

**“Giant Slayer”**

**Scripture – Samuel 17**

**Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones**

**Sunday, August 14, 2016**

The Philistine soldiers assembled on one hill and the Hebrew soldiers took up their position on the opposing hill, with a valley between them. The soldiers on each side were sharpening their swords and spears for battle. The atmosphere was heavy and tense.

Out from the Philistine ranks stepped a giant and the Hebrews thought their eyes must be deceiving them. He called himself Goliath, and he was a fearsome sight to behold. He stood nine feet tall and crushed the scales at 450 pounds. His long, wavy black hair reached his shoulders and a shaggy beard hid his neck. His arms were the size of men’s legs and his shoulders nearly the width of a doorway. He wore a 58 inch belt with protruding metal studs and a finely polished buckle the size of a plate. When he walked, you could feel the earth tremble.

His speech was more like a growl, and his fiery temper put no at ease. He excelled in belligerence and counted cruelty to people and animals as one of his foremost traits. His path was littered with the bodies of men he had vanquished and since he brandished few scars, he was cocksure he was invincible.

While the eyes of the Hebrews were bugging out, this mountain of a man bellowed across the valley, “Put out your best warrior and the two of us will battle. If he wins, we will be your slaves, but if I win, you will be our slaves.” When King Saul and his troops saw the size of the Philistine and heard his challenge, they were terrified and lost all hope.

Have you found yourself in a similar spot – facing a giant and being overwhelmed by fear?

Some of you know the terror of losing your job and the uncertainty of landing another one. Life was on a steady path. You were covering your bills, caring for your family, being generous with the church, and then out of nowhere, comes the word that you are out of work. It can be terrifying.

Some of you know the panic of being told you have a serious illness. You were cruising along through life feeling vibrant and alive and a dreaded diagnosis floored you. Your anxiety kept you awake at night.

Some of you know the fear of believing you won’t survive the death of a loved one. You are afraid that the despair may drag you under.

A friend in Virginia died because of her fear. She was afraid of doctors and hospitals. Throughout her life she avoided them. When she was 49, she felt a small lump in her chest.

Terrified by the thought of surgery, she failed to bring it to anyone’s attention. As the months rolled by, it grew larger until her husband noticed it and forced her to get it checked. The doctor confirmed her fears. It was cancer and needed to be removed immediately.

The surgeon removed most of the tumor, but the cancer had spread. The surgeon told her family that she had waited too long. Had she taken action when she first detected the lump, it likely could have been removed. Her fear of doctors and hospitals cost her her life.

Each morning and evening for forty days, Goliath took his stand and made his speech. The Hebrews were so paralyzed by fear that they could not think of any way to respond. Some of the troops were beginning to whisper, “Should we forego the bloodshed and set down our weapons?”

Enter a young shepherd named David. His three brothers were among the Hebrew soldiers and one day David took leave of the sheep he was tending to deliver food to his older siblings.

While he was among the soldiers, Goliath roared his daily challenge. When David heard it, something stirred within him and convinced him to take on the challenge. He approached King Saul and said that he was his man.

If we had been there, I suppose we would have seen the smirk on Saul’s face when he called the lad “Sonny boy.” But that only riled David up a notch, so he told Saul of his fierce spirit and his adroit use of a sling. Both lions and bears had attacked his sheep and David not only refused to run, but killed all would-be predators. “It will be the same for this Philistine pig,” David said, “I will take him down!”

With no better alternative, Saul said, “Have at it. And may God be with you.”

David marched toward Goliath who was now the one with disbelieving eyes. “A boy? They send out a boy? Your flesh will soon be a meal for the birds.”

“Don’t count on it,” David said. “I’ll give you one last chance to save your skin by surrendering.”

Goliath had had enough of this nonsense and marched toward David to display his cutlery skills. But while Goliath was thundering toward him, David slipped a rock into his sling and flung it with tremendous velocity and pinpoint accuracy.

It struck Goliath between the eyes; he never knew what hit him. He crumpled to the ground and David borrowed Goliath’s own sword to finish him off.

Whether or not this story describes a factual account in young David’s life, it carries a truth that has inspired millions for centuries. God is on the side of the one who stands up for what is right and has the guts to take on the mighty powers of darkness despite long odds. You may be abused and you may not see the victory in your lifetime, but you will be on the right side of history if you are on the right side of God.

You may know the story of Dr. Bennet Omalu who came to the U.S. from Nigeria in 1994 to complete an epidemiology fellowship at the University of Washington. In 1995, he joined Columbia University’s Harlem Hospital Center in New York. He became a forensic pathologist with the Allegheny County coroner’s office and in 2002 he performed an autopsy on a 50 year-old man who was found dead in his pickup truck. The man was Mike Webster, the Hall of Fame center for the Pittsburgh Steelers. A few years after his playing days ended, Mike began hearing voices, experiencing pain and having severe mental issues. He began to self-mutilate and ended up homeless.

Dr. Omalu could not figure out why an otherwise healthy man in his forties would deteriorate so rapidly. When Omalu examined slides of Webster’s brain tissue under a microscope, he discovered that he had severe brain damage. He determined it was the result of the constant head trauma Webster suffered on the football field and the doctor published his findings in a medical journal.

