

“God Overcomes the Odds”

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
June 20, 2021

Ephesians 6:13-18 (The Message)

¹³⁻¹⁸ Be prepared. You're up against far more than you can handle on your own. Take all the help you can get, every weapon God has issued, so that when it's all over but the shouting you'll still be on your feet. Truth, righteousness, peace, faith, and salvation are more than words. Learn how to apply them. You'll need them throughout your life. God's Word is an *indispensable* weapon. In the same way, prayer is essential in this ongoing warfare. Pray hard and long. Pray for your brothers and sisters. Keep your eyes open. Keep each other's spirits up so that no one falls behind or drops out.

1 Samuel 17:31b-50 (The Message)

...Saul sent for him. ³²“Master,” said David, “don't give up hope. I'm ready to go and fight this Philistine.” ³³Saul answered David, “You can't go and fight this Philistine. You're too young and inexperienced – and he's been at this fighting business since before you were born.”

³⁴⁻³⁷ David said, “I've been a shepherd, tending sheep for my father. Whenever a lion or bear came and took a lamb from the flock, I'd go after it, knock it down, and rescue the lamb. If it turned on me, I'd grab it by the throat, wring its neck, and kill it. Lion or bear, it made no difference – I killed it. And I'll do the same to this Philistine pig who is taunting the troops of God-Alive. GOD, who delivered me from the teeth of the lion and the claws of the bear, will deliver me from this Philistine.” Saul said, “Go. And GOD help you!”

³⁸⁻³⁹ Then Saul outfitted David as a soldier in armor. He put his bronze helmet on his head and belted his sword on him over the armor. David tried to walk but he could hardly budge. David told Saul, “I can't even move with all this stuff on me. I'm not used to this.” And he took it all off. ⁴⁰ Then David took his shepherd's staff, selected five smooth stones from the brook, and put them in the pocket of his shepherd's pack, and with his sling in his hand approached Goliath.

⁴¹⁻⁴² As the Philistine paced back and forth, his shield bearer in front of him, he noticed David. He took one look down on him and sneered – a mere boy, apple-cheeked and peach-fuzzed. ⁴³ The Philistine ridiculed David. “Am I a dog that you come after me with a stick?” And he cursed him by his gods. ⁴⁴ “Come on,” said the Philistine. “I'll make roadkill of you for the buzzards. I'll turn you into a tasty morsel for the field mice.”

⁴⁵⁻⁴⁷ David answered, “You come at me with sword and spear and battle-ax. I come at you in the name of GOD-of-the-Angel-Armies, the God of Israel's troops, whom you curse and mock. This very day GOD is handing you over to me. I'm about to kill you, cut off your head, and serve up your body and the bodies of your Philistine buddies to the crows and coyotes. The whole earth will know that there's an extraordinary God in Israel. And everyone gathered here will learn that GOD doesn't save by means of sword or spear. The battle belongs to GOD – he's handing you to us on a platter!”

⁴⁸⁻⁴⁹ That roused the Philistine, and [Goliath] started toward David. David took off from the front line, running toward the Philistine. David reached into his pocket for a stone, slung it, and hit the Philistine hard in the forehead, embedding the stone deeply. The Philistine crashed, facedown in the dirt. ⁵⁰ That's how David beat [Goliath] – with a sling and a stone. He hit him and killed him. No sword for David!

If you were to create a list of the Old Testament's most familiar stories, the story of David & Goliath would be right up there with the Seven Days of Creation, or Noah and the Ark, or Moses and the Burning Bush. The pairing of the names David & Goliath has come to mean a mismatch between the mighty and an underdog who emerges victorious.

We heard only part of the saga of David & Goliath this morning. In 1 Samuel Chapter 17 it takes forty verses of build-up before the actual confrontation between the imposing Goliath and the youthful David.

Let me set the scene for you. We know that the Israelites had escaped slavery in Egypt, wandered in the wilderness of Sinai for forty years on their way to their “Promised Land”, and eventually invaded and conquered Canaan—the region we know now as the modern State of Israel/Palestine. The Philistines were also newcomers to the land of Canaan, arriving at about the same time as the Israelites, but from the opposite direction. Historians believe the Philistines were a people that had come from the region of Greece to the Mediterranean shores of Canaan. It’s from their name “Philistine” that the modern term “Palestine” is derived.

