

But, Who?

By Reverend Litton Logan

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Scriptures:

1 Samuel 17:1a,4-11,19-23,32-49 (NRSV)

1Now the Philistines gathered their armies for battle; they were gathered at Socoh, which belongs to Judah, and encamped between Socoh and Azekah, in Ephes-dammim. 4And there came out from the camp of the Philistines a champion named Goliath, of Gath, whose height was six cubits and a span. 5He 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. 6He had greaves of bronze on his legs and a javelin of bronze slung between his shoulders. 7The 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. 8He 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. 9If 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." 10And the Philistine said, "Today I defy the ranks of Israel! Give me a man, that we may fight together." 11When Saul and all Israel heard these words of the Philistine, they were dismayed and greatly afraid.

19Now Saul, and they, and all the men of Israel, were in the valley of Elah, fighting with the Philistines. 20David 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. 21Israel and the Philistines drew up for battle, army against army. 22David left the things in charge of the keeper of the baggage, ran to the ranks, and went and greeted his brothers. 23As 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.

32David said to Saul, "Let no one's heart fail because of him; your servant will go and fight with this Philistine." 33Saul 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." 34But 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, 35I 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. 36Your 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." 37David 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!"

38Saul clothed David with his armor; he put a bronze helmet on his head and clothed him with a coat of mail. 39David 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. 40Then 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.

41The Philistine came on and drew near to David, with his shield-bearer in front of him. 42When the Philistine looked and saw David, he disdained him, for he was only a youth, ruddy and handsome in appearance. 43The Philistine said to David, "Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks?" And the Philistine cursed David by his gods. 44The 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.” 45But 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. 46This 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, 47and 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.”

48When the Philistine drew nearer to meet David, David ran quickly toward the battle line to meet the Philistine. 49David 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:

The books of 1 and 2 Samuel deal with the convergence of historical, technological, and social factors within and around a loose confederation of thirteen nomadic tribes as they move toward becoming the nation state that we know as Israel. The thirteenth tribe is the tribe of Levi, which was primarily responsible for all the tribes' sacramental relationship with God.

The last of the great charismatic tribal Judges, Samuel, and his lineage have been rejected by the tribes in favor of a king and a centralized bureaucracy like other nations. In addition, throughout the books of Samuel, we will see the tensions between the restricted powers of Israel’s kings under the Laws of Moses as championed by the prophets, over and against the prevailing Ancient Near Eastern ideas of kings having nearly unlimited power.

Let me also say that the books of 1 and 2 Samuel were either written by or edited by elite priestly Judahites during or just after the Exile. These folks wanted to legitimize the kingship of David and his dynasty from the tribe of Judah in opposition to the house of Saul, the Benjaminite. Saul and his lineage, due to a series of errors in judgment and misadventures on Saul’s part, resulting in him and his house being rejected as king over Israel in favor of David and his dynastic house. I want to point out that none of Saul’s errors or offenses could hold a candle to David’s and his descendants’ sins, so we are truly seeing a bias in favor of David in 1 and 2 Samuel. David was a complex and passionate man, whose actions, for good or bad, are woven into the evolution of Israel’s complex social and religious history that linger until this day.

Some scholars indicate that during the Aegean migrations of the 12th and 11th Century BCE, commonly referred to as the Invasions of the Sea People; one such group settled along the coast of the Eastern Mediterranean Sea and became the Philistines. They were extremely aggressive and technologically advanced, holding a monopoly on iron smelting and the production of iron weapons and tools in the area. However, as interesting as the historical, technological, and socio-political background may be for our story today, we must focus on its major point, which is God’s hand at work in the affairs of nations - all nations for all times, but particularly Israel.

Over the years, especially in western Christianity and Judaism, there has been a tendency to either innocently read and idealize this story of David and Goliath or to overemphasize its historical accuracies or inaccuracies, textual inconsistencies, the abuses of power, brutality, and the flaws and faults of its human characters. To take an either/or approach, undermines an essential and timeless truth, which is, God is at work in the messiness and inconsistencies of human affairs all the while honoring human self-determination.

