

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Pentecost 4, June 24, 2012, dedicated to the memory of Judy Wolff and Dr. Patricia Rosenberger, and members who have lost parents in this past two weeks. For Paul Fishel Sr., father of Paul, Pat Leibchen's mother, Gerry Hudson's mother and Rev. Richard Innis Ward, father of Dan, their families, and always to the glory of God!

“Life’s Battles Won”

I Samuel 17:32-49; Mark 4:35-41

Introduction: The late Dr. Brevard Childs, one of America's finest Old Testament professors once said to our Introduction to O.T. class at Yale: *"You will all waste too much of your time trying to be funny, relevant, and liked by the people in the pews. Just give them the word of God. That is what they came for. That is what they are hungering for."* Today, our lectionary text in the Old Testament is the story of David and Goliath – I Samuel 17:1-58. This is why you came – to receive the Word of God and a reflection on its power, purpose, and inspiration.

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Our story is as ancient as time. It is a story about bullies and heroes. It is a story about faith and force meeting head on. It is a story about a simple shepherd called by God and vile giant who called him out on the plains of Armageddon. In each generation,

every person and every nation is challenged to discover who they really are, to whom they belong, and who they will worship and serve.

In David's generation, Israel's very existence was threatened by the Philistines. The Philistines had come to Canaan from the eastern Mediterranean islands about the same time as the Israelites, around 1200 BC. From Asia Minor to Egypt they invaded, pillaged and destroyed one village, one city and one nation after another. These fierce and battle hungry people held the coastline and created conflict and trouble for Israel. Over the years, they had forged superior weapons and had used them to their advantage, winning most military battles with those they attacked. All this happened before the Philistines had their secret weapon – a man named “Goliath.”

Goliath was - by definition – a man of colossal power. Goliath was a giant in his time. He stood 6' 9" and was a mighty warrior. Armed with a helmet, a coat of mail, greaves, javelin and a spear, his armor was matched only by his bombast. He was absolutely sure of himself. He never lost a battle. He was so intimidating that the text from I Samuel 17 does not even bother to use words like, "strong" "fierce" or "bold" in describing this mammoth battle machine. That is simply understood. The narrative is so vivid that reader and the Israelite troops are "dismayed and greatly afraid" (vs. 11) before the Philistine.

As the story opens, Goliath challenges one warrior from King Saul's army to a battle between two men. While this one-on-one, winner-take-all battle approach was not common in the Middle East at the time, it was very common in the Greco-Roman world from which the Philistines came. When Goliath's challenge comes to the army of Israel, they are frozen by fear.

There is one who is not a warrior at all – who enters the battlefield unafraid. His name is David. David is the eighth and youngest son of Jesse whose family is an obscure sheep herding family from the hills of Bethlehem. This young shepherd has come to the battlefield bringing food for the troops. He has not come to

fight. He comes as one who is loyal to King Saul. David is completely unencumbered by fear or by battle gear or weapons.

He is innocent, honest, and unashamed to speak of his faith in the "Living God." David has been secretly anointed by God for greatness. He is a young man of undaunted courage. He believes that no battle may be engaged without the rule of the Living God to guide the steps of the warrior. As I Samuel 13:14 tells us, David is one "after Yahweh's own heart."

David hears Goliath's taunts and mockery of Israel's army. He asks the soldiers why "God's army" lets these taunts go unchallenged and the mockery goes unanswered. David believes there is a "Living God" in Israel and that God must never be mocked. Like Hannah, David believes that our God "gives life and gives death. Blessed be our Lord!" For life and death, David praises God!

The soldiers are also wondering aloud how to respond to Goliath. They say, *"Have you ever seen anything like this? This man openly and defiantly challenges Israel."* (17:24-25). David wants to know what the reward for killing the Philistine is. He asks, *"What is in it for the man who kills the Philistine and gets rid of this ugly blot on Israel's name?"*(17:26). The answer is King Saul's fortunes, his daughter's hand in marriage and a tax free future.

Standing in the midst of a cowardly army, led by a cowardly King, the young David looks around and decides he is Israel's only hope – although when he stands up to declare this, his oldest brother Eliab tells him to be quiet (Question - How many sons of Israel today are named Eliab? How many are named David?).

David goes to King Saul and says he will do battle with Goliath. Saul says "no way" to David's first offer. But, Saul is confronted with a young man who truly believes in the dream of "God and country." Although he is young, David is the only man in this defeatist camp who speaks of and worships "the living God." He

is surrounded by an army of God chosen ones - none of whom believe in God's power to overcome the enemy!

