

“The Gift of Vision”  
1 Samuel 17:41-50/Mark 8:14-21

Today’s Old Testament reading recalls the most famous battle in Scripture. While the Hebrew Bible has many accounts of conflict, the showdown between David and Goliath is the one we know best. Yet even with its familiarity, there are new insights to be gained from its events, thus, we have been focusing on that scene in recent weeks. Let me get you caught up.

The armies of Philistia and Israel have gathered for battle. Both stopped on opposing hills overlooking a valley when the Philistine warrior, Goliath, appeared. He was nearly seven feet tall and covered in armor when he challenged the Israelites to send their best out to battle him with the victor claiming the other army as reward. Only a shepherd boy named David accepted. King Saul could not dissuade or clothe the young man in armor as David instead selected five stones and armed only with them, a walking stick and sling moved forward for battle.

“The Philistine came on,” we read “and drew near to David, with his shield-bearer in front of him.” When Goliath spots the young man he sneers “Am I a dog that you come to me with sticks...Come to me, and I will give your flesh to the birds of the air and to the wild animals of the field.” In reply, David offers his second great speech of the narrative. “You come to me with sword and spear and javelin,” he says, “but I come to you in the name of the LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, who you have defied. This very day the LORD will deliver you into my hand.” Goliath lumbers ahead until David takes out a stone, puts it in his sling, and hurls it forward, hitting the Philistine in the forehead. The narrator then concludes “So David prevailed over the Philistine with a sling and a stone...there was no sword in David’s hand.”

That is the account, events that many of us first heard as children, perhaps even singing the song our little ones just offered. Yet in the midst of familiar words there are new insights.

Some of you know of Malcolm Gladwell, the author of such books as *The Tipping Point* and *Outliers*. His specialty is helping the reader see familiar things with new eyes and his most recent work is called *David and Goliath*, based on this Biblical scene. In the title chapter he notes how a one-on-one showdown between warriors from two armies was a common practice in the ancient world. He speaks, too, of how armies in the past had three kinds of combatants—men on horseback or in chariots, foot soldiers with heavy armor carrying swords, and projectile soldiers—archers and slingers. A slinger would take a stone and place it in a leather pouch attached on two sides by a long strand, swing it around in ever-faster circles and then release one end, hurling the rock forward with a velocity of more than 100 feet per second. A skilled slinger was incredibly accurate and could kill or injure a target up to two hundred yards away.

All of those facts were interesting, but I was especially struck by questions that Gladwell asks of the scene. “[Goliath] comes down to the valley floor accompanied by an attendant—a servant walking before him, carrying a shield. Shield bearers in ancient times often accompanied archers into battle,” Gladwell notes “because a soldier using a bow and arrow had no free hand to carry any kind of protection on his own. But why does Goliath, a man calling for sword-on-sword single combat, need to be assisted by a third party carrying an archer’s shield?

“What’s more,” Gladwell continues “why does he say to David, “Come to me?” Can’t Goliath go to David? The biblical account emphasizes how slowly Goliath moves, which is an odd thing to say about someone who is alleged to be a battle hero of infinite strength. In any case, why doesn’t Goliath respond much sooner to the sight of David coming down the hillside without any sword or shield or more? When he first sees David, his first reaction is to be insulted, when he should be terrified. He seems oblivious of what’s happening around him.

There is even that strange comment after he finally spots David with his shepherd's staff: 'Am I a dog that you should come to me with sticks?' Sticks plural? David is holding only one stick.

"What many medical experts now believe," Gladwell suggests "is that Goliath had a serious medical condition. He looks and sounds like someone suffering what is called acromegaly—a disease caused by a benign tumor of the pituitary gland. The tumor causes an overproduction of human growth hormone, which would explain Goliath's extraordinary size...one of the common side effects of acromegaly is vision problems. Pituitary tumors can grow to the point where they compress the nerves leading to the eyes, with the result that people with acromegaly often suffer from severely restricted sight and...double vision."

With that possible explanation, Gladwell begins to answer his own questions. "Why was Goliath led onto the valley floor by an attendant? Because the attendant was his visual guide. Why does he move so slowly? Because the world around him is a blur. Why does it take him so long to understand that David has changed the rules? Because he doesn't see David until David is close up. 'Come to me'...he shouts out, and in that request there is a hint of his vulnerability. *I need you to come to me because I cannot locate you otherwise.* And then there is the otherwise inexplicable 'Am I a dog that you come to me with sticks?' David had only one stick. Goliath saw two...David came running toward Goliath, powered by courage and faith. Goliath was blind to his approach—and then he was down, too big and slow and blurry-eyed to comprehend the way the tables had been turned." (Gladwell, Malcolm. *David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits, and the Art of Battling Giants*. New York: Back Bay Books, 2015, 3-15)

If Gladwell is correct in his assumptions then that Biblical scene is no longer an account of giants and underdogs, but one of sight. Whether or not Goliath suffered from double-vision or other visual impairment, it is clear that he did not expect David to engage him in battle as he did. The Philistine had only one way of viewing things. He was stuck.

