

## *Facing Our Fears*

*For the children:*

I want to tell you a story.

It's a story about a king who lived a long, long time ago. His name was Saul. God chose him to be king, but Saul forgot about God and did things that God didn't like. So God decided they needed a new king.

Well, Saul wasn't very happy about that. And he became angry. And when he was angry, he threw things and he yelled at people. No one wanted to be around him. But since he was the king, people were trying to help him.

That's when someone remembered a singer they knew. They invited the musician to come and play and sing for the king (1 Sam. 16:16). And it calmed the king down, at least for a while.

Do you know who that singer was? It was David! We know lots of his songs, even though he wrote them a really long time ago. We call them Psalms, but they were songs. Some were to God, some were about God.

I don't know which ones he sang for Saul, but it seemed to help.

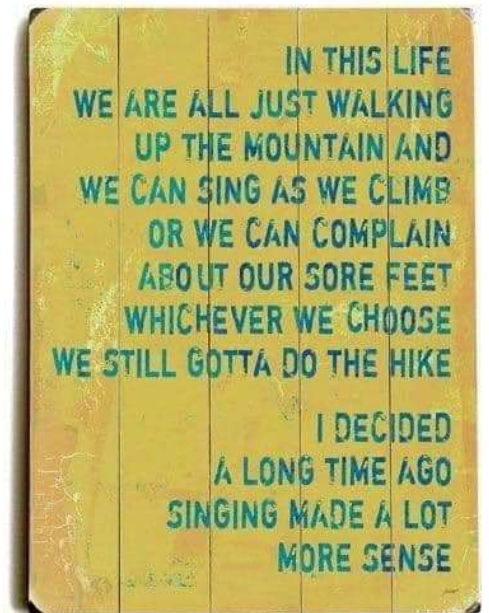
It makes me wonder what songs we know and what songs we could sing when we get angry. Or maybe when we get sad. Or maybe even when we're happy!

What is your favorite song to sing?

I think it's a good idea to know lots of different songs for lots of different times in our lives!

Let's pray:

*God, thank you for music. Thank you for giving us songs to sing. And thank you for song writers. Amen.*



"Don't let anyone lose courage because of this Philistine!" David told Saul. "I, your servant, will go out and fight him!" "You can't go out and fight this Philistine," Saul answered David. "You are still a boy. But he's been a warrior since he was a boy!" "Your servant has kept his father's sheep," David replied to Saul, "and if ever a lion or a bear came and carried off one of the flock, I would go after it, strike it, and rescue the animal from its mouth. If it turned on me, I would grab it at its jaw, strike it, and kill it. Your servant has fought both lions and bears. This uncircumcised Philistine will be just like one of them because he has insulted the army of the living God. "The Lord," David added, "who rescued me from the power of both lions and bears, will rescue me from the power of this Philistine." "Go!" Saul replied to David. "And may the Lord be with you!"

Then Saul dressed David in his own gear, putting a coat of armor on him and a bronze helmet on his head. David strapped his sword on over the armor, but he couldn't walk around well because he'd never tried it before. "I can't walk in this," David told Saul, "because I've never tried it before." So he took them off. He then grabbed his staff and chose

five smooth stones from the streambed. He put them in the pocket of his shepherd's bag and with sling in hand went out to the Philistine. The Philistine got closer and closer to David, and his shield-bearer was in front of him. When the Philistine looked David over, he sneered at David because he was just a boy; reddish brown and good-looking. The Philistine asked David, "Am I some sort of dog that you come at me with sticks?" And he cursed David by his gods. "Come here," he said to David, "and I'll feed your flesh to the wild birds and the wild animals!" But David told the Philistine, "You are coming against me with sword, spear, and scimitar, but I come against you in the name of the Lord of heavenly forces, the God of Israel's army, the one you've insulted. Today the Lord will hand you over to me. I will strike you down and cut off your head! Today I will feed your dead body and the dead bodies of the entire Philistine camp to the wild birds and the wild animals. Then the whole world will know that there is a God on Israel's side. And all those gathered here will know that the Lord doesn't save by means of sword and spear. The Lord owns this war, and he will hand all of you over to us."

The Philistine got up and moved closer to attack David, and David ran quickly to the front line to face him. David put his hand in his bag and took out a stone. He slung it, and it hit the Philistine on his forehead. The stone penetrated his forehead, and he fell facedown on the ground.

1 Sam. 17:32-49 (C.E.B.)

*For the adults:*

I haven't done it every year, but there have been several times when I have intentionally read through the Bible, usually with the goal of finishing it within the year. And when I've done that, I realize how much I enjoy reading the saga of King David. I don't know why exactly; I suspect it's because of the way the storyteller skillfully crafts the story.

