

They Might Be Giants  
Sermon on 1 Samuel 17:4-11, 32-49 Preached at Highland Park UMC  
Sunday, June 25, 2006

It may be just my imagination, but when David says to Saul, “Let no one’s heart fail,” I think he is expressing a hope that no other bodily organs fail. Of course, if they had, they would have failed for good reason. At six cubits and a span, the Philistine champion Goliath stood at an astonishing height of nine feet, nine inches tall. Even if you accept the alternate reading of four cubits and a span, that still makes Goliath six-feet-nine, and a good candidate for the Mavericks. Add to that towering height an impressive array of the most sophisticated military equipment of the day. Goliath wore a bronze helmet, a coat of mail, and greaves to protect his legs. For weapons he was armed with a bronze javelin, a spear like a weaver’s beam, and a large sword. Goliath the warrior was outfitted with the 10<sup>th</sup>-century B.C.’s version of a Patriot missile battery combined with Star Wars defense technology.

For decades the Philistines, “the most powerful entity in this corner of the world,”<sup>1</sup> had raided the territory of Israel, its neighbor to the east, gradually establishing control over Israelite territory in the hill country. The Philistines’ defeat of Israel at Ebenezer resulted in the loss of the ark of the covenant—the sign of God’s promise to and presence in Israel—and the destruction of the religious shrine at Shiloh. The Philistines were an enemy of Israel’s, and the armies of both peoples were now massed in the southwestern part of Judah near the Philistine border and the cities of Ekron and Gath.

For forty days, Goliath had come out to challenge the Israelites to do battle. As the Philistines’ champion, it was his role to engage the enemy in one-to-one, man-to-man representative combat. The physically imposing Goliath menaced the Israelite camp with what we might call psychological warfare. He shouted taunts and threats, jeers and challenges. Who

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<sup>1</sup> H. J. Katzenstein, “Philistines,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary* vol. 5:O-Sh (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 198 ) 326-8.

would engage this fearsome warrior in combat? “Today I defy the ranks of Israel!” Goliath roared. “Give me a man, that we may fight together” (17:10). The Philistine’s intimidation tactics proved remarkably effective: “When Saul and all Israel heard [Goliath’s words], they were dismayed and greatly afraid” (17:11).

And who could blame them? They faced a giant, armed to the teeth with seemingly impregnable defenses and the latest weapons systems. Throughout the Israelites’ ranks, word of the reward for the man who could defeat Goliath spread: riches and the hand of the king’s daughter in marriage would belong to Israel’s hero. Despite the incredible incentive package, no one stepped forward. Day and night, Goliath cried, “Choose a man for yourselves, and let him come down to me” (17:8). But no one came. From the least to the greatest, they were all afraid.

All, that is, except David. The youngest of eight brothers, David was a shepherd and had come to the Israelites’ camp to check in on his brothers who were in Saul’s army, bringing them supplies and the news from home. When he heard Goliath’s challenge, he asked his brothers and the other soldiers, “[W]ho is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?” (17:26). Believing him to be a typical teenager who had abandoned his job in order to watch the fight, his oldest brother scolded him, as did the other men. “Go home,” they said. “There’s nothing to see here.”

But the taunts of Israel’s enemy and the deafening silence that met them aroused something in the young man. In a display of incredible courage, David went straight to King Saul and volunteered to fight the Philistine. Saul, himself a seasoned soldier, was incredulous: “You can’t go fight this Philistine; you are just a boy, and he has been a warrior from his youth.” It was a sentiment Goliath echoed on the battlefield when David appeared for combat: “You can’t be serious,” he said when he spotted young David, who was “handsome and ruddy in

appearance” (17:42). “This is a mere child, just a boy. Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks?” And the Philistine cursed David by his gods (17:43).

Isn't that what we have always heard from the giants in our lives? You can't do that—you're just a fill in the blank: You can't preach, you're a woman. You can't sing, you're no good. You can't play, you're too clumsy. You can't succeed, you're not smart enough. You'll never amount to anything, you don't try hard enough. Whether from parents or teachers or spouses or coaches or bosses or classmates, we have internalized the refrain: I can't because I'm just not whatever. Those figures loom in our memories, taunting and jeering like Goliaths to our David. Friends, they might be giants, but they can be overcome, vanquished, conquered by the power of God.

