who ordains that some people be left out, lost, defeated or killed so that God's favored and God will somehow win.

This story today makes me nervous. It makes me nervous because even as I feel justified to cheer for David's surprising success, I still cringe at the nature of his victory. Let's face it: David's triumph was based in another man's murder. And it makes me nervous because I can see a theological leap that is easily made – that only the faithful are saved and the faithless condemned. That violence is OK when it bears glory to God's power. The logic slips quickly into the brand of theology that I heard preached by those who said that the Asian Tsunami was an act of divine retribution upon Muslim nations.

There's got to be a better way.

And then I can't help but ask: what does this whole situation say about God? In a world where there are winners and losers, how do we know whose side God is on? Are the acts that make some win and some lose, some live and some die scripted by God for God's holy purpose?

We know from the text that God was for David, that God was with David and with the Israelites...but I can't help but wonder, does that mean that God was *against* the Philistines? Even if God is for the oppressed, does that mean that God is against the oppressors? Even if God desires freedom for captives, does that mean that God desires imprisonment for the captors? If God is for the weak, does that mean that God is against the strong? Does God have to be an either-or God, or is our God of possibilities big enough to transcend our cultural dualisms?

What if Goliath thought the whole battle with tiny David too absurd an option and just turned and walked away? Or what if David had stopped and played his harp for both armies and settled the demons within them, lulling them to sleep with no thoughts about war. Couldn't those possibilities still have rendered David victorious and the God of Israel powerful? Or what would have happened if Goliath had simply *believed* David – that the God of Israel is almighty? What if David's courage and vulnerability had convicted the hearts of Goliath and the Philistine army to stop drawing battle lines and to join them in worshipping the living God of power and might? What if David's speech had convinced them all that, in fact, “it is not by the sword nor the spear that the LORD saves? (v 47)”

We see in Jesus the manifestation of David's claim. We see in Jesus that God saves through love made flesh. In Jesus God's love is extended with abundance, God's grace is radical, God's power is inviting.

God is a God who saves. Just as we must not limit our capacity for experiencing the saving grace of God in our lives, we must not try to limit the potential of God's saving grace in the lives of others. Our salvation is not threatened if another is saved; our safety is not threatened if another is safe; our worth is not diminished if another is valued.

As we celebrate God's saving work in the lives of the Israelites – and as we rejoice that God saves in surprising ways -- let us not forget that God is not just the God of David, or even the God of the underdog. God is the God of all of creation.

God's saving work is not restricted to a battle-field victory at the hands of a faithful boy. God's saving work continues – throughout our scriptures and even to us, today.

And so today, trust that God saves. Let God's saving work settle your soul. Let the God who calmed the storm and settled the waves, calm you. And let the God who is victorious over death overcome those giants in our day that diminish life – fear, violence, hatred, oppression, injustice. When these giants arise, let us have faith that the God of the sparrow, has enough grace to go around. Amen.