

“Against All Odds”

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Text: I Samuel 17:4-11; 19-23; 32-49

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Most if not all of us are familiar with this story. For many of us, it was one of the first stories we were taught in Sunday School. One preaching resource I consulted recommended that the preacher avoid any fancy discussion of the intricacies and textual problems related to this story. “Because this story is so familiar and entrenched in the mind of the parishioners, any critical examination will fall on deaf or defiant ears. With this text, the preacher would do well to simply retell the story.” That sounded like pretty wise counsel.

Envision in your mind a valley with the Israeli army on one side and the Philistines on the other. Between them is a playing field for the armies to fight. However, the fighting has been postponed because a giant of a man – Goliath – who was supposedly around 9½ to 10 feet in height – keeps challenging someone from the Israelites to fight him. “Choose a man for yourselves,” he says, “and let him come down to me. If he is able to fight with me and kill me, then we will be your servants; but if I prevail against him, then you shall be our servants and serve us.” So who will go up against this giant? Well, everyone knows it should be King Saul, but Saul will have no part of it – he’s giving in to the fear factor.

For 40 days this giant stands before the Israelites and challenges them – taunts them and ridicules them. Drew Sutor describes it this way:

About this time a shepherd boy arrives in camp with lunch for his brothers and cheese for King Saul. His name is David. While he is there, “the champion, the Philistine of Gath, Goliath by name, [comes] up out of the ranks of the Philistines, and challenge[s] them as before” (1 Samuel 17:23). Goliath stands before them like a professional wrestler. He is huge. He is muscular. He is mouthy. He is dressed to kill. . . .

His armor is spectacular. It is made of bronze and weighs more than a hundred pounds. He is covered from head to toe in armor. A javelin is strapped between his shoulders. In his hand is a beam-sized spear tipped with an iron head. Goliath is not only huge, he is also exceptionally well-protected.

With his bronze armor gleaming in the sun, this giant of a man taunts Israel. Defiantly he shouts insults at Israel. Defiantly he ridicules Israel. Defiantly he challenges Israel to send someone foolish enough to fight him. No one accepts the challenge. No one wants to fight this monster of a man dressed to kill.

As Goliath shouts the insults, David listens. After a few inquiries, David offers to fight the giant. David says he is not afraid of the big bully. His brothers tell him to keep quiet. King Saul learns of David’s willingness to fight. The king tries to talk David out of it explaining, “You are just a boy and this man has been a warrior since youth. There is no way you can win.”

David argues that because he has killed many ferocious animals (lions and bears) that attack his sheep, he can kill Goliath. Saul reluctantly allows David to fight. The king may be thinking, “Who knows, maybe the little guy will get lucky.” The king demands that David use his armor, but it is too heavy. David can hardly move in the king’s armor.

He’s sort of like little Randy in the movie *A Christmas Story*. His mother wraps him up for cold weather but he can’t put his arms down and when he falls down he can’t get back up.

David can’t walk in the king’s armor and it’s removed. He walks to a dry creek bed and selects five smooth small stones. With the stones in his shepherd’s bag and a slingshot in his hand, David proceeds to the playing field to engage the giant in battle. Now I’m sure that Goliath laughs at David and insults him. Goliath says, “What am I, a dog that you come at me with sticks?” David responds, “You come to me with sword and spear and javelin; but I come to you in the name of the Lord, whom you have defiled. The battle is the Lord’s battle.” David pulls a small stone from his bag. He carefully places it in his slingshot. Whirling the slingshot, he lets go of the rock. It cracks the giant in the forehead and Goliath bites the dust.

David versus Goliath. You know that phrase has become a description for any little guy/big guy confrontation. If you “google” “David vs. Goliath,” you get over two million references – everything from a small software company taking on Microsoft to a Canadian canola farmer going up against the Monsanto corporation. Anytime an individual faces an overwhelming situation, fights in unwinnable battle, or struggles against incredible odds, it’s often described as a David vs. Goliath story. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Atticus Finch defends a man who has been falsely accused. Finch knows he faces an uphill battle, arguing for a black man in front of an all white jury in the deep south.

At some point in our lives, we all have to square off against a giant. Rarely is that giant a 9½ foot Goliath. But it is a giant nonetheless. That giant may be known by the name of cancer – or depression – or a broken marriage. The giant that calls us to the battlefield may be discrimination or downsizing or injustice or indifference, greed or guilt, an addiction or the prospect of death. Sometimes we beat the giant. Several of us represented First Christian Church in the American Cancer Society’s “Relay for Life” Friday evening. The evening began with cancer survivors taking a victory lap around the track. We cheered for them and applauded when each of them announced how long they’ve been cancer-free. Some of the survivors are from our congregation. Sometimes the cancer goes into remission, the marriage is put back together, we climb out of debt, we climb out of the hole of darkness and despair, we are able to turn our back on the past or beat an addiction. Sometimes it takes one stone, sometimes all five; but finally we take down the giant, we take it out, we eliminate it and we leave the battlefield bruised but victorious.

Then there are those times when, like Atticus Finch, we lose the case. At the “Relay for Life,” the names of those honored remembered with luminaries were read; hundreds of names, many of whom did not survive, some from our congregation. There are times when the treatments no longer work, when the loneliness is unbearable, when divorce is the only option. We’ve used all five of our stones and we’ve missed every time and that giant is still standing – taunting us – frightening us. What then do we say? With what are we left?

The story of David and Goliath does not really tell us that God is on the side of the underdog. Although the Old Testament affirms in a number of places that the weak and outcast are a special concern of God, that’s not actually the point of our story. I believe the message here is that God keeps faith with God’s people. It is only with God that we have a fighting chance against our giants. With God, there is hope. With God we can fight the impossible battles. God gives us the strength we need to get up every day and walk on to that battlefield. Without God we would be like Saul and fold our tents, hopeless, helpless, and afraid. God does not abandon us, even when the giant seems to be winning.

Remember the words of James Russell Lowell in that hymn “Once to Every Man and Nation.”

Though the cause of evil prosper, yet His truth alone is strong
Truth forever on the scaffold, wrong forever on the throne.
Yet that scaffold sways the future and behind the dim unknown,
standeth God within the shadow, keeping watch above his own.

Eventually each one of us has to face some fearful odds. When we acknowledge that God will not abandon us – that God stands with us on the battlefield – win or lose, we emerge victorious.