Youthful nerve and passionate faith make an unassailable combination. Saul cannot and will not stop this young shepherd boy. So Saul asks how David will fight this battle. Without hesitating, David asserts that as a shepherd he has killed lions and bears with his sling and stones (and most important) God's power has always delivered him from death's jaws. With a sling and stone, David saved his flock. Now, with a sling and five smooth stones, David will defeat Goliath through the same power of God! With his whole heart, he believes God will deliver him in the face of the Philistine because he believes God is the great deliverer!

He has no doubt in the old stories of Yahweh's delivery service because he has firsthand data concerning bears and lions. As such, why would God not deliver David from Goliath? David's courageous faith finally gives Saul the courage to speak God's name! Saul sends David to battle with this blessing: "Go! And GOD help you." (17:37).

After 40 verses, David and Goliath finally meet. The dramatic suspense has built. All 5' nothing of David stands before the huge warrior with shield, spear and gear. David has nothing but one sling, five stones, and One God. The Philistine Bully is offended that Israel has sent a boy to battle. He openly ridicules David and curses him by the name of his gods. He does what all bullies do. He taunts David - half inviting and half intimidating him - thus conducting his own form of psychological warfare.

"Come on," Goliath sneers, "I'll make road kill of you for the buzzards. I'll turn you into a tasty morsel for field mice" (vs. 44).

Once again, David is offended! He bears witness to God! God will not be mocked. God will win this battle. Moreover, David's words guarantee that God receives all the glory for what is to come.

He responds, *"You come at me with sword and spear and battle ax. I come at you in the name of God-of-the-Angel-Armies, the God of Israel's troops, whom you curse and mock. This very day God is handing you over to me. I'm about to kill you . . . and the whole earth*

will know that there's an extraordinary God in Israel . . . The battle belongs to God and he is handing you to us on a platter!" (vs. 45-47).

The verbal confrontation ends. Goliath lowers his helmet, braces his armor, sets his javelin and spear and runs at David. David readies his sling and stone (he will need only one stone!) and runs toward the battling beast. Headlong they charge. Stopping just before the giant, setting himself, winding up, and sending the stone flying toward Goliath, David hits the Philistine in the forehead there embedding the stone deeply. Goliath is dead when he crashes to the ground. David cuts off his head. The battle is finished. David has defeated Goliath with one sling, one stone and One God! God prevails - to God be the glory!

Thousands of years have passed. There are still Goliaths in this world. There are still those who believe their size, their wealth, their power, their name, their Television shows, their popularity, their prestige allow them to do anything they want, say anything they want, step on anyone they want at anytime they want to, at any cost to anyone in their path. They mock people. But, more significantly they mock God. They take advantage of people and the earth which we must share.

Some of these Goliaths wear the mantle of God and abuse the name of God. Some of them claim to speak for God. But, as we know, God is capable of speaking for Himself! And God is still speaking! While it is poor form to mock people, it is unforgivable to mock God. God must never be mocked!

Goliaths are easy to see because of their size, arrogance and often because of their mean-spirits. They are loud and proud. But, the Davids of this world are harder to see because of their small stature, their pure hearts, their quiet calm and their gentle spirits. Nevertheless, there are Davids in our world, too! (again I ask how many parents name their children "Goliath")?

So where are the "Davids" of this world? Who will step forward - unafraid and unencumbered - to fight for God? Who will set themselves in the breach of faithlessness and fear to say, with David, "My God will not be mocked!" Who will enter the battle in our

generation with only a sling, a stone along with the power of the living God to "get rid of the ugly blot" as David did in his times?

Perhaps you are the one. You see, I believe each one of us has a sling and stone to fight for the cause of justice and righteousness. Our sling may be paper and our stone a pen. We may be teachers where our sling is the classroom and our stone a way to peace in a bloody and violent world. Wherever you go in the days ahead, go unafraid. Go unencumbered by heavy gear or expectations. God in the power of the living God to change the world. Do not be afraid. Stand. And where should you stand? Stand on the promises of God.

And if you are not on the frontlines, in the public eye, you can use the ingredients of faith which David gives us – courage, faith, and trust in God. Empowered by courage, faith and trust in God, you can do battle with cancer, with depression, with loneliness, with drugs and alcohol, with the bullies in your family, workplace or neighborhood.

The God of Abraham and Sarah; of Isaac and Rebekah, of David and Jesus – (both David and Jesus come from Jesse's family tree) and our God - will guide us to victory in all the seemingly insurmountable battles of our lives. Against all odds, our God prevails. When you believe this and live and act true to your belief, you shall live in the light of living God and you shall overcome. Amen.

(Material drawn from Walter Brueggemann's commentary on 1st and 2nd Samuel).