

God at Work

A sermon series on 1 & 2 Samuel

"#4 "God Leads"

June 23, 2024

1 Samuel 17

Rev. Dr. Chris Keating

God leads the unlikeliest of champions to face the fiercest and most intimidating opponents.

For reflection:

"The church forgets that God uses what the world considers to be low and weak to bring down the proud and powerful. The church is given the greatest gifts of the Spirit—faith, hope, and love—to walk this path with courage. A pastoral task is to guide the community in discerning the movement of God's Spirit and then stepping forward in faith to embrace the new thing God is doing. (Lewis Galloway)

There are big themes surrounding the stories of 1 & 2 Samuel. That's one of the joys of becoming reacquainted with these stories. Our summer series has reminded us of the many ways that God is at work. These stories are multi-layered narratives crafted to draw us into a world where power and politics sits side by side with stories of personal and family struggles. These stories resemble a large neighborhood pool party in the middle of the summer. They have told us about old Eli, slathered up in sunscreen, sitting under a big umbrella, yelling at his sons as they rough house around the deck.

Across the pool, we saw Hannah standing by herself, murmuring her laments in ways that make people wonder if she's had too many wine coolers. In the pool, there's young Samuel treading water while playing "Marco Polo" with God. All in all, it has been a big summer reunion of family, friends, religion and politics—in short, the sort of stuff that continues to capture our imagination.

Here is the story of where God is at work in our lives and in the lives of others. Here are stories of how God is painstakingly present in the world, often in ways that surprise or even startle us. Here are stories we need to remember, if only because the world tends to downplay the way God is at work. But not only the world. We also downplay the work God does, and even the church at times has ceased to be amazed at God's involvement

in the world. It is because it revolves around questions of where we find God at work – in our lives, in the lives of others, in the life of the world.

We cease to be amazed. We no longer let awe and wonder fill silence our fear. Instead, we allow that fear to remain with us the way it came upon the disciples that evening when a storm came up while they were crossing the sea. The waves had beaten down upon the boat so hard, Mark tells us that the boat was already being swamped. Jesus, however, was asleep in the stern, oblivious to what was happening. The frightened disciples awake him. He rebukes the wind, and calms the storm, but Jesus also rebukes the disciples. “Have you still no faith?” he says. Having seen how God was at work, Mark tells us they were filled with great awe.

Because we struggle with being amazed by God, we need to hear once more this story of David the underdog defeating the champion. We need to hear the story of David conquering Goliath.

We need the reminder of David’s weaknesses. His presence shocks and annoys his own brothers, and confounds the mighty Saul. He comes as the armies of Saul are being taunted and challenged by the nine-and-a-half-foot champion named Goliath. David is bringing lunch to his brothers when he first catches a glimpse at the Philistine. He has seen Goliath trolling the armies of Israel. He has heard the invectives and curses this bully has yelled at Saul’s men – and remember, Saul is no shorty. He was called the tallest of all people, but even Saul is no match for Goliath.

But David is not concerned.

David is not concerned even as he surveys Goliath’s imposing height, even as he views Goliath’s obscenely outrageous armaments. The narrator actually tells us more about Goliath’s weapons than he does about his height. He was outfitted in a bronze helmet, a shiny metal coat, bronze leg protectors and carries a javelin the size of a beam of a house. He grasped a spear made of iron and even had a shield bearer to go in front of him. He was fearsome.

And David is no warrior. He is young, untested. His only experience has come from watching his father’s flocks, and even his brother knows Goliath ain’t no sheep.

But Eliab’s imagination is too limited, and David knows that. David, for all of his faults, brings more to this battle than weaponry. He comes not cloaked with conventional

power, but with the power of God. He comes not with courage that has been tested by battle, but by courage that has emerged out of his own experiences of God.

And this is where we need to relearn this story. For the truth is, as much as we want to make it about an underdog, David shows up with all that he needs.

We need to relearn this story in a way that enlarges our understanding about the power of God at work in the world. While we may have first learned about David and Goliath on flannel boards in Sunday school or from Sunday morning Claymation cartoons, this story is far from a tame children's tale. Our teachers never read past chapter 17, verse 50, where David plunges Goliath's sword into his belly and then slices his head off for a trophy. Our teachers did not tell us that part. They barely mentioned David's slingshot, and were certainly not going to give third grade boys any details about decapitations!

This is more than the tale of an underdog. This is more than the story of a plucky young David who leaves behind his father's sheep for a chance to take out the giant Goliath. There is more here than the plot of another underdog tale – like those movies we so enjoy.

Remember "Rudy," the story of the kid who wants to play football at Notre Dame? Or "Rocky," or "The Karate Kid?" Remember "The Mighty Ducks," "Cool Runnings," "The Longest Yard," or the "Shawshank Redemption?" The plot lines are similar: woefully ill prepared and seemingly powerless protagonists go up against better funded, better trained, larger, and more robust opponents? Yet still they prevail! Somehow, by grit and sheer determination, they claw their way past the heavily stacked odds to claim victory.

Malcolm Gladwell, in his business book *David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits, and the Art of Battling Giants*, uses this story as a way of kindling our imaginations about what is possible. Gladwell suggests David was less of an underdog than we may suggest. Gladwell reminds us that David sees an advantage where all others only see fear.

But Gladwell is only partially correct. David does see an advantage, but it is not because he is such an expert with a slingshot. David's advantage is not that Goliath is a lumbering giant who can easily be knocked off balance. What this story imparts to us is a reminder of the way God's power is at work in the world.

There is no doubt that the armies of Saul are at a serious disadvantage. Earlier we have heard that there are no blacksmiths in Israel. His armies lack Goliath's firepower and defensive protection. His weaponry and power are incomparable.

Goliath, the Philistine, is fearsome. He represents all that Israel lacks. He is strong, well-armed, and filled with conventional power. In movie terms, he is the warden of Shawshank, or the 1980 Soviet men's Olympic hockey team. No one has a chance against Goliath.

Except, David is not playing with conventional power. He declares that he is armed only "with the name of the Lord of Hosts." He is defiant, or as Bill Brown observes, defiantly faithful. This battle does not belong to the Philistine, it belongs to God.

And this is what we so often forget, especially as we face opponents who seem so strong, so numerous, so much better prepared. This is what we forget when we go toe-to-toe with the battles of our lives, or when anxiety floods into our inner being. Like Saul, we become paralyzed and filled with fear. David was hardly taken seriously – and who could, especially as they see him stumbling around in Saul's armor like a kid playing dress up? The scene would be comical if it were not so true: In God's kingdom, the weak are strong while the strong are weak.

Yet David knows these are useless against the presence of God.

So, think about the battles you will face. Imagine the ways you stand naked against heavily outfitted opponents. Remember the ways you have been shepherded by God, and that you have never been alone. Remember, as David does, that "this very day the Lord will deliver you."

Amen.