

THE ARMOR OF GOD
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1Samuel 17:32-37

32 David said to Saul, "Let no one's heart fail because of him; your servant will go and fight with this Philistine." 33 Saul said to David, "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."

34 But David said to Saul,

"Your servant used to keep sheep for his father; and whenever a lion or a bear came, and took a lamb from the flock, 35 I went after it and struck it down, rescuing the lamb from its mouth; and if it turned against me, I would catch it by the jaw, strike it down, and kill it.

36 Your servant has killed both lions and bears; and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them, since he has defied the armies of the living God."

37 David said, "The LORD, who saved me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, will save me from the hand of this Philistine."

So Saul said to David,
"Go, and may the LORD be with you!"

GOLIATH

I've decided to read just a small portion of our Old Testament lesson for today, but that's okay. Most of you have heard this story from an early age. It's the very familiar story of David and Goliath.

The armies of Israel and the Philistines look on as a challenge is made.

Goliath, a giant of a man, weighs in at just over 350 pounds. He's over seven feet tall and a skilled fighter. Standing in no man's land between the two armies he shouts,

“Today I defy the ranks of Israel. Give me a man that we may fight together.”

(The rest of what he says has to be censored because this is a G rated sermon, but we can read his lips. He’s cursing Israel and their God in no uncertain terms.)

But, despite the challenge no one from Israel steps into the ring. You can hardly blame them.

Who wants to fight a guy that looks like a cross between Lebron James and Arnold Schwarzenegger in his prime. More than that, this guy is covered armor and is equipped with the latest spears and swords?

You can hear the Philistines laughing because none of the Israelites have the courage to step into the ring with this guy. Their morale is bolstered by the actions of their champion, while many of the Israelites are shaking in their boots.

King Saul knows that if he doesn’t get someone to fight Goliath soon, his army might just run away. At this point he is willing to do anything and to take anyone. He even offered the hand of his oldest daughter in marriage to anyone who would dare take up the challenge of this profane giant.

The silence is deafening.
Nobody wants to face Goliath.

DAVID

Then David speaks,
“I’ll fight this guy. Don’t worry king. I’ll teach this Philistine a thing or two.”

Now David has never fought in a battle before. In fact his brothers accused him of coming out to the battle line just to gawk at the action, much like we might attend a football game.

David had been anointed by Samuel as Israel’s future king, but that didn’t seem to sway his brothers very much. To them he was still the little kid who tended the sheep. The only reason he was on the battlefield was because his father had sent him to bring supplies to his older brothers who were in the army.

Let's face it.

David is the water boy on the field of battle.

He's too young, too small and too inexperienced.

Even Saul who's absolutely desperate to find someone to face Goliath is not so sure about David. He said, "You're a very brave boy, but you've got to be realistic. Goliath has been fighting and winning battles before you were even born."

But, David tells Saul some fantastic tales about defeating lions and bears in hand to hand combat, and the desperate king throws up his hands and says,

"Okay kid. You want to fight. You'll fight. Try on my armor. And may God be with you. You'll need all the help you can get."

I wonder if Saul did this to try and shame the other soldiers because the story gets really funny at this point. You'll remember that Saul was a big guy who stood head and shoulders above everyone else. And David was good looking but kinda on the small side. So to say that Saul's armor didn't fit was to put it mildly.

In fact, when David put on the armor and strapped on the sword, he couldn't even walk! I can just imagine what Saul and his men were saying to themselves as David tried to support the weight of the armor and the weaponry.

Things were not looking good for the home team.

THE BATTLE BELONGS TO THE LORD

But, David decides on another approach.

Instead of trying to dress like a warrior (which he was not), David dresses like who he was, a shepherd boy (which he was). And instead of taking a sword or a spear as a weapon, he takes a shepherd's staff, a slingshot, and five smooth stones from the creek.

And then he goes out to meet the giant.

In deciding to meet the giant in this way David demonstrates that he is not putting his faith in the weapons of war. He is putting his faith in the power of God.

David must have seemed defenseless as he strode onto the battlefield. Goliath is both offended and amused by the boy that comes to challenge him. He was the best that the battle hardened Philistines had to offer.

And who do they send to fight?
They send a babyfaced boy with a staff and a slingshot!

I love Goliath's response.

"Am I a dog that you come to me with sticks?"

Once again Goliath's language was such that it can't be repeated in my G rated sermon.

But, suffice it to say that it was R rated, maybe even X rated! And then in very graphic language Goliath promised to kill David and feed him to the birds.

David replies,

"You're right about one thing.

This isn't a fair fight. I have the Lord on my side, and your sword and spears and javelins will prove to be no match for the Lord."

And then David turns to the armies that are looking at this unlikely encounter and shouts,

"And the Lord wants everyone who witnesses this battle to know that conflicts are not won by sword or spear. The battle belongs to the Lord."

David did win the battle that day.

He was able to slay the giant with only the weapons of a shepherd.

But, the significance of this familiar story often escapes us. David versus Goliath is not primarily about courage in battle or the danger of pride.

It is a story about what we must do when we are afraid and the way forward looks hopeless.

When we face the giant, we must remember that only the Lord can save us.

The battles of life will not be won by superior weapons. The battle belongs to the Lord.

RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE

The story of David and Goliath does not come to a bloody end. In fact, the rest of this story is quite disturbing.

David takes the head of Goliath as a grisly trophy of his triumph. It reminds me of the terrible violence and atrocities taking place in the Middle East right now.

We usually leave this part out. But, this story forces me to wonder out loud, "How does all this violence fit into the plans of God?"