Given our modern preoccupation with excessive certainty, facts, data, and 30 second sound-bite answers, stories such as David and Goliath are often seen as quaint little bible stories for the hopeless, the powerless, children, and the simple minded. Yet, I think that there is a very

important and highly sophisticated middle ground. That ground being what I have come to see and understand as the power of historical stories or parables to convey God's ageless universal truths even when the facts will not submit themselves to critical analysis and verification. Folks, we must never, never confuse facts with truths, especially in our relationship to God and God's will.

To appreciate our story today, which may or may not have a historical basis outside the Hebrew Scriptures, one must become immersed in the story with one's imagination, hopes, fears, and faith if they are to experience, not just know, its truths and power. Quite honestly, I believe we must hear the story of David and Goliath, regardless of our age or our so-called level of biblical sophistication, through the ears, heart, and mind of a child. Children, as we all know, are quite comfortable with inconsistencies and exaggerations in stories, yet still seem able to grasp their truths. I think this is true in general for the human religious consciousness also, albeit discounted by so many from within and without Judaism and Christianity today.

In addition, I want to strongly emphasize that we must listen to the story of David and Goliath within the greater history of Israel as it defies all odds to become a cohesive and formidable nation in antiquity and today through the efforts of sometimes pious, sometimes dishonorable, and sometimes scoundrels like David and others.

As the story goes, the Israelite and the Philistine armies are faced off against each other. However, the Philistines have an intimidation factor - a giant who stood 6'9", well armored and outfitted with massive weapons. This guy comes out each day and issues a mocking challenge to the Israelites, calling not only their honor and manhood's into question but by implication disrespecting and challenging their god *and his manhood*. The challenge goes that the Israelites should pick a champion to fight this giant and winner takes all. These sorts of challenges were not uncommon in the ancient world. If Israel's champion won, the Philistines would become the slaves of the Israelites and vice-a-versa. Such things never happened; there was always a battle no matter who won the challenge.

King Saul, the leader of the Israelite's citizen militia, himself a tall and an imposing figure, is portrayed as quaking in his boots in the presence of the Philistine army and its champion. Saul offers all sorts of inducements to entice one of his men to take on this giant, including marriage into the royal family and its honorific benefits. (An anachronism, since there was no royal family per se at the time). And, as always in a good story, there is the inducement for the hero to get the girl. In addition, the man who challenges and defeats Goliath will be given money, exemption from taxes and other civil responsibilities. There are no takers.

Jesse, an aging Bethlehemite and a loyal supporter of Saul, has several sons in the battle and since it is a citizen militia, the families of the combatants must sometimes supply provisions for their kin in battle. (At other times, armies just looted and took what they wanted as they moved along.) Jesse dispatches his youngest son, David, from his duties as shepherd of the family flock to take his soldier-sons and their company commander provisions as well as to bring back news of the battle along with assurance that his sons are okay.

David arrives on scene and in youthful enthusiasm, dumps his cargo with the quartermaster and heads up to the front lines to find his brothers. He asks his brothers how things are going. About that time, Goliath comes out and issues his daily challenge to the Israelites. David, in righteous indignation, is appalled at the challenge because it is a mocking derision of the living God of Israel, with whom David seems to have more than a casual or passing relationship.

David, by asking what is in it for the person who kills this uncouth, foul-mouth, pagan monster, poses a tongue-in-cheek honor question to those around him and the readers, not a query about personal gain. David's eldest brother hears the arrogant, young whelp and chastises him for having an evil-heart; that is, a perverted, voyeuristic interest in the carnage of battle as seen in his hanging around and leaving the family flock unprotected or in the care of someone else. However,

in defiance of Eliab's status as the first-born son, an insolent David says to Eliab, "What, what did I do? I just asked a question. And, oh by the way, dude, like who asked you anyhow." The accusation that David has an evil heart flies in the face of everyone knowing that God chose David because God saw into David's heart, and in 1 Samuel 13 we learned that David was a man after God's own heart.

