

Sermon by Ted Mosebach
First Congregational Church
United Church of Christ
East Hartford, Connecticut

June 24, 2012

I Samuel 17 (NRSV)

We Can Be Too Careful

The story of David and Goliath may be familiar to us. In western culture, a mismatched adversarial challenge between a well equipped protagonist and an underdog might be referenced as a “David and Goliath” struggle. Perhaps within the American consciousness is an identification of the David and Goliath story with our nation’s own history, comparing the limited resources of our beginning to develop nation as those of David against the superior economic and military Goliath of the British Empire. Of course, if ever there was a Goliath among nations today it would be the United States.

I have a sort of bipolar feeling about the David and Goliath story. I like very much the narrative of David’s conquering the big bully. Those of us who have been victimized by a bully, and that may be all of us, like to see the bully get his comeuppance. But I also know that it doesn’t always happen that way. I am too well aware of how bullies are often victorious rather than defeated, be that on the playground, or in the boardroom, or in oppressive governments, or on Wall Street.

So I don’t know that it is best to understand this story simply as a contest between unequal foes. A careful reading of the text reveals that not to be the case. It is not simply David against Goliath, but God against Goliath and that is what profoundly changes the equation. It takes the entire seventeenth chapter of I Samuel to tell the story and those fifty eight verses were too long for one Sunday morning reading, but if we read further into the passage we encounter these words which David says directly to the giant before their fight.

You come to me with sword and spear and javelin; but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defiled. This very day the Lord will deliver you into my hand, and I will strike you down...so that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, and that all this assembly may know that the Lord does not save by sword and spear...

Isn’t that something? We need to do something with that verse if we are to consider this story honestly. *The Lord does not save by sword or spear.* Wouldn’t that be the meaning of the slingshot?

In the thirty eighth verse we learn that King Saul’s idea was to put his own armor on David as protection against Goliath. Apparently Saul understood the contest to be a military one. Perhaps at first David did too for he accepts the bronze helmet of Saul, and

his coat of mail and his sword. But then David tried to walk with them, but could not, because he wasn't accustomed to them. And remember that Saul stood head and shoulders over everyone else in Israel and we are told nowhere in the Bible that David was tall. So in addition to David never having worn a soldier's gear, Saul's did not fit David. So he says, *I can not walk with these, for I am not used to them.* And he took them off. So then there was David as vulnerable as ever in just his civilian clothes and without a weapon of war. This match between David and Goliath was at its root not a military one. That's what David at least then sensed and no one else including Goliath seemed to know.

Might it be, when it seems that in some way we are up against a Goliath, if there is ever a need to approach the problem with the eyes of faith it is then? The last thing we might do is to try and fight Goliath on his own terms with his own kind of weapons. If we do we will probably lose. After all, he is Goliath. And the world is full of Goliaths, isn't it? The Goliath of poverty, the Goliath of terrorism, the Goliath of unemployment, the Goliath of domestic abuse, and the biggest most inevitable Goliath of all, the Goliath of death. There are times when the enemy is just too big and strong for human weapons, and we have no choice, do we, we really must let it be the Lord's battle.

The fact that the match between David and Goliath is not ultimately a battle between national enemies may be a subtle point but also the critical one. Goliath is depicted not as a noble soldier defending his country, but as a sinister bully who taunts and humiliates and seeks to dominate with his power. In short, he represents evil, and it is the fight against evil that is the Lord's. A nation has a right to defend itself and when it does it needs the weapons of war. But when the fight is not between nations but between good and evil, that is when the weapons of war are much less effective.

And what are the weapons that God will use and who will God use to employ them? We do not know. Isn't that why living confidently is so often a matter of faith? We do not know how God is going to win the battle, but we must not shrink from it just the same.

The history of the civil rights struggle in our own country may be a case in point. Martin Luther King Jr. and the other brave men and women who confronted racism and segregation in the Sixties could not change the situation with the tools of violence for the opponents of equal rights had so many more of those weapons. King knew that only the discipline and perseverance of a non-violent witness could touch the nation's conscience and win the cause. The conflict was one of good against evil and so the battle was the Lord's. And so despite the guns aimed at them and the fire hoses and the dogs the sling shot of non-violent resistance was victorious.

In an interview with Desmond Tutu during the battle against apartheid in South Africa, Tutu said, *When the white man first came here, we had the land and they had the Bible. They said, let us pray. We closed our eyes and when we opened them again, they had the land and we had the Bible.*" Yet, Tutu wasn't finished. *I can tell you, he said, which is stronger. We have the word of God. We will prevail. It is inevitable!*

The fact that the world is full of Goliaths may tempt us sometimes to withdraw in order to protect ourselves. Rather than confront the giant we may be tempted to stay to ourselves, to take care of our own, to keep clear of the enemy like David's brothers and rest of Israel's army did because the enemy is too big, too strong, too rich, too powerful, too prevalent, too many. But that will not defeat Goliath either. The Battle is the Lord's but the slingshot is in our hands.

The great preacher Fred Craddock tells the story of once when he needed to go to the super market for a jar of peanut butter. It was a large store with which he was unfamiliar. He saw a woman pushing a shopping cart with what he thought to be the confidence of someone who knew the territory. And so he approached her and asked, *Can you tell me where the peanut butter is?* She looked alarmed at him and replied, *Are you hitting on me?* He said, *no, I am looking for the peanut butter,* but she pushed her cart away from him. Craddock says that he went then and finally found the peanut butter by himself but as things sometimes go he arrived at the same checkout counter just after she did. He stood behind her with the peanut butter in his hand. She looked back and saw him and said, *You wanted peanut butter.* He said, *that's what I said.* She replied, *well, I'm sorry, but, you know, you just can't be too careful these days.* To which Craddock replied, *Lady, yes you can. Yes you can.*¹

¹ Lectionary Homiletics, vol. xxiii no.4, p.36. From a sermon by Brett Younger. Fred B. Craddock, Mike Graves, Richard Ward, *Craddock Stories*, (Chalice Press, 2001), 46.