

“HOW TO COPE WITH GIANTS”

I Samuel 17:4, 8-11, 32-49

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The story of David and Goliath is a classic example of how to deal with your problems. It is almost simplistic in its approach: Goliath, a giant, nine and a half feet tall, challenges any man of Israel to a duel. He is so well-covered with armor that the weapons of the soldiers seem useless. No one will accept the challenge to fight the Philistine strong man. No one except a snot-nosed kid from Bethlehem, who brings a care package to his brothers in the army and decides to get in on the action. With youthful naivete, David goes out to fight the giant, not with the traditional weaponry, but with five small stones and a sling that he carried around to pass the time while he watched his father's sheep. You know the story: David's well-aimed stone does what spears and swords and heavy artillery fail to do, and Goliath falls to the ground. The Philistine army is so overwhelmed that they flee from the area, fearing for their lives. David becomes a folk hero, capturing the minds and hearts of his countrymen.

This morning I ask you, who are the giants you have to contend with in your life today? Don't we all have problems that loom as large as Goliath, nine and a half feet tall, problems that threaten to overtake us? How can we slay them and break the spell of fear and failure that keeps us from being the people we were meant to be?

I met Goliath in the seventh grade when I was assigned a locker partner who threatened to beat me up for no reason at all. I was terrified. I met Goliath when I was thrown into a new situation in college and didn't know which way to turn. I continue to meet Goliath when I encounter health issues with my family, and when I hear the concerns of the congregation. Goliath can take the form of a medical diagnosis that we don't want to hear and certainly don't want to accept. Goliath persists as we struggle with chronic illness, either our own, or health problems in the lives of those we love. Goliath may come in the form of a pink slip at work. When companies downsize or move or close, Goliath looms large, threatening the well-being of our families and the lifestyle to which we have become accustomed. I have met Goliath many times in working with families: husbands and wives who have become estranged from one another, persistent problems with children and teen-agers, health and safety issues with senior adults and the seeming insurmountable stress that escalates with each passing day. We cannot pick up a newspaper without reading of violence and war and killing somewhere in our city or in our world. While we pray for peace, Goliath stalks the planet, threatening the well-being of the people of every nation, race, religion and economic class.

Yes, Saul and his army were “*dismayed and greatly afraid*” when they saw the likes of Goliath. They are not alone! It seems that the battle is too much for us. We are overwhelmed by the problems we face at home, on our jobs, in our communities and in our world.

While King Saul was quaking in his boots, who should appear but a good-looking young man named David, a kid not old enough to enlist in the army. Not only does he arrive on the scene with provisions for his older brothers, he offers to take on Goliath without so much as the protection of the traditional armor! Is this some kind of a joke? Is he out to humiliate Saul and the army of Israel that has worked so hard to protect its citizens from the Philistines?

No, David is not out to show off. He does want to put things in perspective, however. David points out that Goliath in his arrogance is not really opposing Saul, he is opposing God. God does not intend that people should live in terror and in fear. God does not intend that people suffer and perish.

If God does not want people to live in fear and to suffer, then in the face of a disaster or a medial diagnosis or a marital break-up one of the most challenging questions one can ask is “Why did this happen?” The easy answer is to say, “It was God’s will.” I’m sorry. I do not believe a loving God inflicts cancer on this person and gives that one a heart attack and causes a tidal wave to wipe out a whole village. That’s not the God I believe in. There are some things in life that are beyond our understanding, to be sure, but let’s not blame God for everything that happens. There are some questions about life for which there are no easy answers. There are some situations in life for which we have no reasons. These circumstances test our faith, to be sure. But instead of blaming God, let’s just admit that we don’t understand everything there is to know about our world and how it works. A seminary professor of mine once said, “When I get to heaven, if I get to heaven, I have a few questions I want to ask God.” Don’t we all.

In the meantime, Goliath is running loose, and God is ready to fight against him. The God I believe in is with those who are working on a cure for cancer. The God I believe in is with those who are trying to get the people of this world to live in harmony. The God I believe in wants us to share our resources so that every man, woman and child will have enough to eat, clean water to drink, and a place to sleep at night. Three thousand years ago, David said, “*The Lord does not save by sword and spear.*” When will we learn that lesson? Then David says, “*The battle is the Lord’s.*”

I remember some years ago when I led a youth mission work team to a remote and poverty-stricken area of Appalachia. One of the girls brought a tape with her and played it over and over. It was Twila Paris singing, “*The Battle Is the Lord’s.*” As we went from home to home, helping the people against all odds, those words could have been our theme song: “*The battle is the Lord’s.*” God is on the side of justice, mercy, healing and peace. God does not intend that people suffer, nor does God want us to live in fear. God is working to defeat Goliath. The battle is the Lord’s.

The God who is working to defeat Goliath is calling us to join the battle, and that’s why this is a sermon and not just a folk tale. David was able to slay Goliath, and we will be able to defeat our giants as well, if we do what David did.

