

SMALL BUT – OH MY!
A Sermon by Avena A. Ward
St. Pauls United Church of Christ
Chicago, Illinois
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Text: 1 Samuel 17: (1a, 4-11,19-23), 32-49:

Now the Philistines gathered their armies for battle. And there came out from the camp of the Philistines a champion named Goliath, of Gath, whose height was six cubits and a span. He had a helmet of bronze on his head, and he was armed with a coat of mail; the weight of the coat was five thousand shekels of bronze. He had greaves of bronze on his legs and a javelin of bronze slung between his shoulders. The shaft of his spear was like a weaver's beam, and his spear's head weighed six hundred shekels of iron; and his shield-bearer went before him. He stood and shouted to the ranks of Israel, "Why have you come out to draw up for battle? Am I not a Philistine, and are you not servants of Saul? Choose a man for yourselves, 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 and kill him, then you shall be our servants and serve us." And the Philistine said, "Today I defy the ranks of Israel! Give me a man, that we may fight together." When Saul and all Israel heard these words of the Philistine, they were dismayed and greatly afraid.

Now Saul, and they, and all the men of Israel, were in the valley of Elah, fighting with the Philistines. David rose early in the morning, left the sheep with a keeper, took the provisions, and went as Jesse had commanded him. He came to the encampment as the army was going forth to the battle line, shouting the war cry. Israel and the Philistines drew up for battle, army against army. David left the things in charge of the keeper of the baggage, ran to the ranks, and went and greeted his brothers. As he talked with them, the champion, the Philistine of Gath, Goliath by name, came up out of the ranks of the Philistines, and spoke the same words as before. And David heard him.

David said to Saul, "Let no one's heart fail because of him; your servant will go and fight with this Philistine." Saul said to David, "You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him; for you are just a boy, and he has been a warrior from his youth." But David said to Saul, "Your servant used to keep sheep for his father; and whenever a lion or a bear came, and took a lamb from the flock, I went after it and struck it down, rescuing the lamb from its mouth; and if it turned against me, I would catch it by the jaw, strike it down, and kill it. Your servant has killed both lions and bears; and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them, since he has defied the armies of the living God." David said, "The Lord, who saved me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, will save me from the hand of this Philistine." So Saul said to David, "Go, and may the Lord be with you!" Saul clothed David with his armor; he put a bronze helmet on his head and clothed him with a coat of mail. David strapped Saul's sword over the armor, and he tried in vain to walk, for he was not used to them. Then David said to Saul, "I cannot walk with these; for I am not used to them." So David removed them. Then he took his staff in his hand, and chose five smooth stones from the wadi, and put them in

his shepherd's bag, in the pouch; his sling was in his hand, and he drew near to the Philistine. The Philistine came on and drew near to David, with his shield-bearer in front of him. When the Philistine looked and saw David, he disdained him, for he was only a youth, ruddy and handsome in appearance. The Philistine said to David, "Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks?" And the Philistine cursed David by his gods. The Philistine said to David, "Come to me, and I will give your flesh to the birds of the air and to the wild animals of the field." But David said to the Philistine, "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 defied. This very day the Lord will deliver you into my hand, and I will strike you down and cut off your head; and I will give the dead bodies of the Philistine army this very day to the birds of the air and to the wild animals of the earth, 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; for the battle is the Lord's and he will give you into our hand."

When the Philistine drew nearer to meet David, David ran quickly toward the battle line to meet the Philistine. David put his hand in his bag, took out a stone, slung it, and struck the Philistine on his forehead; the stone sank into his forehead, and he fell face down on the ground.

Sermon

I had my sermon all done early this week. I planned to come back to it on Thursday and just tweak it a little bit. But then on Thursday morning something happened and it began to grow and grow.

I had planned to tell you about attending our daughter Coco's graduation from Kalamazoo College a week ago. How – as the grads in their gowns and mortar boards processed – there were the usual tangles of parents jockeying for the perfect position to take a photo of their son or daughter. Of course we were among them. And we got a number of shots in, some not so clear, some with other kids faces or tassels in front of Coco's face. But we got at least one good one.