Being from another country and not understanding America’s intoxication with football, he naively thought that once the National Football League understood what was happening to players, they would do something about it. But, of course, the NFL – a.k.a. Goliath – dismissed his findings and launched a smear campaign to discredit this doctor from Africa. Fans made threatening phone calls and he was pressured to drop his research into traumatic brain injuries. He could have let it go and his life would revert to normal or he could gather his courage and take the fight to Goliath.

He is a person of faith and found the strength to continue his crusade to expose the terrible damage that is shortening the lives of football player. Over the next four years, Dr. Omalu discovered three other players who died with similar symptoms to Webster.

The evidence mounted. More and more players experienced increasing cognitive problems and the NFL finally relented. It reached a huge financial settlement with the players union and changed the rules of the game so that striking with the head is now a penalty. Any player that appears to have a concussion during the game is finished for the day and cannot return to any contact until a doctor approves.

Most of us are more aware than ever about the danger of concussions. All because one man knew he could save people’s lives if he had the courage to stand up to Goliath.

Throughout Scripture we find these four little words: Do not be afraid. More than once when Abraham feared what he was facing, God coaxed him forward, saying, “Do not be afraid.” God assured Abraham that he need not rely solely on his own strength to face the difficulties of life, because God was with him.

God spoke the same words to Hagar and Moses. When each faced great odds, God said, “Do not be afraid.” Moses’ faith grew and one day he stiffened the backbone of the Hebrew people when they were facing a challenge that threatened to overwhelm them. “Do not be afraid,” Moses said.

We also find these words on the lips of the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Zechariah. When the people faced a giant obstacle, the prophets bolstered their courage: “Do not be afraid.”

At the very beginning of the gospels, when Joseph learns that Mary is pregnant, he is ready to dismiss her. However, a messenger of God appears to him in a dream and says, “Do not be afraid.” A messenger also seeks to reassure Mary about her unexpected pregnancy and says to her, “DO NOT BE AFRAID.”

On one occasion when Jesus is calling people to follow him, what do you think he says to Simon? “DO NOT BE AFRAID.” When Jesus is teaching a crowd, he understands their anxiety about the unpredictability of life and what does he say to them? “DO NOT BE AFRAID.”

On the Sunday morning after Jesus was crucified, the women went to his tomb to anoint his corpse. He was not there, and what does the angel say to the women? “DO NOT BE AFRAID.”

God has proven to be a source of strength to countless people over the ages. These four words remind us that we are not alone. The words do not wipe away our emotional distress, but such encouragement can be the difference between failure and success.

The words, “Do not be afraid” also remind us to dig deeply into our soul for courage. It is not as if God will suddenly infuse us with a burst of bravery, but if we have a history with God; if we have nurtured our spiritual connection over the years; and if we have survived difficult times in the past thanks to our faith, then the phrase “Do not be afraid” is more than an empty promise.

Telling ourselves that the present situation is hopeless will surely hasten our crumbling. Challenging ourselves to face our trial with courage can boost our confidence and generate a passion to conquer the giant standing in our path.

If you live long enough, you will face a giant in your personal life. When you do, will you have nurtured a strong foundation of faith that will see you through the battle?

And not to be forgotten, we also face giants that threaten to unravel the fabric of our nation – widespread poverty, terrorism, strained race relations, homophobia and xenophobia. What will we do about these Goliaths? Will we sneak back behind the lines and hope others will take on the battle or will we summon the courage to fight for what God has shown us is right and just for all?

**Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson**

God of glory and grace – You gather us around table, font, and pulpit, and fashion us as your people. We come out hope and in joy to dwell in your presence. Some of us seek respite from the hectic pace of life; some of us yearn for forgiveness, or crave the comfort you bring. Some of us long to hear a word of challenge or encouragement, as we strive – day after day – to follow Christ. Whatever brings us here, we hope to glimpse your Spirit at work in our lives, our communities, our world. Move among us, we pray, and open our eyes and our hearts to your presence.

We lift to you the concerns of our hearts. We pray for the needs of the world: for those weighed down by injustice, for those suffering from violence, for those fleeing wildfires or floods, or other disasters that threaten life. We pray for the cares of our nation: for those without jobs or homes, for those who are hungry today and will be tomorrow. We pray for our communities: for those dear to us who struggle with illness or addiction, or who mourn the loss of loved ones. Be present in the midst of brokenness and suffering, O God, that all for whom we pray, may know peace, and comfort, and security.

We pray for the church – for all you have called into your service. We give thanks that your Spirit is at work, breathing into the Body of Christ, sustaining your disciples in the life of faith and empowering our witness. Help us, O God, to cling to your living word – and to root ourselves in it – that we may be a people who are bold to follow Christ, even when the task is daunting and the way fraught with danger. Give us courage to stand firm in the face of injustice, and voices to advocate for the least of theses; give us hearts that overflow with compassion, and hands offered freely in service ...

All that we might participate in your work, until Christ comes in glory and all creation experiences your wholeness.

We pray these – and all things – in the name of Christ, the one who gave us words to pray: **“Our Father ….”**

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