

Facing the Giant – June 21, 2015

1 Samuel 17

Rev. Rachel A. Wann

The story of David and Goliath is easily one of the most well-known stories in the bible. Everyone knows it – little guy squashes big guy. We have a soft spot for the underdog, and we love it when the underdog defeats the favorite. But this story of David and Goliath has more to it than simply little guy tramples big guy.

Picture this. One army faces the other. The valley floor separates them. Every soldier tense, breaths held, hands white-knuckled grasping weapons, all awaiting the impending battle. Finally a stirring in the ranks of the Philistines. A man comes forward. And the army of Israel utters a collective gasp.

No doubt about it. Goliath was huge and imposing. He roared out a challenge to Israel. “Why bother with all this? Choose your champion and have him face me. Let our fight decide the victor of this contest. I defy you to send out your man.” I imagine that many eyes turned toward Saul. He was their king, after all, and in fact, his size was comparable to the Philistine. But Saul drew back in fear and the army of Israel with him.

What happened to Saul? Saul had been God’s anointed – the very first king of Israel. His reign had started out fairly well, but on a couple of occasions, he disobeyed God’s commands and sinned against God. Instead of following God’s plan for how to lead Israel, Saul got caught up in his own power and decided to do things his own way. Perhaps in his position of great power, he felt like he no longer needed God, or maybe he slowly succumbed to the worldly ways of the nations that were around him. He lost his roots. He lost his history. And he forgot that Israel was God’s chosen people. Saul chose to follow a new path. So God went looking for a new king. And now since Saul had turned from God’s way, he was unable to face the giant when the giant arrived.

For forty days the Philistine army and the army of Israel would leave their camps in the morning and stand again face to face on the battle line in the valley. Each time Goliath would come forward, issuing his intimidating challenge to the Israelites, and each time the army of Israel would fall back in fear. Every day, over and over again, same scenario.

In time the Israelite army developed what author and pastor Eugene Peterson calls a Goliath-dominated vision. Every day the huge man would taunt them, tease them, and provoke them. And every day they sank a bit deeper into their own cowardice. They became so wrapped-up in their Goliath-dominated vision - in a situation seemingly with no hope of resolution - their despair took over. (*Leap Over a Wall*, p. 40)

I think in many ways we can relate to what the soldiers were feeling. In our own lives we often face periods of darkness or despair or situations that seem to have no hope of positive outcome. In fact much of life is spent in battle with our own personal giants. They make take the form of illness,

depression, constant physical pain, loneliness, addiction, anger, fear, betrayal, loss of independence, or grief. Or maybe at work or home or school, a bully is dominating and belittling us. Or perhaps we have simply bought in to a worldly vision that draws us away from God. No matter what form it may take, each day, we find ourselves tormented by this problem. We are faced with our very own relentless giant. Every morning we wake up, and the giant is still there taunting us and intimidating us. Until our vision becomes Goliath dominated, and we become helpless in its sight.

In light of the recent act of hatred and terrorism in a black church in South Carolina, we are forcibly reminded of one of the most insidious problems our own society as a whole has to constantly face – the pervasive problem of racism. It is so ingrained into our culture, we either become accustomed to it or often feel helpless to try to confront it. It is a massive giant that taunts us, and we stand in its sight, hoping that someday it will just go away. Or we just numbly accept that the giant is here to stay, and there's nothing we can do to change things. Or worse, we refuse to acknowledge our own culpability and assume it has no effect on us or those around us.

One morning, as the army was leaving their encampment for the battle line, David arrived on the scene. Sent by his father Jesse, David was seeking out his three older brothers. For the first time, David heard about the taunts of Goliath, and he asked the soldiers what was going on. And David was incredulous. Who was this brute that dared to defy the armies of the Living God? He could not believe what he saw and heard. David did not understand their Goliath-dominated vision and wondered, "What is wrong with you people? How can you listen to this rubbish and not act?"

David's vision was God-dominated, and all he could see before him was the army of God cowering before some pagan bully. While Israel saw a giant too big to handle, David saw a target too big to miss. After meeting with and convincing Saul that, despite his youth and inexperience, he was more than willing to face this Philistine. He was too small to wear Saul's armor, so he went out to the valley with only his staff and sling.