Evidently, David's youthful confidence and chagrin at Goliath's challenge reaches the ears of King Saul. Saul has the young lad brought to him. David in brash confidence like Mighty Mouse says to Saul in effect, "Take heart, and never fear; David is here, I will save the day." Saul, I imagine, in mocking surprise at the brash young man, whose alligator mouth he believes is about to overload his hummingbird abilities, tells David that as an untrained boy he doesn't stand a chance against this giant, who has trained as a warrior since his youth.

David speaks up and in effect says a boy under the power of God is better than any well-equipped, well-trained military man, even a giant, and proceeds to give his bona fides of courage and skill as a shepherd with a bit of a twist.

³⁷David 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!"

David was under God's care; God had delivered him many times and God would deliver him now.

Saul's response to David is the first time in the whole story we hear Saul even speak of the Lord. "Go, and may the Lord be with you!" Saul seems finally to get it - their hope lies with the Lord. Where was Saul's faith in God during all this? Where was the army's faith? Are these the same people whose ancestors the Lord led out of Egypt, kept, and protected them during their wilderness wanderings, and brought them in to the promise land? How soon we forget.

Saul, like so many then and now, has assumed that the power to deliver the people lay in military might alone - the quintessential ways and means of nations. David makes King Saul aware of what he has overlooked - there is another source of power at work in the affairs of humankind, especially in the life of God's people. The contest between David and Goliath is a witness to the Israelites, the Philistines, and to the world that a god of might and power is in Israel; Israel's God is a god to be reckoned with.

David spurns Saul's armor and accouterments of battle and all that such things represented. David takes only his slingshot, historically a formidable weapon in and of itself, and five well-gauged stones. Goliath is insulted and dishonored by the appearance of a boy to challenge him. Huge Goliath tells this kid what he is going to do to him. David's response is, "Bring it on, big ugly, talk is cheap, let's see what you've got." And, oh by the way you crude, irreverent idiot, I am gonna have your head this day and the bodies of your army will be brunch for the buzzards." In an almost anticlimactic manner, David slings a stone - only one stone - at Goliath, striking him in an unprotected part of his head, stuns him, and quickly decapitates him. With Goliath's death, the Philistine army is routed, and carnage ensues. Thus, with an inspired David we see the beginnings of Israel's breaking the hold of the Philistines, technologically and politically, in the area and the ascendancy of Israel as a nation and David as a king.

It is the oppressed and the marginalized, the terrified, the brutalized, and the discounted of the world that tend to appreciate the David and Goliath story the most. History is full of dictators and evil tyrants that did not listen to the story and the truth this story conveys to their detriment. Who would have thought Rome would have fallen, Hitler would have lost, Stalin would be discredited, the Berlin Wall would have come down, and centuries of apartheid in South Africa

would have ended. I wonder, who would have thought 13 small colonies could have withstood and bested the leading world power of their day. Seems, some people still discount God in the mix of nations.

In addition, we need to understand that the Philistines, a world and a people now synonymous with the crude, uncouth, and the arrogantly powerful of this world, will not be beaten by creating bigger armies, better weapons, or newer military technology alone. Such things bring a parity of power and deterrence, but they do not defeat evil and ignorance to the ends of divine peace, justice, and wholeness - the quintessential desires of God and humankind.

In short, dictators, tyrants, Imperialists, and the demonic principles and principalities they represent will eventually be met by a holy, universal force for good and justice. In truth, this Force may be long-suffering, giving ample opportunity for the evil and wicked to turn around, the righteous and committed to marshal their resources and resolve, but never doubt it is at work.

Initially, God appeals to people's common sense and personal and mutual interests, as well their innate still, small spiritual voice of truth. However, all this failing - well, God will be amid the violence, strengthening the righteous, although saddened and broken hearted while consoling and comforting the living and the dead on both sides as God strives to steer things in the right direction. This is not the world God wants, so if we want peace, justice, health, prosperity, and wholeness we've got to cooperate and work with God and one another.

Nevertheless, I want to draw our attention to another serious dimension of this story for our time, primarily as a nation and as a people. This dimension is often eclipsed by the naive individualizing and popularizing of a young lad killing and decapitating a giant. I am talking about the marginalization and mocking disdain of the Judeo-Christian spiritual and religious consciousness of this nation and its people. As if to say, Goliath still comes daily, challenging and mocking the people of God.

