

Facing the Goliaths and Storms of Life

1 Samuel 17 Mark 4:35-41 Rev. Todd B. Freeman
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One of my favorite Bible stories when I was very young was the story of **David and Goliath**. It's the ultimate "rooting for the underdog" story. And since I was such a small kid, still only 4'11" going into the ninth grade, everyone seemed like a Goliath to me.

Later, as a teenager going through adolescence, I also remember liking the story of **Jesus calming the stormy sea** and rescuing the disciples who were filled with fear and anxiety. It was reassuring during those times when I (like most teenagers) felt anxious and needed rescuing.

Both of these biblical stories are dramatic narratives, perhaps primarily metaphorical in nature, depicting **God's powerful intervention into the human arena to help the faithful overcome bad odds and tough times. In the case of the story of David and Goliath, it's overcoming the forces of injustice and oppression by courageously facing overwhelming obstacles. In the case of the story of the boat on the stormy sea, it's overcoming the forces of chaos, fear, anxiety and uncertainty by trusting in God's presence.**

Looking first at our Old Testament passage, let's review the story of David and Goliath. You may have forgotten some of the details since your first heard it in Sunday School. The story takes place in the lower hill country of Judah, in territory disputed by the Philistines, who had been in conflict with the Israelites ever since they entered the Promised Land.

You may be interested in learning that the name 'Palestine' is derived from the Hebrew word for 'Philistine'. So I think it's worth noting that the ancient battles between the Israelites and the Philistines continue, in some respect, to this very day in the conflict between the Israeli Jews and the Palestinians. In other words, this is an ancient rivalry.

In our biblical story, the two armies gather across a valley, the Valley of Elah. But before the battle is fought, the Philistine champion, Goliath, strides out onto the field of battle and, in mocking tones, challenges Israel to send out someone to duel him in man-to-man combat – a winner-take-all scenario. Both Goliath and his armament are described in terrifying detail. His words of intimidation and his monstrous appearance have the desired effect – no Israelite is brave enough to accept the challenge.

Then a boy named David is introduced. David is the youngest of the eight sons of Jesse, who lives near Bethlehem (about 15 miles from the Valley of Elah). We have previously learned in 1 Samuel that the prophet has already anointed

David to be the new king, choosing him (through God's guidance) over his older brothers.

Several of David's older brothers are soldiers in King Saul's army. But since David is too young for battle (probably only 14 or so) he stays behind to take care of his father's flock of sheep. Acting as a courier, David is sent by his father to the army encampment with food for his brothers. He arrives just as the armies are again setting up the battle lines.

David hears Goliath issue his daily challenge and sees the Israelite army tremble in fear. As the soldiers talk about what is happening, David becomes more and more disturbed, both with Goliath, for defying "the armies of the living God" (v. 26), and with the Israelites themselves for their lack of courage.

Let's pause here a moment and reflect upon what we might learn from this part of the story. I think that a primary point that the author is trying to make is that **being timid in the face of oppression and injustice, and refusing to face seemingly overwhelming obstacles is not the appropriate course of action for the people of God.**

Therefore, we may want to ask: **What would it take for you, like David, to gain the courage to face those things in your life that you could describe as injustice or as a daunting obstacle?**

When David's brothers learn that he is upset with the situation they tell him that his duties lie back at home with the sheep (v. 28). (Have you ever been told to go away and mind your own business?) Perhaps the point here is that **fighting injustice and oppression is everyone's business.** David's rebuke has also reached the ears of the king, who calls him in for a visit. David valiantly volunteers to fight Goliath himself. When King Saul objects, David argues that he is indeed capable.

Now, it's one thing to be cocky and overconfident, but perhaps we can reflect upon those times when we have been *under-confident* in ourselves and our abilities, and in the strength of God's presence with us. David reflects upon how God has helped him in the past, particularly in protecting his flock of sheep from lions and bears, and knows that God is with him now.

King Saul finally agrees to David's proposal and places his very own armor on young David. Again, as in the case of Goliath, the armament is described in much detail. This scene, however, is meant to look *comical*. Standing there dressed in armor four sizes too large, we learn that the tools of traditional warfare are much too cumbersome and inappropriate for the young shepherd.