And with digital technology we were able to crop that one shot so to show Coco's face, beaming, as she received the bouquet of flowers we brought for her. This shot shows just what we want to focus on and leaves out everything else that was going on around it. It'll make a great profile shot for her Facebook page, but it's definitely not the whole picture.

The verses we read this morning from 1 Samuel present the story of David and Goliath. But they're also cropped. They're selectively chosen from a longer account of the battles between the Israelites and their surrounding neighbors. This story is only part of the story of the battles between the people of Israel and the Philistines.

Goliath – a nine-foot-tall Philistine warrior – has been taunting the army of King Saul daily for 40 days. But you wouldn't know that from the story we read today. You only see Goliath on this particular occasion, offering to go one-on-one, sword-against-sword, with someone of the Israelite's choosing.

Goliath and the Philistines are willing to have this fight-to-the death decide the outcome of the battle in a single match-up. Goliath's intimidation tactics have worked well so far, because, until now, no one has come forward from the armies of Israel.

We also don't know that King Saul has offered a reward to the person from his army who is willing to go against Goliath. We only know that Saul and all Israel are afraid – paralyzed. That is, until David steps forward.

What we see in the verses we read today – is little David – eagerly agreeing to face Goliath. David – so small and inexperienced in battle. When Saul's armor is fitted on him he can't even walk so he chooses to go into battle without any armor at all, rather than clank around in something he isn't used to.

David tells of the times when – as a shepherd – he's defended his flock against lions and bears. The focus is on David his youth, his ruddy cheeks, his good looks. We see him selecting five smooth stones and putting them in his shepherd's bag. We hear Goliath's surprise – and then his disdain – as he looks down at his essentially unarmed opponent.

Then we hear the taunts. David speaking defiantly to Goliath in a voice that might have even cracked a bit. Trash talking, like wrestlers in the build up to a match. Threats and insults fly back and forth. Goliath calls on his gods and David comes back in the name of the God of Israel. "My God will give you into my hands!" he says. My God is stronger than yours.

But then ... it's all over in a matter of seconds. Before Goliath even knows what hit him, David has run up to him while simultaneously hurling one of those stones with his sling shot. The stone has found that soft spot in Goliath's head and that's it. It's over. A photo finish. We see David standing victorious beside the fallen giant.

What we don't see in the verses we read today is both armies standing round in amazement. And we also don't see what happened next. We don't see David stand over his opponent and draw his sword. Nor do you see David cut off the head of his fallen enemy, and pick it up and brandish it before everyone.

Because of the oaths they had sworn before the battle, the outcome has been defined by the conclusion. The god of Israel has won over the gods of the Philistines – by proxy of little David.

But this part has been cropped out of the picture.

And we don't see David take the severed head of Goliath and shows it to King Saul. Nor do we see him post that head in a central place in Jerusalem so all can see what his god has done. What we see in this cropped story is a fascinating fable of the weak overcoming the strong. So we can conclude that the power of God will deliver us from all that intimidates and oppresses us. It makes a neat clean story when we crop out the blood and gore.

But, in real life we aren't really able to crop out violence, are we? Unfortunately, the ugly specter of violence is still with us, whether we read about it in a worship service or not. Violence is still with us in our world, as much as we'd like to wish it away. The taunt of "my God is stronger than yours" often accompanies it. We can cut it out of our lectionary passages, but we can't eliminate it from human nature.

I think this cropping is one of the unfortunate things we do as progressive Christians. While this abridged version of the story of David and Goliath contains lots of wonderful points, if we ignore what's left out we miss something very important to our Christian faith.

Our Christian inheritance tells us that the picture of the gods upon whom both Goliath and David call are both distortions. With the gospel story the images of those gods is cast into tension with the God we've come to know through Jesus, a God who disavows violence by confronting it. With self giving God transforms the powers that seek to destroy life.

We see this picture of God unfolding throughout Jesus' ministry. Perhaps the clearest picture of it is found near the end of Jesus' life, when his followers want to use violent means for his cause in the Garden of Gethsemane. When his disciples try to prevent Jesus' arrest (Mark 14:47), Jesus stops them. He insists that his Father in heaven is One who causes the sun to shine on both the wicked and the righteous.

