

"The Living God"
1 Samuel 17:4-10, 24-27, 32-37
The Rev. Mary Kathleen Duncan
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⁴And there came out from the camp of the Philistines was six cubits and a span. ⁵He had a helmet of bronze on his head, and he was armored with a coat of mail; the weight of the coat was five thousand shekels of bronze. ⁶He had greaves of bronze on his legs and a javelin of bronze slung between his shoulders. ⁷The shaft of his spear was like a weaver's beam, and his spear's head weighed six hundred shekels of iron; and his shield-bearer went before him. ⁸He stood and shouted to the ranks of Israel, 'Why have you come out to draw up for battle? Am I not a Philistine, and are you not servants of Saul? Choose a man for yourselves, and let him come down to me. ⁹If he is able to fight with me and kill me, then we will be your servants; but if I prevail against him and kill him, then you shall be our servants and serve us.' ¹⁰And the Philistine said, 'Today I defy the ranks of Israel! Give me a man, that we may fight together.'

²⁴ All the Israelites, when they saw the man, fled from him and were very much afraid. ²⁵The Israelites said, 'Have you seen this man who has come up? Surely he has come up to defy Israel. The king will greatly enrich the man who kills him, and will give him his daughter and make his family free in Israel.' ²⁶David said to the men who stood by him, 'What shall be done for the man who kills this Philistine, and takes away the reproach from Israel? For who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?'

²⁷The people answered him in the same way, 'So shall it be done for the man who kills him.'

³²David said to Saul, 'Let no one's heart fail because of him; your servant will go and fight with this Philistine.' ³³Saul 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.' ³⁴But 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, ³⁵I 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.' ³⁶Your 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.' ³⁷David 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!’

The word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

A picture doesn’t do it justice. Even if Ansel Adams or Michelangelo had been there – camera and paintbrush at the ready. There’s no way it could. Not with the magnitude of this text. Not with the scene it describes. The entire story takes up a whole chapter in the book of 1 Samuel – 58 verses in all. It is in the top ten longest chapters in the Bible, coming in at a total of 1719 words. There’s no way a picture could do it justice. But today, our task is to try and put ourselves into David’s shoes.

Or maybe Goliath’s. Or Saul’s. Or even into the shoes of those on the front lines for Israel who were terrified of facing the famed warrior.

So, take a deep breath, and put yourself on that battlefield. Choose a vantage point. The Philistines are on top of one mountain, overlooking the valley of Elah. The Israelites are on an opposite mountain. No one, save Goliath who stands boldly in the middle of the two sides, has made a move in 40 days. David has come, up the backside of the mountain where the Israelites are encamped and has scurried to the front of the battle line to find his brothers. It is then that he hears Goliath’s challenge –

Why have you come out to draw up for battle? Am I not a Philistine, and are you not servants of Saul? Choose a man for yourselves and let him come down to me. David responds –

Who is this that he should defy the armies of the living God?... ‘Let no one’s heart fail because of him; your servant will go and fight with this Philistine.

The story that follows is rather amazing. David, the young man who is inexperienced in battle, much smaller than Goliath, unprotected by any armor, and armed only with a slingshot, kills Goliath with the first whip of his wrist and one mere stone from the nearby wadi. At first glance this story is about the underdog defeating the mighty bully, the young boy felling the larger than life warrior, the small and weak taking over the big and strong. It is the story of one man’s personal triumph over another. But at second glance, it is much, much more than that.

Back in the middle of June, I found myself serving alongside some of our Middle School Youth in urban Charlotte through the program CROSS Missions out of Myers Park Presbyterian Church. One day, half of our group spent the day at the Charlotte Rescue Mission. This organization seeks to serve men who are recovering from addiction through a 120 day in-patient recovery program, as opposed to the more common 30, 60, or 90 day treatment programs. Our job that day was to help prepare lunch, serve it, and then to sit and share fellowship over a meal with these men. That day at lunch, I sat with a man named Carl. When I first sat down, there were a few other men at the table who greeted me both kindly and respectfully but moved on as soon as they had finished their meal. But Carl and I lingered and talked even after our food had been consumed. Carl was fascinated by the fact that I was a pastor. He shared with me that his son was also a pastor and how he strived to keep faith in Christ a part of his life, even through the ups and downs of addiction. It was then that he brought up this story, the one of David and Goliath. He likened his battle with addiction to David fighting and defeating Goliath. I sat there, stunned and humbled to be listening to his story and his thoughts. When he stopped talking I said, "Guess what I'm preaching on in a few weeks?"

In the days since I met Carl, I've spent a lot of time thinking about him and a lot of time thinking about the program that he is a part of in Charlotte. I can't tell you how amazed I was, how amazed our entire group was, at the spirit present at the Charlotte Rescue Mission. These men were respectful. They were humble. They were committed to recovery. They were committed to each other. You see, the way Charlotte Rescue Mission works is through community. One cannot defeat the behemoth of addiction alone. One needs community. A community of counselors and medical doctors, chaplains and life coaches, fellow addicts and those who have been in recovery for years. Yes, Carl was facing the Goliath of addiction, but he was doing it with and on behalf of the community surrounding him.