This is one of my favorite details in this story, because perhaps we're being taught that **traditional methods of battling one's opponents are not always what is called for when fighting injustice and oppression, and when facing enormous odds.** David couldn't be like someone else, in this case a full-grown powerful warrior. He had to be himself and work within his own means and capabilities. We learn that **we, too, have to use the tools and ways that are familiar and common to us – to be true to who we are – when facing overwhelming obstacles.**

We all know how the story ends, of course. Hit in the forehead by a single stone from his sling, Goliath, a mighty symbol of all that stands in opposition to God and God's people, is defeated by David, a seemingly unworthy opponent.

The central theme in this vivid story is the triumph of the weak over the strong, especially the righteous weak over the unrighteous powerful. But this is not a simple story of the triumph of *human* skill and bravery over brute strength. I am among those who believe that this is more of a story about God than it is about a single battle between David and Goliath. **Yes, it's a story about the ability to help those who seem un-powerful to overcome enormous obstacles. But we are also left with a powerful image of God's opposition to and eventual victory over injustice and oppression.**

As with every biblical narrative, it is important to ask how this story might apply to your own personal life and spiritual journey of faith. The traditional application of this particular story is still valid:

- What are the goliaths of injustice and oppression, and the overwhelming obstacles that *you* are currently facing in life?
- Are they causing fear and trembling in you, or do they call forth courage?
- What strength and courage can you gain in *your* situation after hearing this Bible story?

I encourage you to reflect on these things this week.

Well, if the story of David and Goliath reflects God's triumph over and seemingly insurmountable obstacles, then **the New Testament story of Jesus calming the storm reflects God's triumph over the chaos, fears, anxieties and uncertainties of life.**

When finding themselves in the midst of a terrible storm, the disciples respond in fear (much like the Israelites did in the presence of Goliath). And it must have been one heck of a storm, because at least four of the disciples were experienced professional fishermen, who undoubtedly faced many storms before. Jesus teaches them that instead of responding in fear, they should respond in faith.

There is a great deal of important **imagery** in this story. For instance, throughout the Bible, starting in the first chapter of Genesis, the **sea often metaphorically represents the place where chaotic and evil forces hostile to God live and dwell.** This story, then, portrays Jesus as possessing the same power as God over these forces. For the gospel writer, Mark, this is an important story in revealing the identity of Jesus.

Also, **one of the earliest symbols used to represent the Christian church was a boat with a cross as its mast.** If you take a look at the stained glass window behind me here in this sanctuary, you can see this depicted in one of the panels. **The earliest interpretation of this story, then, was that God would be with the church and protect it from the chaos and danger of the world around it.** This story of Jesus calming the storm and rescuing the disciples in the boat was a

tremendous **reassurance** that God would calm the storms in which the early church found itself. I think the same is true for the church today.

In a similar vein to the David and Goliath story, the personal application of this story leads to similar questions:

- What are the storms of chaos, fear, anxiety and uncertainty that you currently find yourself in the middle of?
- Are you responding to these storms with fear and anxiety, or faith?
- What strength and courage can you gain in your situation after hearing this Bible story?

Reflect on these things this week, as well.

I know that each one of us can find parallels to these biblical stories in our own lives, for no one is exempt from goliaths of overwhelming obstacles, nor from storms of anxiety and uncertainty. For as both these stories reveal, **God does not promise to keep us away and free from giants and storms – the unfairness and tragedies of life – but does promise to be with us when we do indeed face them.**

I like the way one biblical commentator puts it, “Where is God when our boat begins to sink? Right there in the boat with us, as Jesus was with the disciples. God offers support to calm the storm in us.”

It is my hope that you will leave today reflecting upon all these things as they apply to your own life. This may help. I have a magnet up in my study here at the church that has the following wonderfully appropriate quote:

- *Serenity is not freedom from the storm, but peace within the storm.* •

I have found strength yet again in this saying, and in reflecting upon these two powerful Bible stories as I have been facing the reality of losing my mother just over a week ago. And I have learned yet again that **facing obstacles and storms is a whole lot easier when you know there is a loving and caring community standing right there with you.** I cannot thank you enough for how much that has meant to me over the past week.

So, as we continue to face issues of injustice and oppression, and seemingly overwhelming obstacles, let's remember the story of David and Goliath. And as we continue to face times of fear, anxiety and uncertainty, let's remember the story of Jesus calming the stormy sea.

And know deep within your heart that “Serenity is not freedom *from* the storm, but peace *within* the storm.” For God is with us!

Amen.