"Faith - Standing Up to Goliath!"

1 Samuel 17:1-11 | 1 Samuel 17:34-40
January 31, 2010 | St. James UCC

Preached by Rev. Dr. Robert Matlack

When Goliath appeared before the Israelite army, challenging them to send forth a champion to fight against him, they all trembled in terror. They knew that this challenge was one that they were not up to facing. Goliath was so awesome, so dominating, so fearsome, that they could not even consider the possibility of being able to beat him.

You see, Goliath was some sort of freak of nature. He was over nine feet tall. His strength was absolutely incredible. Goliath could not only walk while wearing 125 pounds of armor - he could run and fight. He used a javelin whose head weighed 15 pounds. He was so large that his reach guaranteed that he would get in the first blow in a battle, and given Goliath's strength, one blow would usually be enough. To go against him in battle was certain death. There was no way that an Israelite could hope to win by the strength of arms or skill with weapons or any other conceivable method. Instead, they hid in their camp, unsure what to do, and literally quaking in fear.

We've all experienced times like that. Something happens, we're challenged by a problem or concern and we know that there is no way that we can solve the problem. We give up before we even start, because we've already decided that there is no possible solution. The Israelite's did that. They didn't gather around in their camp looking for ideas and discussing possible solutions. They had already given up. They were back in their camp, literally cowering in fear, knowing that there was no solution, there was no way out of this nightmare.

David was different. David was too young to serve in the army. He normally cared for his father's flocks, but he had been given the day off from his chores to go and take some food to his older brothers who were there with the army. David was young and innocent, and not afraid of Goliath. He saw the Philistine champion. He heard his challenge. He saw the Israelites run in fear. David even had the temerity to say to King Saul, "Your Majesty, no one should be afraid of this Philistine! I will go and fight him."

Behind David's lack of fear, behind David's sense of outrage that this Philistine was intimidating the whole of the Israelite army, behind David's offer to go and fight Goliath, was his faith in God. David had grown up believing that the Israelite's were God's people, that if they were faithful, God would take care of them. David believed, and out of his faith asked the question, "who is this heathen Philistine to defy the army of the living God?" David believed that God would work through the Israelites to defeat Goliath. God would not abandon the Israelites. God would not allow them to be conquered and enslaved. Somehow, in a way that David could not define, he was sure that God would bring about a victory.

When you stop to think about it, it's absolutely amazing that King Saul took David's offer to fight Goliath seriously. After all, if David fought and lost, the Israelite's would have all become slaves

of the Philistines. They had a great deal to lose. If their very best soldiers, strong men who were highly trained in the techniques of warfare and had the very best weapons available, if these soldiers hid in fear at the thought of facing Goliath, then what chance did David have? The only reason that I can imagine that Saul gave David's offer any serious thought, the only reason that I can imagine that in the end he accepted the offer and allowed David to go out against Goliath, was that somehow Saul got a glimpse of David's faith in God, and he too began to believe that God would work through David.

Even so, Saul had David try on his armor, which after all was the very best armor available. Saul still expected that the battle would be won by armor and weapons rather than faith. But his armor was so big and heavy that David could not even walk with it on. Instead, he took it off, picked up his shepherd's staff, five smooth stones from the stream nearby, and with his sling and his staff went out to meet Goliath.

The rest of the story is history. Goliath was filled with scorn that this shepherd boy was coming out to fight him. Goliath with his armor, his mighty sword and javelin, and David with a sling and a shepherd's staff. But David reminded Goliath that his most important armor, his most important weapon, was one that Goliath could not see. David said, "I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty, the God of the Israelite armies which you have defied." In faith and confidence David ran towards Goliath, pulled out a stone, slung it at Goliath, and killed him.

The impossible had happened! Goliath who could not be defeated was killed by a young lad with a sling! The Israelites who could not win on their own strength of arms, were suddenly victors because of God's amazing intervention on their behalf. Fear was conquered by faith, and faith was indeed the victor that day.

There's an old story about a mighty dragon. High in his cave above the village he roared every day; sometimes all day long. Morning, noon and night he roared. And looking up, the fearful people were sure that they could see him brooding, glowering, threatening. Small wonder that even the bravest of the town's leaders were absolutely afraid.

Finally, a small boy announced that he would go against the dragon. With great perception and maturity he said, "I will not live where fires cannot be lighted; where children do not play outside; where men stay away from the fields; and all in fear.

"I will go to face the dragon," he said. And though the town's people tried to dissuade him, he went anyway. As he made his way up the mountain, a strange thing happened, the closer he came to the dragon's cave, the smaller the dragon seemed to be. At last when he arrived at the cave opening, a miracle - that mighty dragon, the dragon that had the entire town cowering in fear, had become a creature small enough for the boy to hold in one hand. Whereupon our hero took the tiny "monster-creature" and carried it back to his people.

Often, that's how it is with our fears. We make things larger than life. We build up those things that we're afraid of, so that we're convinced that they are more powerful and mighty than we can

ever be, so that we're convinced that there is no way that we can overcome the object of our fear.

That's not to say that there aren't things that are genuinely scary, because there certainly are. That's not to say that Goliath wasn't genuinely impressive in his size, strength, and skill at arms, for he was - but he was not invincible. He could be defeated, and it took David to realize it. The other Israelites were so intimidated by their fear that they didn't even try. There was no way that they could contemplate winning a battle against Goliath. They were defeated before they started, just as we are when we decide that there is no way that we can overcome something that we're afraid of. Our fears always seem larger than life until we face up to them - just as the dragon seemed mighty indeed, until the boy actually climbed up and saw him.

The first letter of John talks about love casting out fear, and reminds us that "love comes from God". In other words, with the gift of love, God casts out fear. That was certainly true for David. David knew God's gift of love. David knew that God loved him and that God loved the Israelite people, and so David was not afraid.

David went out to face Goliath knowing that God was with him, and by his faith he was freed to come up with a strategy that would work. Instead of fighting Goliath the way that everyone expected he had to be fought, the way that Goliath expected, the way that Goliath was prepared for and that played into his strengths - wearing armor and fighting with a sword and javelin, no, instead David fought Goliath the way that he knew how to fight - standing at a distance and using a sling. David used his gifts creatively because he was freed by his faith, freed by God's love.

When we face problems that seem overwhelming, when we're afraid and there doesn't seem to be a way out, when we're overcome by the nearness of death, the loss of a job, an illness or injury - whether physical, emotional, or spiritual - in all of these cases and more, we need to remember that God loves us and is with us. If we let our fears paralyze us, then we will be like the Israelite army, quaking in fear before the mighty Goliath - unable to look for a solution, defeated before we even get started. The Israelites did not really expect, and they could not even hope that David might win. But when we remember that God is with us, when we place our trust in God, allowing ourselves to experience God's wondrous love, then we are freed to live as God wants us to live. Then we are freed to serve God, so that God can take our talents and abilities, and somehow create something good, something positive, where we saw only death and defeat. When we trust in God, miraculous things can happen. In faith we find God's help in overcoming the problems of this world - instead of being overcome by them.

Amen.