In today’s story the Israelites and the Philistines are fighting over territory. The Israelite army is perched on a hill on one side of a valley, looking across to the Philistine Army occupying the hill opposite. David is not part of the Israelite army. David visits the Israelite encampment because his three older brothers are serving in the army. Their father Jesse sends young David to take food to his brothers. While David is there he hears the bellowing voice of Goliath, a Philistine soldier calling from the valley below.

Goliath is not just another soldier; he’s an intimidating figure. He is said to stand 9 feet 9 inches tall, though the uncertainty of the ancient text probably means 6 feet 9 inches—that would still be much, much taller than the average person in those days. Virtually every inch of Goliath’s body except for his face is covered in armor, from his helmet to his chainmail coat to his armor-clad shins and boots. Goliath’s enormous size is matched by his enormous strength. The head of his spear alone weighs 15 pounds, and his chainmail coat adds another 125 pounds.

Goliath calls for the Israelite army to send a “champion”—one who will fight on behalf of the entire army. This squaring-off between two representative combatants was not uncommon in ancient times, though it didn’t preclude the rest of the forces from later engaging in battle anyway.

For forty days, the Bible says, Goliath steps forward to taunt and challenge the Israelite army. To a man the Israelite soldiers and their commander-in-chief King Saul are terrified by Goliath. But on this day when David is bringing his brothers food from home he hears Goliath’s insults and boasts. David exclaims, “Who does he think he is, insulting the forces serving the will of the living God?” Some soldiers tell King Saul of the youth’s defiant reaction to Goliath, and Saul sends for him.

“Listen, son, you are only a boy, but Goliath has been a warrior since he was your age.”

David answers King Saul, “With respect, sir, when bears and lions have taken lambs from my flocks I your servant have used my sling with stones to fight them off and rescue my animals. How fierce can that soldier be? He doesn’t even have respect for God. The God who protected me from bears and lions will protect me against that Philistine.”

Saul believes him. He tells David, “Go, and may the Lord be with you!” Then Saul takes his own personal armor and begins to outfit young David with helmet, armored coat, and heavy sword strapped over his shoulder. “Saul has assumed that the power necessary for deliverance must lie in the realm of military might.... David is the model of another way.”¹

David staggers under the weight of Saul’s armor. “I can’t even walk with these; I’m not used to them,” he says. So David sheds all the armor and picks up his walking staff. Then he goes to the creek bed and selects stones to sling at Goliath. He picks up five; their

¹ *New Interpreter’s Bible—A Commentary in Twelve Volumes: Vol. II.* Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998, 1111-1112

smoothness will provide better accuracy being flung through the air. He puts them in his pouch and sets off.

After the Bible's lengthy build-up, this confrontation is over quickly. Goliath scoffs at the ridiculous sight: an army sending a boy, unarmed, to stand against a battle-tested veteran. David declares that he stands on behalf of the will of the living God of all people against an army serving idols of wood and stone. And before Goliath can get within range to wield his sword or even his spear, David whirls and whirls his sling and unleashes a stone that strikes Goliath squarely in the forehead, dropping him to the ground.

To us that sounds like the stuff of legends – a young boy with a single stone striking a person in the one place unprotected by armor. But on my travels in Jordan, Israel/Palestine and Egypt I have seen boys and men quite skilled at using the traditional slings. They can hurl projectiles farther than a football field with devastating speed and accuracy.

This story remains popular both in religious and secular settings. In the biblical tradition, the purpose of the retelling of this story "is the glorification of [the LORD] in the eyes of the world,"² because God made victory possible despite improbable odds of an inexperienced boy going up against a seasoned, well-equipped warrior. In the secular world this story is often cited as an example of the victorious underdog, not unlike the classic fable of The Tortoise and the Hare, or the example of the 1980 U.S. Olympic Men's Hockey Team.

But why was David successful? And what we can we take from that?

Malcolm Gladwell has written for the *Washington Post* and *The New Yorker*. A few years ago Gladwell authored a book called David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits, and the Art of Battling Giants.³ Gladwell uses that biblical story to suggest that improbable events can, in fact, be more probable than common sense would expect.