Seeing David approach, Goliath thought the Israelites were pulling a joke on him, and he shouted at them, "Am I a dog that you send a boy with a stick?" He didn't at all sense any danger or threat from David. Goliath was pure power, David was powerless. He mocked this feeble attempt to engage in battle. Goliath had no fear of this tiny runt in front of him, and he started to curse David in the name of his own gods, trying to intimidate him. But David wasn't plagued by the Goliath-dominated vision of the soldiers who had seen the giant day after day. As a shepherd who had to fight off bears and lions from preying on his father's sheep, all David saw was a predator that was threatening God's flock.

David had a God-dominated vision and trusted that God would deliver him from Goliath. In response to the threats, David countered, "My power comes not from the sword or spear, but in the name of the Lord of Hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. After without further ado,

David ran toward Goliath, used his sling to knock the brute to the ground, stood over the fallen giant, and with Goliath's own sword, lopped off his head.

And for a brief moment, I imagine the entire valley was silent. And then as the reality of the situation became clear, the Philistine army broke rank, took off running, and the Israelites gave chase. And David stood there in the chaos, determined and holding up Goliath's bloody head. Okay, maybe I've seen too many action movies. But it makes for great story-telling.

Someone once said, "Goliath probably laughed a little at this boastful upstart, but about the time the stone hit him in the head, he knew that there was a God in Israel." (David Owen) Indeed there IS a God in Israel. And with God all things are possible. Yet if we are living our lives blinded by a Goliath-dominated vision, it becomes difficult if not impossible for us to see God. In a world where it seems like the powerful always get more, it is easy to become cynical and jaded. We fall into the trap of powerlessness. I am stuck here, just surviving. Getting by. There is nothing I can do to change things.

King Saul had lost his God-dominated vision and instead chose the worldly path of power and prestige. He didn't need God, and he didn't follow God. And in the end, he couldn't face up to the giant. David comes along, an inexperienced youth, but burning with passion for God. Through him God was able to work, giving powerless David the true power to conquer the giant.

Okay, we might say. I am powerless. Here I am stuck in a worldly rut, facing my own giant. The depression or the fear, the anger or the inadequacy, the loneliness or the grief, the societal structures that hold me captive. But where is God? I look for God. I come to church, read my bible, pray...but I can't find God.

In Mark's gospel the disciples of Jesus are facing a similar situation. They are all in the boat, crossing the sea, when a violent storm comes up. Remember, some of these people were fishermen, so they were familiar with storms on the Sea of Galilee. So this storm must have been particularly fierce for them to be so frightened. Suddenly they are face to face with their own giant. They instantly recognize their own lack of power against this horrible storm. They are in a panic, yet Jesus is sleeping calmly in the stern. They wake him and cry out, do you not care that we are perishing? Jesus calms the storm and shakes his head at their lack of faith.

The disciples are awed by and a bit fearful at his power against these crushing forces that threaten to destroy. They look to one another in astonishment and in fear, and ask, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" Indeed, who then is this?

A great question. It is a question about faith – Jesus asks them, "Why are you afraid? Do you still have no faith?" In times of trouble, it is a natural human response to wonder if there really is a God, and if so, is God present in the situation or not? Does God even care that I am suffering?

Did you notice where Jesus was throughout the story?

He was there. In the boat. With the disciples all along. Before the storm began, he was there. During the storm, he was there. And then he was there to deal with the storm himself. He wasn't in some far off place. He didn't have to come running in at the last minute to save them from their fear and panic. He was there all along. He was silent, but he was there.

So as we face our own giants, we can be assured that God is there with us. We may not see God or feel God or hear God. But if we drop, even for a moment, our Goliath-dominated vision, we will know that God is there with us. We do and will have storms to face and giants to confront, both in our lives and in the greater society. When Jesus rebuked the winds and calmed the storm, he never promised we would not have any more storms to face. What he did promise is that he will always be there with us when they occur. In him we will find the courage to make a change for peace. Lord, may it be so.