

“Let no one’s heart fail because of him”
Reading from the Old Testament: 1 Samuel 17
Reading from the New Testament: 2 Corinthians 4:7-10

For most of my adult life I have taught adults for one simple reason: the kids scare the bejeebers out of me. Bible studies, book studies, officer training classes, or various retreats; for the most part I’ve cast my lot or sensed my call with adults. I don’t claim to be any good at it and shudder at the thought of a teaching expert observing my pedagogical efforts, but it is with adults that I at least rise to the level I don’t feel like I’m drowning in the sea of my own ineptitude. For like a dog smelling fear, the kids can sniff the incompetence on you and then you are sunk. The adults can at least carry on the pretense of engagement a bit longer, and I am saved by their assumption that listening, even if pretended, must be something Jesus would be in favor of.

Of course, there is that stark contrast between children and adults when it comes to their reaction to the word *volunteer*. The children see your lips shaping to make way for the letter V, and they are thrusting their hands in the air and elbowing for position, “Me, me, me, me!!” Adults, not so much. In thirty-one years I have not come upon a

workable way to avoid the awkwardness of engaging participants in the reading of Bible texts, an important task in each class if for no other reason than to offer a blessed break from the sound of my voice.

I try not to assign readers, knowing some may be uncomfortable with public reading. After all, we are talking about the Bible which can be a bit of a minefield when it comes to pronunciation. Of course, it would be seldom that anyone would notice whether we pronounce it right or not. Maher-shalal-hash-baz? Shear-Jashub? Your guess is as good as mine. And yet, I have a friend who named his dog Abishag, only to be corrected by an Old Testament scholar who claimed it should actually be pronounced *Abeeshag*. Well, that just doesn't sound as cool; and unless he's taking the dog to a meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, who'd ever know anyway?

Subsequently, I ask for volunteer readers, but here's the thing; while children love to volunteer, adults love for someone else to volunteer. So, inevitably there is this awkward silence, and if I could read minds, I'd probably hear something like: "*Not me! Not me! Not me! Come on, people! Really? Okay, I'll do it.*" And thus, the silence is broken by those blessed words. "I'll read." And the room breathes again,

or at least I do. Oh, how grateful I am for the courage, commitment, and cheer of the church volunteer, not just the readers, but the greeters, choirs, committee chairs, maintenance impresarios, youth advisors, ambassadors, missionaries, teachers, and so many others in the life of the church; those who live into the knowledge that life is a gift to be received with gratitude and a task to be pursued with courage.

Somewhere between childhood and adulthood our connotation of volunteerism shifts from coveted opportunity to obligation. Perhaps you are familiar with the aphorism *too cool for school*. It is a bit of insider lingo used to describe those for whom exuberance and eagerness have succumbed to an aloof cynicism tinged with conceited derision.

Engagement becomes apathy. *Too cool for school*. Of course, you don't have to be a youth to be infected with this virus. The teacher, preacher, supervisor, social worker, customer service rep., nurse, office drone, or bureaucrat who crossed the border of burnout long ago; the person who resents life in general and views most encounters as a waste of time; the person who in every group setting is the self-appointed ambassador of *We tried that before and it didn't work*.

What forges the difference between active engagement, roll-up-your-sleeves readiness, and courageous perseverance; as opposed to dispassionate apathy, terminal trepidation, passive resignation, and chronic retreat? Some press on in faith while others mock those who do. Why?

One of the great benefits deriving from a slog through Israel's complicated narrative is the insight it offers about the human condition. It is a mirror of discernment revealing much about ourselves. We're not reading about some amber-encased collection of distant heroes, rather we are engaging the personalities, group dynamics, flaws, gifts, and challenges that make up our lives. There are pieces of you revealed in David, Eliab, Saul, and even Goliath. And reading about the intersection of their lives with the presence of the living God reveals a great deal about the intersection of our lives with the living God whether the armaments, spears, slings, Philistines, and stones in your life are metaphorical or all too real.

Few church kids arrive to first grade without having heard some form of 1 Samuel's play-by-play of the thrilling duel between the young David and the mighty Philistine, Goliath. It is great drama, riveting

literature, the classic triumph of the little guy over the giant, its theme regularly appropriated in summer blockbusters and bookstore bestsellers. David and Goliath – It’s George McFly vs. Biff Tannen, The Bad News Bears vs. the Yankees, Minny Jackson vs. Hilly Holbrook, The Miracle on Ice, Flashdance, Hidden Figures, Susan Boyle, and Rudy all wrapped up into one. However, there is a whole lot more going on here than a courageous youth and a ferocious giant.

The Philistines had migrated to the land of Canaan from the Aegean basin, establishing cities on or near the coast. Known to be belligerent or warlike, they sought to expand westward. At the same time, Israel, having settled to the East, began to expand westward. And thus, a mutual hostility became inevitable.

“Now the Philistines gathered their armies for battle; they were gathered at Socoh, which belongs to Judah ... Saul and the Israelites gathered and encamped in the valley of Elah and formed ranks against the Philistines. 3 The Philistines stood on the mountain on the one side, and Israel stood on the mountain on the other side, with a valley between them.” William Wallace and Robert the Bruce lined up against King Edward; Hamilton and Burr back-to-back before taking their

paces. Patton facing off against Rommel; Ali staring down Frazier before the bell; the Jets and the Sharks giving each other the evil eye on an Upper West Side playground; Taylor Swift and Katy Perry loosening their thumbs before another *Twitter*-fit. In ratcheting up the drama, the author draws us into the narrative like the ring announcer before the fight. *Are you ready to rumble?*

But then the author throws us a curve ball. “And there came out from the camp of the Philistines a champion named Goliath, of Gath, whose height was six cubits and a span. 5 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. 6 He had greaves of bronze on his legs and a javelin of bronze slung between his shoulders. 7 The shaft of his spear was like a weaver's beam, and his spear's head weighed six hundred shekels of iron.” Gulp!

