

“I HEARD AN OLD, OLD STORY: I – DAVID AND GOLIATH”

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Elkton United Methodist Church
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Memorial Day Weekend

I Samuel 17:38-49

John 15:12-17

Just recently I finished a study of Adam Hamilton’s book entitled *Moses*. It was a wonderful look at that incredible Biblical character – how he was gifted by God, but unsure of using those gifts when God called; how he led God’s people through trials and tribulations to get to the Promised Land; and so much more. But I have to tell you that of all the things in the study, something that Hamilton wrote in the last chapter will be what I remember the most.

The last chapter was about God leading Moses up to the top of Mount Nebo and giving him a vision of the Promised Land. Moses wouldn’t get there with his people – he would die before that came to pass. But after Moses caught that vision, he came down from the mountain and addressed the people.

He said a lot to them that day, but one of the most important things he told them was to be sure to pass the faith to their children. Tell the stories, help them know their history. They’re young, they have no idea what their ancestors went through to bring them to the Promised Land – so tell them the stories of the faith.

In talking about that, about what would happen if they didn’t do that, Hamilton wrote this, which is the line that will stay with me forever. (“The church is one generation away from extinction.”)

Isn’t that frightening? And yet, it’s not that hard to believe. I was telling someone the other day that when I do funerals these days, I can’t just ask people to say the 23rd Psalm with me, because they don’t know it, by and large. And increasingly, some don’t even know The Lord’s Prayer.

So, that’s the long way around in telling you how I came about deciding to do this new sermon series for the next month. I decided to take some of the old, old stories and hear them again, or perhaps, for some folks, introduce them for the first time. These are some of the stories I learned as a child here in Sunday School in this church.

So, today it’s David and Goliath. Let’s start with a little biography of David. David was the son of a man named Jesse – actually he was Jesse’s youngest son – the youngest of eight sons. When David was young, like most young boys that day

he was a shepherd, tending his father's herd. He was also, by all accounts, a gifted musician, playing the lyre.

At that time, when David was young, Israel was ruled by its first king, King Saul. Before Saul, there was no king. God was the ruler, but along the way, the people clamored for an earthly king, and though it was not his wish, God granted it to the people, and Saul became king.

Suffice it to say, that it did not go well. Before long, God was disappointed in the way Saul disobeyed him time and again, and he decided there needed to be a new king, so God set the prophet Samuel to the task of finding a new king. One of the places Samuel looked was in the house of Jesse – knowing that there was a houseful of young men there.

One by one, Jesse paraded his sons in front of Samuel, and one by one, he would shake his head “no.” He hadn't found the one God wanted. When the seventh son had passed by, Samuel turned to Jesse and asked, “Is that all of them?” “Well, no,” Jesse replied. “There is one more, my youngest, but he's just a boy, and he's out in the fields with the sheep.”

Following God's nudging, Samuel asked Jesse to have him brought in, which he did, and Samuel knew right away, that he was the answer to his search. He was the one God wanted to be Israel's next king. It wouldn't happen immediately, in fact, for a while David was part of the support system for King Saul – coming to play his lyre to soothe Saul when he was upset or irritated.

Well, it came to pass that Israel went to war against the Philistines. All of Jesse's other sons were in the battle. One day, the Philistines' great warrior, a man whose huge fierceness was matched by his huge size, a man named Goliath, put out a challenge to the Israelites – that they should send their fiercest, most courageous warrior to fight him – one on one.

Young David had come to the battle ground, not to fight, but to bring provisions to his brothers - he heard Goliath's challenge and stepped up to the plate. Now, imagine that, a young man standing up to this giant, fierce, imposing Goliath. Anybody with any sense could see that there was no way David would survive.

Well, you heard what happened in the scripture reading that Mike read. King Saul attempted to help David be armed for the battle by clothing him with a full coat of armor, a helmet for his head and more, but David discarded all of it. Instead, he took a staff, picked up five smooth stones and put his sling in his hand, and off he went to face the giant Goliath.

You can almost hear Goliath's laugh when he sees David coming. He sees this young guy coming at him relatively unarmed, and surely unprotected and he cries out, "Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks?" He continues to taunt David, and David replies with words that show his true power – how he is coming in the name of the Lord to strike down evil, that his power is from God.

And when big old Goliath came at him, thinking he would make quick work of David, young David picked out a stone, put it in his sling, let it fly, and it struck Goliath on his forehead, and down he went. It was over! The big bad enemy was gone, good had won, evil was defeated, God was victorious!

This is the stuff of legends, and after that, the people adored David. They hailed the conquering hero, who would eventually become Israel's second, but no doubt, greatest king!

So that's the essence of the story. What I'd like to do now, is for us to look at it first, as we heard it as children; then what it says to us now; and finally, to look at it in light of Memorial Day.

First, what did this story say to us when we first heard it, probably as children? Well, I think it was pretty straightforward back then – there is good in the world and there is evil, and there are some pretty evil, big bad people trying to hurt you. Think of stories children read – the big, bad wolf, the evil witch in the Wizard of Oz, bullies in all sorts of stories trying to hurt people.

Those bad guys are scary, really scary. They're threatening and intimidating, and people are afraid to stand up against them. And this story, in particular? Can you remember as a child thinking Goliath was about fifty feet tall, with muscles bulging, a great big scowl on his face? Like King Kong, or the Incredible Hulk, able to stomp all over somebody and wipe them out?