In this case, he points out that Goliath's apparent strength turned out to be his weakness. Goliath's heavy armor and weapons were intended for traditional close, hand-to-hand combat. David lacked those tools, but he intentionally avoided that traditional tactic. Instead, David used his lack of those things to his advantage, fighting from a distance and targeting Goliath's one unprotected feature. Gladwell challenges us to think of what we can do despite what we *don't* have.

The story of David & Goliath "embodies the hopes of all persons (when they are faced with overwhelming... power) that there is a way to overcome that power and win the future."⁴ "...There is a way...." In 1 Corinthians Chapter 12 the apostle Paul declared, "There are different abilities to perform service, but the same God gives ability to all for their particular service. The Spirit's presence is shown in some way in each person for the good of all."⁵

God gives ability where we wouldn't expect it. Some examples in our lifetimes:

Consider how God was at work in the collapse of the Berlin Wall, as the dominated people of East Germany and Eastern Europe prevailed over the authoritarian communist governments. Who would have imagined that!

² Walter Brueggemann, Interpretation: a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching – First and Second Samuel. Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1990, 132

³ Malcolm Gladwell, David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits, and the Art of Battling Giants. New York: Little, Brown & Company, 2013

⁴ New Interpreter's Bible—A Commentary in Twelve Volumes: Vol. II. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998, 1114

⁵ 1 Corinthians 12:6-7 New Living Translation

Or who could imagine the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa in the early 1990s after centuries of racial discrimination rigidly and ruthlessly imposed on indigenous people by European settlers. The world's moral outrage applied sustained pressure causing the race-based government to loosen its discriminatory grip and allow more democratic processes to hold sway.

We have witnessed God-inspired efforts by faith-inspired individuals to accomplish seemingly impossible victories. Perhaps we're praying to discern how we can be part of the solution.

For instance, our great nation is not without its blemishes. One blemish on our great nation is how part of our population has exercised its power through the centuries to take advantage of minority populations. While you and I may not have intentionally supported practices that discriminate against minority groups, we are beginning to recognize what was once invisible to us. Now as we hear Christ's words to "do for even the least of these brothers and sisters of mine," we hear it as a call to more actively advocate for everyone to be able to enjoy the opportunity for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Another "underdog opportunity" before us is the opportunity to eliminate chronic hunger. Our world has the capacity to feed all its people. But some populations suffer from chronic hunger because of conditions like expanding drought, poor food delivery infrastructure, corruption. It's a huge problem that may not impact you or me, but it impacts 815 million people—about 10% of the world's population, according to the United Nations.⁶ Just the phrase "world hunger" can overwhelm us. But let us have faith that God can work through us to achieve what seems impossible.

One more comment about God giving ability where we wouldn't expect it. What's true for us individually can also be true for us as a church. This congregation is bigger than many, but not as large as some. Some other churches are able to be involved in larger mission projects than we can. Some other churches may have the security of large endowments to sustain their operations and their charitable work. Some other churches may have large numbers of participants enabling them to offer many services and programs to their people and to the community.

Despite the reality that other churches have greater capacity for programs than we do, we should not despair. As one observer has written, "When the church imagines that its mission can go forward only with massive numbers, large budgets, corporate styles of planning, and hierarchical structures of authority, then maybe we should read this story [of David & Goliath] again."⁷ Despite how we measure up to another church, or how other churches measure up to this church, we should rejoice in the blessing that God is always giving ability where we wouldn't expect it.

This is true for congregations, and it's true for you and me. What may seem to be deficits—what we don't have—may be the very things that God has provided us as gifts to accomplish the work God has in store for us.

[se20210620 © 2021 Jon M. Fancher]

⁶ United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, https://www.google.com/search?q=how+many+people+suffer+from+chronic+hunger&rlz=1C1CHFX_enUS823US823&oq=how+many+people+suffer+from+chronic+hunger&aqs=chrome..69i57j69i64.6372j0j4&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8 accessed 6/15/2021

⁷ *New Interpreter's Bible—A Commentary in Twelve Volumes: Vol. II*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998, 1115