I remember the thrill of hearing my name called for an all-star team at a basketball camp, a brief *Yeah-I'm-Bad!* moment. Very brief, because the honor bestowed upon me was to guard Mizzou alum and 1st round draft pick of the Detroit Pistons, Al Eberhard, whose size and physique would make a grizzly bear shudder. Put it this way, he's Cody

Zeller's uncle, and I'd bet Cody wouldn't want to mess with him. And then, there's me... I came! I saw! I looked for an exit sign! Believe it or not, many scholars say that, depending on which manuscript you refer to, Goliath and big Al are close to the same size, i.e. a size I don't want to mess with.

“The Philistines stood on the mountain on the one side, and Israel stood on the mountain on the other side, with a valley between them.” Great literature often relies on conflict and the author here, after masterfully heightening the tension between two foes, seemingly deflates the drama with the appearance of Goliath. What was billed as a battle has suddenly become what appears to be a game of hide-and-seek; cat and mouse; or maybe a whack-a-mole marathon. For forty days, Goliath taunts Israel, daring them to set forth a challenger; and for forty days, Saul and his soldiers are looking for an exit strategy, or maybe looking at one another to say, “I'm not going out there. You go.”

Well, enter David, the young stripling, who the author can't help but constantly remind us, is good looking. So, instead of army facing army, we have Harry Styles bowing up against Julius Peppers. “Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the

living God?" Can't you hear David's brothers mocking him? *Shut up, Squirt, or we'll stick you in the dryer back home like we did last summer.*

But the brothers have no jones to challenge Goliath, and neither does Saul for that matter. So, David gets the go-ahead to take on Goliath, and refusing the encumbrance of government-issued high-grade armor, David chooses five simple smooth stones, pulls out his well-worn sling and forthwith gives Goliath a massive headache before ceremoniously separating his head from his shoulders (That's the part usually edited out of the children's sermons).

It happens so quickly as to be anticlimactic after all the preliminary hoopla and bluster, but perhaps Goliath's demise and David's easy triumph are not meant to be the primary focus of this text. If that were so, this would be a very different sermon, a sermon like far too many that have been preached on this text, the ones fueled with bad theology, intimating that if you just pray a little harder, or your faith is just a bit stronger, or if you dig a little deeper all those Goliaths will fall faster than the bowling pins on league night.

It just does not work that way and far too many of God's cherished children have been terribly wounded by voices and churches preaching that false hope. Don't get me wrong, this story is **all** about faith. I just don't think that the point of faith is to beat up the bully. If it were, we'd be communing on spinach instead of bread and singing songs about Popeye instead of Jesus. Can't you see it? Instead of giving blood we'd be getting anchor tattoos.

This text isn't about slaying giants. Rather, this text is about how we will face the giants come what may. I believe this is uncovered if we dig just a little deeper into the text. No doubt, the Philistine threat is real and immanent, but did you happen to notice that until David enters the scene, God is not mentioned? Hmm.

Remember that Israel had demanded a king so that they could be like the other nations and so that their king could go out and fight their battles on their behalf, and in Saul, they got what they asked for, a conventional king, a conventional monarchy, reliant on conventional forms of security and dependent on the strength of its conventional army. In chapter 14, we are told, "There was hard fighting against the Philistines all the days of Saul; and when Saul saw any strong or

valiant warrior, he took him into his service.” Of course, in a world of conventional armies and conventional warfare overseen by conventional kings and conventional principalities and their conventional fealty to ego and pride, life is increasingly defined by competition for the longest sword, the heaviest shield, the biggest button, which all results in higher anxieties because, sooner or later, somebody else is going to get a bigger gun, and so you buy more locks, build higher walls, dig deeper bunkers, batten down the hatches. And before you know it, you’re no longer living, just surviving.

“When Saul and all Israel heard these words of the Philistine, they were dismayed and greatly afraid.” Was David naïve? Probably. Infected with a heaping helping of youthful arrogance? Maybe. Yet he was clear headed enough to see how fear can be every bit as toxic to life as any Goliath. As David proclaims in the children’s Bible, “You come with a sword and spear, but I come in the name of the Lord. This battle is the Lord’s.” It’s the battle against fear, against hopelessness, a refusal to be counted among the living dead; a desire to live with faith, with trust, with hope regardless of what Goliath may do, because one thing Goliath can never do is separate you from God’s loving presence.

Walter Brueggemann suggests that the question David asks his brothers, Saul, and us is this: “Is there a working power and a governance outside the scope of the armies that relativizes the power and danger noticed at first sight?” Paul’s answer? “Whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.” (Walter Brueggemann, *1 and 2 Samuel*)

This text isn’t about slaying giants. Rather, this text is about how we will face the giants come what may. The prophet Isaiah testifies: The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable ... Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; 31 but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.”

Paul elaborates: “Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ ... [We] boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, 4 and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, 5 and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts.”

Again, Paul attests to the truth David held onto in the face of Goliath: “We have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. 8 We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; 9 persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.” And wasn’t it Jesus who said, “those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” And didn’t our Lord also say, “My peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.” Ultimately, isn’t that our life fueling strength and hope whether Goliath falls or not? Amen.