In an age where rampant religious violence disgusts and terrifies us, the story of David and Goliath is not only a story of courage and triumph. It is also a profoundly disturbing story.

I think it helps to tell the rest of the story, to look at the big picture.

David will become a great warrior and lead his people as king. And yet in the end David will forget the one great lesson of this encounter with Goliath.

He will begin to rely upon the sword instead of relying upon the Lord.

And when David comes to the end of his life he will be a broken man with a broken and scattered family. Violence and division will plague his family and his country for generations to come.

And down through the ages God's people will long for a Messiah, someone who can take up the mantle of David, unite the country, and slay the giant.

They will get their wish. The Messiah will come.

But, as we said last week, that Messiah was not the Messiah the people expected or even wanted. That Messiah steadfastly refused to take up the sword against his enemies.

Jesus told his disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane, "If we live by the sword we will die by the sword."

Instead Jesus told his followers that the only way to win the battle is to take up the cross of self sacrifice and follow him.

The sword will not save us.
Only the cross will save us.

That is God's answer to religious violence.

THE WHOLE ARMOR OF GOD

Goliath is not just a giant who lived long ago.
Goliath represents all those powers that are arrayed against us today.

How do we face those powers?
What armor can we put on?
What "weapon" can we wield?

Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians made a suggestion.
He wrote that we should put on the "whole armor of God" so that we will be able to stand against the power of evil.

That armor consisted of the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shoes of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, the word of God.

I preached on this passage from Ephesians and someone criticized the sermon because they thought that Paul's language was too militaristic, and I didn't do enough to separate myself from that language.

But, actually just the opposite is true.
Paul has taken the language of warfare and subverted it with the language of faith.

Paul is telling us with this very clever metaphor that real power is not found in the rulers of this age.

Real power is found in the promises of God. When we put on God's truth and righteousness and peace, we are equipped to stand against the principalities and powers of this world.

We cannot face those powers on their own terms.
We cannot "fight fire with fire" as the saying goes.

Putting on the armor of the king will keep us from putting on the armor that we really need. Just as David could hardly walk when he put on Saul's armor, we too are put at a disadvantage if we attempt to fight evil on its own terms.

Indeed, if we adopt the ways of those that we fear, we will become what we fear. We will become our own worst enemy.

But, when we put on the whole armor of God, we embody the hope that is ours in Christ Jesus.

In our attire we say to the world that we trust in the Lord, and in the end the battle does belong to the Lord. In the end God is greater than any problem that we may have.

What giants threaten you this day?
What makes you afraid?

Put on the armor of God.
And attack those fears with the promises of God.

Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus ... not hardship or persecution or even the tragedy of war and death.

He wrote, "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor

anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.”

We are more than conquerors.
We are redeemed.
God is for us and no one can be against us.

THE HEART OF A MOUSE

According to an ancient Indian fable, a mouse was in constant distress because of its fear of the cat. A magician took pity on it and turned it into a cat.

But, then it became afraid of the dog. So the magician turned it into a panther. And then it was full of fear because of the hunter.

At this point the magician gave up. He turned it into a mouse again and said, “Nothing I do for you is going to be of any help because you have the heart of a mouse.”

Too many Christians have the heart of a mouse.

Too many Christians have forgotten that the battle belongs to the Lord.
Too many Christians are willing to trust in almost anything except the promises of God.

But, the promises of God are the one thing, the only thing that will protect us and allay our fears.

If God is for us, who can be against us?

Faith is not an academic exercise.
Faith is something that we do.

WHAT IS COURAGE?

In a Rice University philosophy class, the professor told his students to bring blue books for a test the next day. On the test, he told them to answer this question, “What is courage?”

Most of the students took the full hour and filled the pages of their blue books describing courage. But, one young man thought for about five minutes, wrote two words and turned in his test.

That evening the professor telephoned the young man who turned in the two word test and informed him that he had given him an A on his test, and that he would like to meet him.

How could the student make an A when he only wrote two words?

The professor asked, "What is courage?"
And the student wrote in capital letters on his blue book,

"THIS IS!"

The student didn't define courage.
He demonstrated it.

As followers of Jesus Christ we are not called to define courage.

We are called to demonstrate it.
We are called to have the courage of our convictions.

The whole Bible is filled with stories of those who trusted God, who had the courage of their convictions.

That's what Moses did when he faced down Pharaoh.
That's what David did when he faced Goliath.
That's what Daniel did in the lion's den.

That's what Paul did on his missionary journeys where he was persecuted and eventually killed for preaching the gospel.

And that's what Jesus did on the cross.
On the cross Jesus faced a giant called death.
And once that giant was slain, the world changed forever.

POWER AND LOVE

Paul in his second letter to Timothy reminded his young and sometimes timid protege,

“God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.”

We all need to be reminded of that from time to time.
When we come face to face with the giant we are tempted to run away.

But, remember: the battle belongs to the Lord.

In a world that equates power with violence, we equate power with love,
God’s love.
And that gives us the courage to be disciples of Christ in good times and bad.

This week a young man murdered seven people at a Bible Study.

And at his bail hearing the judge allowed some of the family members to speak. One by one they stood in a courtroom Friday and addressed the accused killer, Dylann Roof.

One by one they told him that he had hurt them.
And one by one they forgave him.

Bethane Middleton-Brown, the sister of the Rev. Depayne Middleton, one of the nine shot in this terrible crime said,

“We are the family that love built.
We have no room for hate so we have to forgive”

These grieving disciples are facing a giant this week.
But, they have put on the armor of God and are standing firm.

Let us also put on the whole armor of God and join them in the fight for love and justice.

Amen.