

"As Brave As a Child"
1 Samuel 17:31-40

A number of years ago, I was reading about a graduation ceremony in Charlotte. It didn't take place in a high school or college, but instead was a day of transition at an elementary school. In that district, sixth grade marks the first year of middle school and thus a local journalist was writing about the excitement and trepidation for some graduating fifth graders. "They've been the big shots all year long," Debbie Cenziper wrote, "ruling over the hallways and classrooms of Park Road Elementary School. In their insulated world of recess and spelling bees, a flash of a safety patrol badge means unquestioned authority. On Thursday, [the] fifth-graders prepared to step down...Once summer ends, they'll start all over again as the youngest, smallest, newest kids in school...They'll be dealing with class changes and lockers, eighth-graders two heads taller."

In the article she quoted several students, but my favorite comment came from a boy named Jamar Wilson. "We're growing up so fast," he said. "One minute you're in kindergarten and the next minute you're in middle school, out in the real world all by yourself. You have to be mature and you have to leave all your stuff in a locker. Also, there's no recess." (Cenziper, Debbie, "Fifth-graders mark end of leadership year." *Charlotte Observer*, 6/15/97, p. 1C)

As I read his words, I smiled at Jamar's confidence and his ideas of what constituted the real world. Yet then moments ago we all heard bolder words from another young man offering to take on one more than two heads taller than he and his confidence turned out to be well-placed.

That latter instance was described in our Scripture reading. The Israelite army had been preparing for battle with the Philistines when the enemy unveiled their secret weapon, a man named Goliath who was nearly 7 feet tall. From the opposing mountaintop, he had issued a challenge to fight Israel's best one-on-one with the victor claiming the other army as servants. No one accepted until David appeared. He wasn't old enough to be a soldier, but had been sent by his father to deliver food to brothers serving at the front. Shortly after arriving, David heard Goliath's taunts and said to his siblings and other Israelites "who is this...Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?" It's at that point that our reading begins.

Saul, the king of Israel, learns of what David has said and sends for him. When they meet, the young man makes his offer. "Let no one's heart fail because of him" he declares "your servant will go and fight with this Philistine." It's seems likely his king smiled in a wistful kind of way as he responded "You are not able to fight with him, for you are just a boy." Undeterred, David tells of past success he has had in protecting his father's sheep from wild animals. "Your servant has killed both lions and bears," he boasts "and this...Philistine shall be like one of them." With no better option, Saul relents and arms the boy with a helmet, coat of mail, and his own sword. "I cannot walk with these," David says "for I am not used to them." He removes the king's armor and prepares differently. He "chose five smooth stones from the wadi, and put them in his shepherd's bag...his sling was in his hand, and he drew near to the Philistine."

We all know how the battle ends, of course, but next Sunday will ponder it anew even so during our worship service at Central Park. Today, though, we stop to reflect on David's words here for how could he have shown such courage when everyone else around him was trembling? Even more importantly, what might his response teach us about times we need the same gift?

As most of us don't have to worry about literal giants, but we all face moments when our

heart begins to race or our palms sweat. For us, it might be when we head off to college or begin our first day in a new job. It can come as we walk down the aisle at our wedding or run into an Emergency Room wondering what we will find or when we sit down at the kitchen table for a hard conversation with an aging parent. In such times and others like them, we can find that our courage is missing or sorely tested, and it is to such occasions that David's actions speak.

For my guess is that had we been in Saul's place on that day, we would have responded to that young man with the same reluctance, viewing David's words as just youthful exuberance; as one who clearly didn't understand the ways of the world. Yet what changed the king's mind or at least caused him to give up his resistance came when that young man named the reason for past successes; when David said "The LORD, who saved me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, will save me from the hand of the Philistine." That young man knew that his times of protecting sheep from wild animals had not been due to his own strength or skill, but to God's work. He was the first in that whole scene to call God by name and in doing so revealed the basis for his courage. He knew that all he had achieved in other times of uncertainty was due to God's work and thus was confident even in the face of the Philistine giant. It was only when Saul heard those words that he relented and said "Go, and may the LORD be with you."

David was able to speak with courage because he knew that God had been with him in the past and would be as the future unfolded. In so doing, he points the way for us.

During the three years that I worked for the Bell System, my district manager was a Goliath of a man. His name was John and he stood about 6 foot 5 and weighed over two hundred pounds. In those days, there was a popular business philosophy known as Management by Walking Around, being visible to your team. John's approach was Management by Intimidation, as he had a short fuse and when making a point would stand so close that you had no choice but to look straight up. Perhaps some of you have worked with one of John's management disciples.