While the cropped version of David and Goliath is a valuable story to tell our children, it's also important to familiarize ourselves – and them – with the full text. If we are to prepare our children to live in this world, we would do well to help them interpret the PG13 or R-rated version of it.

Because violence in the name of God does still go on around us. Recently, a man with "white supremacist" leanings walked into the holocaust museum and shot dead a security guard – in the name of God. A doctor who performed late abortions was murdered just a few weeks ago in Kansas – in the name of God. Suicide bombers still blow themselves and many others up weekly in Iraq and Afghanistan and Pakistan – in the name of God. Violence in the name of God still occurs just as it does in our holy book.

But those of us who follow Jesus, have an image to hold fast to – an image of God who opposes violence in a way that contrasts sharply with the tales of heros like David. So, when faced with our own Goliaths, we have a the example of a God who transforms evil by doing good to temper our reactions.

Now ... right here is where my sermon was going to end. With this point about extremist violence in the news and Jesus' non-violent approach to counter it. That is, until Thursday morning.

That morning, as I was driving down Clybourn, I heard shouts before I actually saw the source. As the demonstration came into focus, I realized the demonstrators were the staff and clients of

Anixter Center – an organization that provides sheltered workshops for adults with Downs Syndrome and other mental and physical challenges. I pulled up to a staff member standing in the street and took a leaflet. It urged me to contact my state legislators to stop threatened state budget cuts that will be deadly to the programs at Anixter. I was moved and I vowed to call the phone numbers listed on this flyer.

But that wasn't all. As I came down Fullerton I saw the children. Little bitty ones dressed in their red DePaul t-shirts, marching with older children up to about 8 or 10 in age. They were carrying signs and shouting, too. Their programs will also be cut. I got that this David and Goliath struggle is not just about extremist violence. It's also about gigantic, systemic issues that threaten to draw us into making decisions that will do violence to many small and vulnerable people.

If we want to raise our children in the Christian faith – we will tell them the whole story of a loving God who faces violence and whose face shines upon the well off and the poor and the oppressed alike. By this they'll know that violence doesn't just disappear because we crop it out of the story, or out of the picture. And that violence isn't just something that "evil" people practice. Even good people (like King David ... and you and I) are capable of violence. Even in the name of all that's good and sacred. It's still violence.

What we bring into the picture with our Christian faith is the context of the God that Jesus has taught us to love and serve. This God is able to transform even the violence of crucifixion into a force that counters death – through self-giving.

As followers of Christ we're called to look at the violence we participate in when we fail to address – and stop – the violence that goes on all around us. We will do violence to the body of Christ – and the body politic – if we allow extensive cuts that have been proposed to health and human services programs in Illinois. If these cuts go into effect, who will pick up the slack? Will we, as a congregation, be ready to care for the people who will certainly line up outside our doors when they can no longer access services through Anixter, Uhlich Children's Advantage Network, DePaul, Catholic Charities?

As I finished another edit of the sermon I received an email from Uhlich detailing how the \$14 million in budget cuts would impact that organization's ability to serve the children and families they currently serve. Just one example of the impact of such a reduction is that Uhlich's foster care caseworker staff would be drastically cut. The caseworkers who are left would see their caseloads go from 15 families to 50!

On Thursday, the messages kept coming – from Treatment Alternatives for Safe Communities, from Casa Central, and many other agencies that St. Pauls currently supports with micro-grants.

The messages were like battle taunts, and they were coming from both sides. It's been going on for some time now. And the challenges is in the air -- who will come out to face the giant?

If we respond as followers of Christ, it will be not only with the courage of David, but with something else as well. It will be with a willingness to give up something in order to stop the cycle of violence. If we choose to enter the battle we must choose our stones, but not the kind that wound or kill. Following Jesus' example, they will more likely be words. They will be letters and phone calls and emails and personal visits with legislators. And, whatever the outcome, we know that doing battle means risking something, giving up something, on behalf of others – so that they may have life as we have life. It means offering our resources to care for the least among us -- the children who depend on free lunches, those who need safe homes, those who need meaningful work.

May God be our vision and our wisdom as we weigh the challenge. We may be small, but oh my the difference we can make with God as our guide.

Amen.