One of the hard parts of using those stories in worship, however, is trying to figure out how much we need to hear to understand the context. Our text for today is a good example – more about that later.

When you read through the entire story of how David became king, you find three separate stories that seem to be independent of one another, each giving validation for his ascent to the throne. Today's scripture is the third, the longest, and perhaps the best remembered of these stories.

The first one we heard last week, the story of Samuel coming to anoint David as the Shepherd of Israel (1 Sam. 16:1-13). The second, which I tried to summarize for the children, tells how David makes his way into the court of King Saul as a minstrel who provides soothing music when Saul is tormented (1 Sam. 16:24-23).

I suppose you could make the argument that there is a fourth story, the story of how David marries into Saul's family, but that feels more like an extension of today's text, since Saul offers his daughter's hand in marriage to anyone who can defeat the giant (1 Sam. 17:25). It's part of the story we didn't read in worship today – again, more about that later.

Each of these three stories can be read without the others and the story will feel complete. In fact, Saul is introduced to David more than once as if the two had never met (1 Sam. 16:19; 17:58). When told sequentially, however, the storyteller seems to be working as a lawyer who is compiling evidence to justify the irregular succession from Saul to David, leaving little room for doubt that God is at work.

Of course, the storyteller is telling these stories in hindsight. He (or she) already knows how the story ends, so the story is told in a way that makes it feel like there is a straight line connecting each of the stories. It's something we all tend to do.

While we are living our lives, it feels like we meander. But when we turn around and look, it often looks like a fairly straight line. I was keenly aware of that when I was writing my first book. It is the story of my life's journey, written for my children and grandchildren. I called it *And Then Everything Changed*; every chapter of

the book ends with that line. The truth is I had to work hard to explain how it felt like every change was a turn, because from the perspective of hindsight, it looks like it led me straight to this place and this time.

I could not have foreseen how my past experiences would have made me the right person to be your pastor in this season of Hope's journey. And yet it feels like all of my life has been preparing me for this season.

In a similar way, the storyteller looks back on David's life and reminds us that God is at work, even when we can't see how it will all fall together. Things that seem so counterintuitive, so disconnected, become part of the backstory.

So even though each story seems isolated and unique, they are part of a larger story in which God was preparing David for a future he did not understand.

Of course, we can also read it from a slightly different perspective; we can read each scene in David's life as a demonstration of his unique qualifications for the task. These three stories help explain *why* God chose David:

1. he was a shepherd who cares for the sheep the way a good king cares for the people in the kingdom,
2. he was a poet who could speak to and about his love and devotion to God as expressed in the Psalms,
3. and he was fearless before the giant, demonstrating his trust in a God who helps him in times of difficulty.

In other words, David has compassion, faith, and confidence. In those three arenas, David becomes the example of how an ideal king behaves. Not all the kings who follow him are competent in all three areas. Some do better than others, though.

Whether you read them as three independent stories pointing to how God is at work or as three independent stories helping us see how David was being prepared for the call to become king, I want to spend time with today's story and see how it invites us to name our fears and to find the courage to face them.

As I've suggested, our text today is part of a much longer story. Let's back up a little and give a sense of the larger context.<sup>1</sup>

Let me start with a brief geography and history lesson. If you were to look at a topographic map of Israel, you would notice the lowlands near the Mediterranean Sea. To the east are hills and valleys that host luscious vineyards. To the west are the sea ports where goods are exchanged to and from foreign shores. The farmland between the water and the mountains is a rich source of fruits and grain.

On either side of this fertile farmland are two peoples. There are the seafaring Philistines to the west and the Hebrews to the east. Neither could survive long without access to the crops raised on that land in between.

And maybe not too surprising, they don't create a cooperative form of shared resources; instead, they fight over the land.

So many people died in successive generational conflicts, that a "representative battle" was suggested to avoid more casualties. One person from each nation would fight and whoever won the battle would win the land on behalf of his people. It's not the only time, nor is it the only place in history where the concept has been

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful for, and am relying on the insights of Malcolm Gladwell, especially the details he describes in the introduction to his book, *David & Goliath* (pp. 3-15).

suggested – although it may be one of the only examples we can point to where it actually happened (1 Sam. 17:8).

And while the idea is a move toward non-violence, I am aware it doesn't go far enough for most Anabaptists – as well as a significant number of Methodists. It may be *less* violent, but someone still has to die; and we believe life is precious, even the life of an enemy. It does make me wonder if we could try a version of rock-paper-scissors to accomplish the same thing, without anyone having to die.