So often we picture David and Goliath on their own. Just the two of them in the scene. Alone on that dusty battlefield.

We fail to remember that there were armies behind both of them. That on the Israelite side were David's brothers, likely as close as they could get, watching with baited breath to see if their brother's bravado would overcome the mighty warrior. And behind them was a nation, new in its monarchy, uncertain of this new order, with fledgling faith in God, constantly fighting battles, used to, like David, being the underdog. So David's triumph over Goliath was not just a

personal victory. Sure, it may have meant a certain level of personal glory, but we who know the rest of the story know that David took on Goliath because of his heart. Because of his heart for his family, his people... because of his heart for God.

To David it wasn't Saul's army fighting the Philistines, it was the army of the living God. To David it wasn't his own strength that would save him from Goliath, but God's. To David it wasn't human-made armor that would protect him, but the name of the name of the Lord of hosts. Every time David could have touted his own strength or Saul's strength or Israel's strength, he instead pointed to God... And, as we learn from the stories of the Bible, you cannot point at God without pointing at God's people. You cannot serve God without serving God's people. That's why God's spirit rested upon David. Because God saw that quality in David. In this story, every time that David could have claimed his own strength or power, he humbled himself before another, be it God, Saul, his father, Jesse, or the people of Israel.

The latter days of June into the first days of July, I found myself, along with 11 High School Youth and 2 other chaperones from Westminster, on the hauntingly beautiful, utterly captivating island of Cuba. Even now, 10 days since our return, I have trouble putting our experience into words. But I do want to share a story with you. On the third day of our trip, we traveled from Havana City to Matanzas City along the breath-takingly gorgeous coastal road. That afternoon, after we arrived and settled into our dorm rooms at the Evangelical Theological Seminary, we visited a place called the Kairos Center. The Kairos Center is a mission the First Baptist Church of Matanzas and seeks to provide a space where people can come and experience the power of art and faith, combined. *Kairos* is an ancient Greek word that, in Scripture, means *God's time*. Moments and experiences that might occur during our time, *Chronos time*, but that are marked by God's fingerprints. As the director of the center, Wanda, was getting us acclimated and explaining its mission, she led us in an activity. Each person in a group was given a piece of clay. We were asked to mold that clay into something that depicted a dream we had for our lives. After we had done that and shared our individual dreams aloud, we were told to smash the dreams and to rest in the space of what that felt like. After a few moments, Wanda asked us to use our clay to depict new dreams. We then shared these new dreams and as we did, Wanda gently took our individual clay creations and formed them into a beautiful collage of dreams. Only when we can all share and work toward achieving our dreams together can they truly come to fruition, she said.

It wasn't just David's dream of glory that led him to defeat Goliath. It wasn't just God's plan for David's life that led him into mighty victory. It wasn't just David's childish bravado that luckily came through in the end. David's actions were out of the community and for the community and with the community of his people in mind. Most importantly, they were empowered by the living God. I'd even go so far as to say that David's battle with Goliath was on *Kairos time*...it was a *Kairos moment*. That's why he succeeded. Not for him. Not only for his glory. For the good of his people. For the glory of God...

Now the story of David and Goliath is not simple. It is complicated. It involves war and death. Victory and defeat. The spirit of God resting upon one person after having departed from another. Goliath was a person, not just an addiction that deserved defeat.

But the faith of David in this story is something to be admired. It is as pure as human faith can be. And it calls the people around him to a deeper faith. His actions point to other people and they point to God. The presence of God in this story is even more powerful. It is the undertone that leads and carries this narrative and inspires us even today. We, like David, must move from "me" to "us".

I think that is the lesson I will take away from both of our youth trips in the month of June – the call to move from "me" to "us" and how it is the living God who inspires, enables, and empowers that move...even when it feels like we're facing a real life giant. Our trips, for me, and I think for the participants, were experiences of *Kairos time*. Of days spent in new places where God constantly showed up, where ordinary experiences seemed to stretch out, to be holy, and where God's fingerprints were upon every interaction that we had. The trip to Charlotte was our first out of town Middle School Mission Trip in quite some time. And it was transformative for all involved. We learned about the plight of the poor, hungry, and those struggling with addiction in the city of Charlotte and how those lessons can translate to our own community here in Greenville. We learned that sometimes we must get out of our individual comfort zones in order to encounter God and to be transformed by interactions with God's people in the world. The trip to Cuba was a first for our youth group, too. It was a different kind of mission trip – one focused on learning about a new place, a new culture, and a new people. It was about listening and participating and building relationships beyond national, ethnic, and linguistic barriers. It was about being grounded in what unites US, rather than what divides you and ME. And it was challenging. But it was also beautiful and rewarding. So, as I step back from this

text today and I take a lesson away from the story of David and Goliath, I remember Carl and our interaction at the Charlotte Rescue Mission and how it was the community that bore his recovery into being. I remember Wanda and the work of the Kairos Center and how the dreams of all people are deeply connected to our faith in God. I remember that sometimes we are gifted with moments and experiences and interactions that are pure *Kairos moments* – God's time moments. As we go from this place today, my hope and my prayer is this – that the living God David knew so well might be powerfully active in each life here represented as we strive to faithfully move from “ME” to “US”.
Thanks be to God. Amen.