In order to cope with the giants we face, we will need to have what I would like to call a “David perspective.” First of all, David was confident because he remembered past victories. Nobody wins them all, but all of us have had some successes in the past, and they can give us strength and courage to face today and tomorrow. David recalled that when he was watching his father’s sheep, once a lion had attacked, and another time, a bear. David was able to slay these animals. If he could do that, he might be able to handle Goliath. Of course, David had never had a challenge quite like Goliath. We have never had to deal with problems quite of the

magnitude that we face today as individuals and as a society. But we have had some victories in the past, so why run from our current predicaments?

Some days it seems that the tasks I have to accomplish are too many and that there is too much for me to accomplish in the time available. Deadlines can be overwhelming. Can anyone here relate? Of course, you can. The other day I happened to look back over my appointment book and noticed a period on my calendar which was extremely intense. How did I get through all that, I thought to myself. Only with God's help. In our own strength, we are lacking. But with God's help, we can accomplish more than we think possible, more than we could ever do on our own. Like David, our memory of past accomplishments can provide encouragement and confidence as we face the giants before us.

A "David perspective" helps us identify the resources we have to cope with our problems. Saul felt that if David was going to fight an armored man, he needed a suit of armor as well. But David was unaccustomed to the outfit and was not able to maneuver in it. Beware when you are dealing with giants, that you do not allow them to trap you into thinking that their ways are the right ways and that your ways are inferior.

Anytime I deliberately try to impress someone, I usually make a fool of myself. Trying to be somebody I'm not, you see. There's no need to look for solutions to our problems in new and novel places. Our own resources are still our best allies when the chips are down.

When faced with a new situation or a Goliath of larger proportions than we are used to, I have seen many grab for the closest thing they can find to hang on to. I have seen those suddenly confronted with a terminal illness or the loss of a loved one turn to some off-beat religious guru or some strange formula for help. People in crisis are, oh, so vulnerable to bizarre, wild promises and the radical emotionalism of spectacular religion. We sometimes forget that our own faith offers us the resources we need to deal with the giants we face. "I don't need all this excess baggage," David said in essence to Saul. Some may think: how foolish of David to face Goliath without any armor. The fact is, David had all the armor he needed, for he was armed with his faith in God. That was the shield he needed and the weapon that conquered the giant. When we come face to face with the giants in our lives, do we have the presence of mind to reach for our inner resources and trust God to see us through?

Having a "David perspective" tells us that we must be willing to act on our beliefs. It's one thing to say that we believe in God and trust that God will see us through. It's something else to put our faith into action. The army of Israel believed in God, but they lacked the courage and the motivation to cope with the giant and conquer the Philistine army. For forty days Goliath challenged them. The more he talked, the more afraid the soldiers became. It took the courage and faith of a young man to go in and face the giant. It sometimes takes a child or a youth to get us off dead center and make us act on our faith. Some of you have shared with me times when your children took their faith seriously, so seriously that it embarrassed and reformed their parents in the process! There is no "yes, but" where true commitment is concerned. The older we get, the more excuses we can find. But Goliath will never be slain and our problems will continue to mount until we face him openly and squarely, acting on our beliefs.

The story of David and Goliath reminds us that in the final analysis, God will be victorious. We may fight and lose. We may face the giants and win no clear victory. But God will not be defeated. God will see us through. I would not want anyone to leave worship this morning thinking I said that "God is on our side," and that whatever we set out to do, God will

see to it that we win. That is not an adequate theology for healthy living. Anyone who believes that Christians will always be successful and win every battle either has not lived very long, or refuses to face all the facts.

The kind of victory I am talking about is a victory of the Spirit, a confidence and a faith that keeps us going, even in the adversities of life. It is this faith which gives us the courage to face the giants and to cope with them. With our faith and trust in God, we need not fear, for God will be with us and help us to face the giants. And God will ultimately overcome them.

Do we believe that God will win the battle? God has already claimed the decisive victory through the resurrection of Jesus Christ on Easter morning. He has defeated the last enemy — that of death itself. The beautiful Greek letters “NIKA” in our stained glass window over the altar in our sanctuary spell the Greek word for “victory.” The God who raised Jesus Christ from the dead ultimately will be victorious over every enemy. That is the message of the Gospel.

Let us ask God to help us. Let us not shrink from the problems we face in life, the giants we encounter, but confront them squarely and honestly, with our Christian faith as our armor and shield. God will be with us. In that knowledge and with that strength, we, too, can cope with giants. Let us face Goliath, and overcome him!

Prayer: Dear Lord, as we hear this story of David and Goliath, help us to realize that this is not just a folk tale from long ago, but a challenge to us today. Help us to face our problems head on, as David did. Help us to remember our past victories, and help us to draw strength from you, remembering that you will ultimately be victorious over every enemy. This we pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.