Can you imagine doing that in Ukraine? Or in Gaza? Yeah, that's not what happens in our text, either

The Philistines offer to engage in this representative battle knowing they have a secret weapon, a giant of a man we know as Goliath (1 Sam. 17:4). His sheer height sends shivers up the spines of any and every enemy warrior. No one wants to go toe to toe with him.

The Philistines don't suggest finding charioteers to pit against one another in a form of jousting. Nor do they offer an archery contest. They go with their strength, and their strength is so imposing that no one considers what might be the strength of the Hebrew warriors. They only recognize they cannot compete with the size of this man.

It's worth noting that had it been a normal battle with a line of warriors facing an opposing line of warriors, the Hebrews may not have fared any better. That kind of battle does not play to their strong suit, either. Not surprisingly, King Saul can't find a willing soldier to face Goliath; they are all afraid. He can't get a volunteer even after offering his own daughter's hand in marriage (1 Sam. 17:25).

The Hebrews are living in fear. No one wants to face the giant (1 Sam. 17:11). And when we are living with fear, our judgement becomes clouded. We don't make our best decisions. Fear limits our ability to see the larger picture.

Then a shepherd boy shows up. David is sent by his father to bring sandwiches to his older brothers who are on the battle line (1 Sam. 17:17). When he arrives, he finds them cowering in fear with the others. When he learns the reason, David looks at the situation and immediately knows what can be done. He goes to King Saul and makes his offer (1 Sam. 17:32).

We all know what happens next. He plays a version of rock-paper-scissors and wins – because the Philistines reveal their choice before David does.

Rock may be scissors, but paper covers rock.

There are unwritten rules calling for warriors to go toe to toe with one another. Sword to sword, fist to fist. David ignores the rules. The giant uses his size to intimidate people; David sees a potential limitation presented by Goliath's perceived strength and capitalizes on it.

- Goliath moves slowly, for example.
- And if Goliath is as strong as he appears, why does he have a shield-bearer (1 Sam. 17:7, 41)? Can't he carry his own shield?

What if the real purpose of the shield-bearer is to guide Goliath because he can't see very well? Some medical experts have theorized that Goliath is super tall because he has a pituitary disorder known as acromegaly. If they are right, it would affect his eyesight. That might also explain why Goliath refers to the "sticks" that David is carrying rather than his slingshot (1 Sam. 17:43).

While everyone else cowers before the giant, David thinks, “God is bigger than this giant. All I need to do is to do what I do best.” His lack of fear allows him to see other possibilities, including the possibility of using his own strengths against the weaknesses of the Philistine.

King Saul, on the other hand, continues to respond with fear and tries to put on armor and give David a sword (1 Sam. 17:38). David sees these as a hindrance rather than an asset. He relies on his own strength: his speed and his accuracy in throwing rocks. The storyteller includes these details as if to remind us that this is God at work, not David.<sup>2</sup>

It isn't what the Philistines expect.

They are used to acting like the bully who can make others cower in fear, knowing there is no way to win a sword fight against Goliath.

The triumph of David over the giant opens the eyes of the Israelites. They suddenly see how fear has paralyzed them. In the words of FDR, the only thing to fear is fear itself – because fear limits our options. When the Israelites see another possibility, they run down the hill chasing the Philistines all the way back to the shore (1 Sam. 17:52).

The story offers an important lesson for us, especially when some people are inviting us to live with fear.

- There is fear of violence, so we are told the only response is to arm ourselves.
- There is fear of losing jobs, so we are told the only response is to keep immigrants from entering the country.
- There is fear of a declining economy, so we are told the only response is to stop spending our tax dollars on the impoverished and disabled people in our communities.
- The number of unhoused people in Wichita is rising and some would have us respond out of fear rather than compassion.

When we let fear run our lives, however, we forget the truth that God is working behind the scenes, that God is bigger than our fears, that God is bigger than our problems, that God can provide.

There may not be fear about the uncertainty of what will happen next, but I know there are some anxieties as we near the end of my time here, especially since we still don't know when we will have a settled pastor.

But I think the story of David is a reminder that we can confront our fears and our anxieties with a sense of confidence, because God is at work. God will bring the right person to us at the right time, just as God provided David for the people of Israel, a leader who had compassion, faith, and confidence.<sup>3</sup>

Just as God brought you into my life and me into yours.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Payne, p. 90

<sup>3</sup> Payne, p. 90

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