Today, we see the ways of the living God mocked, trivialized, derided, and attacked by the Philistines - the crude, vulgar, irreligious, arrogant and idolatrously proud humanist within this nation and the world. Certain groups, especially the mainstream media elitists, disdain those of us who hold a sense of moral commitment to God's will and ways. We are called ignorant, backward, superstitious, and unsophisticated people. As Christians, we are constantly being mocked with the lowest common denominators of human greed, violence, hypocrisy, carnality, etc., courtesy of a godless modernity and our nation's and its people's moral cowardice. It seems that our local, state, national, and international leaders as well as many of our religious leaders are willing to compromise the ways of God for personal gain and their cause du jour at the expense of the big picture of what is good for all the people of this nation and the world.

People, being what they are and not what they are supposed to be, sometimes violence becomes necessary. Ideally, the faithful of the Lord will never use violence as their first choice in settling differences with others or one another, but neither should we hide behind the misunderstandings of ancient pacifism or peace to our detriments.

Individualizing and lifting the David/Goliath story out of its original birth of a nation and power defining context defrauds the text and trivializes God's word. Furthermore, I think the use of the David/Goliath metaphor is often superficial and nothing more than emotional manipulations by sinister and ulterior forces. Yet, I must admit that this story does have the ability to marshal the powers of human hope and spiritual fortitude in service of justice, peace, and wholeness, assuming the motivations of the underdogs are not simply to invert the power structures of the world for their own benefits - those on bottom now on top kind of thing. Interestingly, the only reason this story of David and Goliath can be used or misused is because we innately know that there is a power and force for good and justice at work in the universe. However, some people think with their ideas of noble causes this Force can be manipulated. I add that when people try to manipulate God for their

own ends, no matter how noble they believe they and their causes are, we may find a lot of dead "Davids" lying around. Folks, God is not manipulated or mocked.

However, if we modern folks want to individualize and romanticize this story from its original context as some sort of self-help, motivational story, we need to be careful because the glaring question will be - who will be the Lord's champion. Who, armed with pure faith will take on the giant champions of an arrogant, ignorant, crude, perverse, and godless humanism? Also, remember it is dangerous and gruesome work killing and decapitating giants. And, let us not be deceived, we are in a battle. The faithful of God are in a timeless battle to save the world from humankind's lowest common denominators of idolatrous pride, fear, greed, carnality, and indifference to the holiness of life, all life, as we strive to do our part in ushering in the kingdom of God on earth through God's will and ways, not ours or the machinations of nations.

Yet, the silence of God's army quaking in its boots yells out loud and clear, "I don't care what you promise me if I face down that big guy. I'll take my chances on judgment day and trust that my milquetoast ideas of cheap grace will not have any consequences because I ain't going up against the giants of social convention, public opinion, friends, family, the politically and economically powerful armed only with the Word of the Lord in some quaint, historical parable. No way! No way am I going to speak out against boycott those commercial, social, or political products and entities that mock God and God's people just to make a statement for God's will and ways. It just ain't going to happen, let God call someone else. Shoot! Let God do it God's self!"

But, that's not how it works, is it? That's not how it has ever worked. So, if not you and me, then who? I mean isn't our God the God of all reality, nations, and peoples? Can't we trust God to be in the mix of nations and their competing interests, leading, blessing, and delivering the righteous and producing justice and peace? *Careful, Litton, don't get carried away with your own rhetoric, and let your alligator mouth overload your humming bird abilities and commitment.*

I believe with all my being that the God of all nations has favored this nation among the many, but if it, we, and our beliefs in the inalienable rights of humankind to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness is to remain strong and a beacon of hope for human rights and opportunity around the world, its people must step up for the tasks ahead. I echo the heart of Psalm 127: 1: Unless the LORD builds the house, (the dynasty, the nation) the builders labor in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the guards stand watch in vain. (NIV)

As the story goes, David continued to fight against the Philistines and was victorious even when those within his own camp, including his own king, turned against him. And, oh, by-the-way, David got the girl - Michal and she became his wife, which is another story.

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