Vanquishing giants is not about what we cannot do. It is a matter of faith in the God who can and does deliver. The man who could defeat Goliath would take away the reproach from Israel. David understands that his countrymen's lack of response due to fear is shameful, for it demonstrated a lack of trust in the power of Israel's God to save them from their enemy. Is there no one to take up the cause? Then the reproach is not merely to Israel or to Saul, but to Israel's God. And thus David sees the situation in theological terms. Bruce Birch says: “He sees what Saul and the rest of Israel apparently do not: that to respond only in terms of the Philistine trust in force of arms leaves them in the clutches of fear and death, but to understand the Philistine offense against a living God is to open up powerful and unexpected resources for life.”<sup>2</sup>

Saul and the Israelite armies were paralyzed with fear because they had become, for all intents and purposes, practical atheists. A practical atheist is a man who, though he may acknowledge the existence of God, does not live his life as though God exists. The collection of

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<sup>2</sup> Bruce C. Birch, *The First and Second Books of Samuel: Introduction, Commentary, and Notes*, New Interpreters Bible vol. 2 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998) 1111.

spears and swords in the Israelite camp demonstrated that Israel put its trust in those weapons of war. So when David volunteers to fight Goliath, Saul is skeptical. He assumes that the power to deliver must come from military might. David has no military experience; how can he possibly hope to prevail against a heavily armed man twice his size? David responds by saying that power and courage can come from sources other than military experience, sources that for David are practical and spiritual. It is a humble shepherd who must remind the mighty warrior that there is a God in Israel, a living God who will deliver his people.

David had confidence in this God's power to deliver because he had seen it first-hand. When he was out tending his flocks and a lion or a bear would seize a lamb, David would pursue, seize, strike down, and kill the predators. Based on this experience, David vows to do the same to the Philistine who had defied the armies of the Lord of hosts. Although David has spoken of his own courage and skills in facing down predators, he credits God as their source: It was the Lord who saved David from the paw of the lion and the bear, and it is the same Lord who will save him from the hand of the Philistine.

Knowing that he cannot fight Goliath on Goliath's terms and with Goliath's weapons, David casts aside Saul's armor and his sword. He goes forth to meet Goliath, his weapons five smooth stones and a sling. But David also goes forth, trusting God to make deliverance possible against the odds, confident that with God there is hope, even in the face of an apparently hopeless situation.

As they faced off, David and Goliath were a study in contrasts: Goliath comes to battle with military weaponry, whereas David comes in the name of the Lord. Goliath placed his trust in arms, whereas David placed his trust in God's mighty arm. The God of Israel whom Goliath

has confidently defied is the same God who will now deliver the Philistine champion into the hand of a faithful shepherd boy.

Finally, the giant's challenge is met. As he did to Saul, so now David does to Goliath: he gives voice to the source of his confidence in God's power to deliver. David stands before Goliath and declares that "This very day the Lord will deliver you into my hand, and I will strike you down and cut off your head; ...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 my hand" (17:46-47).

David's first shot was a rhetorical salvo, directed at Goliath's heart. The speech missed its mark, for Goliath feared neither David nor the God he served. David's second shot was a stone slung from a sling, directed at Goliath's head. That stone found its mark, and the mighty Philistine warrior fell to the earth, just as David had said.

Friends, this tale is not so much about the underdog who overcomes all odds to beat his opponent, as it is a tale of hope. Our hope for deliverance comes not from the powers of this world nor trust in human might. Our hope is in the power of the living God, a God who does not save by sword and spear, but by a power that overcomes even death itself. Every day we step into the valley and onto the battle lines between the forces of God and forces opposing God—the forces of fear and hatred, forces of greed and suspicion, forces of sin and death. They might be giants, but we serve a living God who triumphs over all and gives us the victory through Jesus Christ, our Lord.