A few months ago, Lori and I cut the cord for our television viewing. For years, we had played that annual game with the cable provider of their telling us of an increased cost, my spending way too long on the phone negotiating a lower price only to repeat the experience when the contract expired. This time, after our cable company said it would increase our bill by 50% we decided to move to a wireless provider. I researched options, talked with our children who had some first-hand experience and made the move. It was the week before the Super Bowl.

Mostly, it's been a good change, but do occasionally run into a buffering problem. Since my degree is in theology and not technology, I cannot explain what causes buffering, but know its result as the image on the screen freezes; sometimes backing up to the place things stopped and others times skipping ahead.

As we watched that championship game in February, it became apparent we no longer held any loyalties for the teams we grew up watching in childhood as we definitely wanted the Eagles to win. Thus, like many of you, we were on our feet when the last play of the game occurred as the quarterback for the New England Patriots went back and launched a Hail Mary pass. The announcer was said "Brady is back, the ball is in the air, New England has several receivers in the end zone and the pass is..." At that moment we experienced buffering as the screen froze with the ball in midair. I will confess that there was no buffering of my reaction! Thankfully the sound was working and we could hear the outcome, but the view was frozen.

Goliath's idea of military protocol was frozen in a different way as he thought the only way to engage in battle was to put on all the armor you could and lumber forward with a sword. Saul clearly had the same bias when he tried to get David to put on the armor and use the

king's sword before the showdown. Whether or not the Philistine had literal vision problems, he failed to see other possibilities. He was not the last one to suffer from that condition either.

Our New Testament reading describes that kind of moment with the first disciples. A large crowd had gathered to listen to Jesus and late in the afternoon he fed 4000 people with a few fish and loaves of bread. It was the second such time in Mark's gospel that God's son had done that kind of thing and when they finished, Jesus and the disciples got into their boat and left. They don't get very far on the Sea of Galilee before one of the men point out that someone has forgotten to bring along enough food for the trip. Jesus uses that discovery for another teaching moment as he says "beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod." To Jews, leaven was a symbol for corruptive power, but Jesus' comment goes over the disciples' heads as one says to another "It is because we have no bread," that Jesus speaks in that way. Their teacher can't believe it. "Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not perceive or understand...Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears and fail to hear?"

The first disciples struggled to see and it was not due to any medical issue as they focused on only one way to understand the truth. We are their descendants in the faith as all of us can have times we get stuck into thinking there is only one way to handle things or approach an issue, too. Thus, we all have times when we need others to help us see.

Tomorrow night, our Session will have its first meeting as a new group of officers. As part of our agenda there will be at least two items where we will be asked to use new eyes. First, will be a review of the strategic plan for DPC that has been in development since last August, a guiding document mapping out our ministry for the next three-to-five years. A faithful team of eleven church members has been looking closely at what our congregation does well and the places where we need to make changes. They have listened carefully to you and looked at what is occurring in the world around us and is ready with suggestions. Once the plan is approved, we will share it with the whole congregation, but an overarching theme is the idea of new eyes.

The other item is a congregational response to the sadness unfolding in recent weeks along the border between the United States and Mexico. The forced separation of children from their parents seeking asylum has evoked passionate cries for change from persons of all political views and across the aisle. The President's Executive Order thankfully stopped such separations moving forward, but there is still the question of how families will be reunited and how those caught in the mix might have the legal representation needed for a just outcome. On Monday, our Session will hear a plan from our Mission Committee for how we can commit resources to help in that critical process and how you can contribute to that effort, too. Stay tuned.

We need vision to keep growing as people of God. A vision of what God's world is meant to look like and our part in making it happen. A vision for a different way; God's way.

As I read Malcolm Gladwell's book about those two Biblical combatants, I was struck by how each of the major sections cited Scripture and the way some of the chapters tell of persons modeling faithful choices. So I Googled his name and added the word "faith." What came up was a series of articles about the impact of this book on himself.

He spoke of growing up in a family that was active in the Mennonite tradition with many having gone to seminary and becoming lay preachers. "I've had a different journey," he told a reporter. "I had drifted away a little bit. This book has brought me back into the fold. I was so incredibly struck in writing these stories by the...power faith had in people's lives, it has made a profound impact on me in my belief...I am in the process of rediscovering my own faith again." When asked if he had had a personal conversation experience, Gladwell said "It wasn't an 'I woke up one morning' kind of thing. It was a slow realization something incredibly

powerful and beautiful in the faith I grew up with that I was missing. Here I was writing about people of extraordinary circumstances and it slowly dawned on me that I can have that, too.” (Bailey, Sarah Pulliam “Interview: Malcolm Gladwell on his return to faith while writing ‘David and Goliath.’” <https://religionnews.com/2013/10/09>)

We all have times when we fail to see what is right in front of us and thus need others whose vision helps us. Ironically, it was a man named Goliath who made that need clear.