And then there was little David, because that's how he was always portrayed in the shadow of Goliath. He was always portrayed as a good looking young man with wavy hair, wearing just a tunic with a belt around his waist, holding his little slingshot in his hand. Looking completely vulnerable. There's no way he could win this battle.

And then, Goliath comes at him, and as a child, you could almost feel the earth tremble as he moved his big feet, one after the other towards David. You could almost substitute words from another childhood story – "Fee, fi, fo, fum, I smell the blood of a shepherd boy." It was almost scary enough to make you close your eyes for fear of seeing David beat up or worse.

And then, and who will ever forget it, little David picks up a stone, puts it in his slingshot and lets that rock fly, and bam, it slams into that giant Goliath's face, right in the middle of his forehead, and bam, down he goes in a great, huge heap, seeming to make the ground bounce a bit, almost like an earthquake.

As children, we almost wanted to let out a cheer, didn't we? That big old bad guy thought he was something else, and he was going to do something terrible, but that little guy, a guy like us, outsmarted him and took him down. Amazing! And every time we read it, our teachers made sure we knew how it was that David won the battle, it was because of God. God was with him, and gave him what he needed to face this evil, and even though, in the face of all the evidence, it should have ended the other way, God made it end his way.

"Let that be a lesson to you," the teachers would tell us. No matter what things look like, God can take something bad and make something good out of it, even things that look impossible and scary. So we were ready if a big, bad giant came our way – at least theoretically.

Which brings me to my second point – how we see the story today, more grown up than when we first heard it. It really boils down to one thing, I think. Now, we know that big, bad giants that try to take us down don't always come in the form of people. Now, we know that the "Goliaths" that come at us in our lives take many forms.

Oh, to be sure, sometimes, they are people. Sometimes we face people who really do wish us harm. The co-worker who's trying to climb the corporate ladder and will do and say anything to get there, including making you look bad, or taking credit for things they didn't do. An ex-husband, ex-wife, ex-partner who constantly tries to put you in a bad light to put a wedge between you and your children, or get more in a settlement, or simply out of hatred and malice. Well, you get the idea – sometimes the Goliaths are people.

But perhaps, more often, the "Goliaths" that you and I face, are those things that crop up in life, looming large, threatening to take us out – things like the loss of a job, suddenly and without warning; or financial stress, finding yourself at a place where you can't pay your bills and foreclosure and collection calls loom large; or suddenly hearing scary words from a doctor about a bad diagnosis seemingly out of the blue; or maybe the biggest Goliath of all, losing someone you love.

Those are the Goliaths that threaten to take us down, that seem so powerful, so all-consuming, so overwhelming, that we can't imagine facing them down, let alone defeating them. When those things come our way, we feel like little David, standing there completely vulnerable, in the shadow of pure evil.

Which is why this Biblical story is so important for us to tell and retell over and over again. To remind ourselves how it ended. David did stand up to Goliath, to evil; and he won, with God's help and by God's grace. It was an impossible situation, absolutely impossible, and yet God brought the victory, in unexpected ways.

And so too can God do that for us, when we face the Goliaths that come our way. God makes a way every time, and often, in ways we couldn't or wouldn't expect. Why, I daresay we could go around this room, and hear stories of victory that God has made happen. I know we could.

We'd hear stories from some of you about how after you lost your job, you thought the world had ended, but you, with God's help reinvented yourself and went on to find a new, more fulfilling purpose and work in your life.

And from others, countless others, we would hear about how you faced illness, terrible illness, and came out on the other side – sure, it was a struggle and really, really hard at times – but God was with you, and that Goliath is gone, and for you, life is good and rich and full.

And I know, from still others, we would hear even about battles with people who have done their level best to drive you crazy, have been healed, and you've found some peace where once there was only rancor.

Indeed, friends, as grown-ups, when we hear this Biblical story, sure we hear about a giant named Goliath, but we understand that Goliath represents all that is evil and tries to hurt us – but we also understand that God is greater than the Goliaths that try to take us down, and helps us defeat them in incredible ways. That is the hope we find in this old, old story.

Finally, let me just say a word about this story in light of Memorial Day, which we celebrate this weekend. In that vein, I invite us to think of all of the military personnel who fight for good as David, and all of those who would do our country harm as Goliath. Certainly I have not been in the military, and I'm not sure how many in this room this morning have been, but I have to imagine that when you are facing the enemy in times of war, they must seem like Goliath. You know they can take your life away, and take away the lives of those you love in this country. You know that the stakes are incredibly high, that the enemy can do great harm to our country and its people.

And so, no matter your fear, you stand up against the enemy, and fight the fight. And I hope above all hope, that every single person who wears a uniform and fights the fight, knows that they go with God. That it is by God's grace and God's

gifts that they can face the enemy, the Goliaths of our time – and that God is with them every step of the journey.

I don't know how else they could fight the battle.

What a debt we owe to all of those who face the Goliaths for us – so many who do that – police and fire personnel, doctors and medical personnel, counselors, teachers, so many others. But today, we especially give thanks for those in the military who fight Goliaths for us, and we remember those who paid the ultimate price doing that – those who gave their very lives for us. May they rest in God's peace for all the days to come, as we echo to them the words of scripture, "Well done, good and faithful servants."

Amen