On the company organizational chart there was another manager between John and me. His name was Jeff. He loved to laugh and motivated his team with encouragement. He also had a unique way of diffusing our boss' tactics as there were times when John would call Jeff and say "I know Willingham is slacking. Prepare a report for me on the Shelby results so that I can tighten the screws!" Jeff would assemble the data, but not send it as he had learned John would often hang up and become so agitated about something else that he would forget. On the rare occasion when he called back weeks later and say "Where's that report on Willingham?" Jeff would say "Oh, you didn't get that? I'll get another copy to you today" and then would send it via inter-office mail. In this era of e-mail, he likely couldn't get away with such delay tactics.

John ruled with fear, so after 2 ½ years when I came to the conclusion God was calling me into the ministry, I was not looking forward to telling him my news. I shared that anxiety with a co-worker who wisely responded "What can John say to you? After all, you're going to work for an employer with the ultimate in a benefits package!" That was certainly true, but on the day when I sat on the other side of John's desk my stomach was still churning. In typical fashion, he started with some criticism of my work and then snarled "I understand you wanted to talk to me about something. What is it?" I began to speak and as I neared the punch line took a deep breath and said "I think I'm supposed to be a minister." With that word, his demeanor completely changed. He laughed nervously and started to tell me how much he loved his church and pastor. He told me I had done a great job working for him and even gave me a few sermon tips. When I

walked out of his office, the fear had been completely replaced with relief, but I will confess to you that it occurred to me I should have used that line about seminary years before!

David wasn't feeding Saul a line, but instead pointing to a fact that he had discovered to be true; one that is true for us with all of the symbolic Goliaths of our day, too, that we never face any moment alone. Instead, our history offers the evidence we need for courage, too.

In her book, *Thus Far on the Way*, Presbyterian minister Eileen Lindner reflected on another Biblical moment when that gift was needed. She was commenting on the day centuries before the battle between David and Goliath when Joshua had become the leader of the Israelites. We can well imagine the anxiety that man must have felt for how do you follow a legend like Moses—one who led the people out of slavery and received the Ten Commandments? Sometime shortly after the death of Moses, God appears to Joshua and tells him it is finally time to take the people into the Promised Land. Twice in succession, he tells Joshua “be strong and courageous” and then before the man can even respond adds a third time “Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.”

Lindner writes: “When I was a child, I was afraid of something. I don't remember what it was, it might have been dragons, might have been thunderstorms, might have been roller coasters, might have been my big brother. I don't remember... But someone said to me, ‘Eileen, you have to have courage.’ I said ‘What does that mean? Do I have any of it?’ Well, courage is not the absence of fear, said this voice. Courage is the ability to go on in spite of your fears.

“I pondered that for some time. And then I heard a different explanation in my seminary years, when someone said, ‘Courage is fear that has said its prayers.’ Saying your prayers doesn't make fear go away, does it? Prayer doesn't even automatically make you go on in spite of the fear. But when we pray, when we say we're not in this alone, when we say, ‘O Lord, share this burden,’ when we say, ‘Pick up my portion. I'm trembling.’ When we say, ‘I'm not certain. I'm afraid. I'm lost. I'm not sure where to go,’ then courage comes to us. Because the voice of the Almighty says to us as Yahweh says to Joshua, ‘It's all right, go ahead, be afraid.’ Doesn't God in essence say to Joshua, ‘If I were in your place, I'd be afraid, too? But I am with you.’ God doesn't say it's not going to be scary. God just says we will be accompanied on the journey.” (Lindner, Eileen. *Thus Far on the Way*. Louisville, Kentucky: Witherspoon Press, 2006, p. 72)

David never said taking on Goliath would not be scary, but only that God would go with him. That doesn't mean Saul bought his argument. Our text leaved us to wonder if the king even dreamed that David could actually succeed or if he sent that young man out only because he had no other option and expected that soon the army of Israel would be under the control of the Philistines. When you or I act in courageous ways there can still be persons who think we are being foolish, that if only we knew better or had more experience or had thought it through more completely that we would recognize how ridiculous such a step would be to take.

Yet when we claim our history with God and find the strength to be as brave as that child who approached Goliath there will be others who ask us how we could do such a courageous thing. Giving us the chance to reply as did David, declaring that we did not do it alone.