

“Only a Question”
1 Samuel 17:19-30/Luke 2:41-52

Among all the stories in Scripture, few have had an impact on the human imagination equivalent to the Old Testament account we began a few minutes ago. The story of David’s encounter with Goliath is one of those Biblical moments with which people of faith and no faith are familiar and one that has also made its way into everyday speech. In describing an impending showdown between two groups or individuals that seems to be a mismatch, persons can speak of it as a “David and Goliath” kind of moment. Despite the fact that the nation represented by David’s adversary was far more sophisticated at the time than the Israelites, the term “philistine” is used today to speak of someone who is hostile or indifferent to culture and the arts.

Yet even with its familiarity and everyday contribution to language, the scene itself can still speak to people of faith in ever-new ways. Thus, starting this morning, we’re going to focus on that account with 21st century eyes. To begin, let me set the stage for the passage we read.

The Philistine and Israelite armies have met in the western part of ancient Israel. Philistia was located along the coastline—the present-day Gaza strip—with Israel to the north and east. It’s ironic and sad how the struggle over that same land lives on today. In our text, the two armies have reached a place where conflict is inevitable as the Philistines have gathered on a mountain to the west with the Israelites defending a hill to the east. It is then that Goliath steps forward. Depending on which manuscript is used, he is described as four or six cubits and a span in height. Even the smaller number would have meant he was six feet, nine inches tall, a big man by today’s standards, but a true giant in that era. The narrator tells of Goliath’s armor and weapons including a coat of mail that weighed 150 pounds and a spear with a 15 pound head made of iron. After summarizing those intimidating features, the Philistine warrior speaks.

“Why have you come out to draw up for battle?” Goliath taunts from the hill. “Am I not a Philistine, and are you not servants of Saul?” He challenges the Israelites to select one man to fight him. Whoever loses, that man’s army will become servant to the other. “Today I defy the ranks of Israel!” he sneers. “Give me a man that we may fight together.” No one steps forward. The scene then shifts to David. He was not old enough for the army and thus is at home taking care of his father’s sheep until the day Jesse sends his youngest son to the front with food and to check on his three oldest brothers who are part of the army. Our reading begins at that point.

David leaves early in the next day and upon arriving drops off food with the quartermaster and then sets out to find his brothers. As they talk David hears the latest taunt from Goliath. The Israelites run back and one says “Have you seen this man who has come up? Surely he has come up to defy Israel.” They speak of how Saul will reward anyone brave enough to fight Goliath. David asks “What shall be done for the man who kills this Philistine, and takes away the reproach from Israel? For who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?” Eliab, the eldest son of Jesse, doesn’t like what little brother is doing. “Why have you come down?” he says “With whom have you left those few sheep in the wilderness? I know your presumption and the evil of your heart; for you have come down just to see the battle.” David replies “What have I done now? It was only a question.”

Now as one who, in my family of origin, is both big brother and baby brother, I recognize the accusatory tone of Eliab and the plea of innocence by David as there were moments in my growing-up years when I played either part! Yet I would argue that whether or not David was trying to annoy Eliab his query wasn’t “only” a question, but “the” question. David was asking who Goliath thought he was to defy God. Eliab’s youngest brother was the only one who was

willing to raise the question of the hour and as we know in our familiarity with the conclusion to the David and Goliath narrative, that his question will lead to action.

Thus this morning, I'd like for us to ponder the place of questions in our life of faith still. My operating premise is that questions are an essential part of being a follower of Jesus Christ and that not only do we all have questions, but we are urged to raise them, too.

We see that example embodied in Jesus himself as our New Testament reading contains his first recorded words in the Bible and they are questions. His parents and he have gone to Jerusalem for the festival of Passover. Somehow when Mary and Joseph set out for the return trip to Nazareth, they are unaware that their 12 year old is not part of the large traveling party of family and friends. Once they realize his absence and track him down, three days have passed and when they finally find him Jesus is in the temple where Luke says the boy was "sitting among the teachers and asking them questions." The frantic parents are both relieved and angry which Mary expresses as she says to her son "Why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." In reply, Jesus says "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"

That moment begins a conversational pattern found throughout Jesus' ministry of times when he posed questions; in some cases to clarify what his disciples understood and in other moments to turn the challenge of his opponents back on them. It wasn't just good pedagogical technique; it was an invitation for us to ask questions, too, and wrestle with the answers.

The true story comes from a man named Fred Metcalf who a number of years ago wrote about a moment when he did just that. "My little boy came in the other day with a serious look on his face. 'Dad, can I ask you a question? Where do I come from?' It was a question I'd been dreading," Metcalf confesses, but to his credit, he did not follow the first inclination of many fathers and say "Ask your mother." Instead, he did something else. "I sat him down," Metcalf continues "and told him, as gently as I could, all about the birds and the bees. When I finished, he was very quiet and he got up and said, 'Thank you, Dad,' and headed for the door. I said, 'So what made you ask me?' And he turned around and said, 'I just wanted to know because Bobby next door says *he* comes from Manchester.'" (*Bits 'n Pieces*, January 2, 1997, p. 2)

Questions can get tricky at times, but as people of faith there will always be matters with which we wrestle. Perhaps for you it is the eternal question of why bad things happen to good people or why God allows the wicked to prosper. Maybe for you the query is more personal of struggling to find a new direction for your life or why a particular prayer appears to go unanswered. Or it could be that your primary question for God is on behalf of someone else, asking why they he get better or why she can't seem to catch a break. The questions that bubble up in our heart and soul will vary, but the invitation of our Savior is to keep asking them and to keep our eyes open to discovering the answer God intends.

In his book *Wishful Thinking*, Presbyterian minister and Frederick Buechner has a section entitled "Questions" where he lifts up Scripture as an essential source. "Don't start looking in the Bible for the answers it gives," he suggests. "Start listening for the questions it asks."

"We are much involved," Buechner goes on "all of us, with questions about things that matter a good deal today but will be forgotten by this time tomorrow—the immediate wheres and whens and hows that face us daily at home and at work—but at the same time we tend to lose track of the questions about things that matter always, life-and-death questions about meaning, purpose, and value. To lose track of such deep questions as these is to risk losing track of who we really are in our own depths and where we are really going. There is perhaps no stronger

reason for reading the Bible,” Buechner suggests, “than that somewhere among all those...pages there awaits each reader...the central question of [her/] his life. Here are few of them:

What will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?—Matthew 16:26

Am I my brother's keeper?—Genesis 4:9

If God is for us, who is against us?—Romans 8:31

What is truth?—John 18:38

Where can I go from your spirit?—Psalm 139:7

What do people gain from all their toil at which they toil under the sun?—Ecclesiastes 3:1

Who is my neighbor?—Luke 10:29

What must I do to inherit eternal life?—Luke 10:25

“When you hear the question that is your question,” Buechner concludes, “then you have already begun to hear much.” (Buechner, Frederick. *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*. New York: Harper and Row, 1973, p. 77)

David's big brother and the entire army of Israel heard much when he asked “who is this Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God.” And despite what he said when challenged by Eliab it wasn't only a question, but the central query that needed to be raised in that life-and-death moment for a nation from the past. Our questions may not have such historic significance, but they can still be ones that raise the most important theological issues of our lives. So keep asking them of God, of your pastors, and of one another as only when they are spoken can we ever hope to discover the truth of what our Creator intends for us to know and do.