

San Lorenzo Community Church

United Church of Christ

Sermon from Rev. Annette J. Cook

Sunday, February 19, 2017

Hear now a reading from the Gospel of Matthew 17:1-9.

¹ After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. ² There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. ³ Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus.

⁴ Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah."

⁵ While he was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"

⁶ When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified. ⁷ But Jesus came and touched them. "Get up," he said. "Don't be afraid." ⁸ When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus.

⁹ As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, "Don't tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

This ends the reading from the Gospel of Matthew. Thanks be to God.

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Lives may be changed by mountain top experiences but life is all about what happens when you come down from the mountain top – when you return to daily life. Jesus knew this. The Disciples knew this, though they clearly wanted to stay up on the mountain with Jesus and Moses and Elijah, hearing the voice of God. Still, even they knew they had to return to the valley below and live their life.

It is very much like the story that happened 3,000 years ago. It takes place in an area called the Shephelah in what is now Israel. It is a story about coming down from the mountain and about how we use what we have, what we know, who we are for the greater good.

In this region in the Middle East, Palestine had along its eastern border a mountain range. Still same is true today. And in the mountain range are all of the ancient cities of that region, so Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Hebron.

There is a coastal plain along the Mediterranean, where Tel Aviv is now. And connecting the mountain range with the coastal plain is an area called the Shephelah, which is a series of valleys and ridges that run east to west. You can follow the Shephelah from the coastal plain to the mountains. The Shephelah is considered to be the most beautiful part of Israel. It's gorgeous, with forests of oak and wheat fields and vineyards.

But more importantly, the Shephelah serves a real strategic function because this is the means by which hostile armies on the coastal plain find their way to get up into the mountains and threaten those living in the mountains. And 3,000 years ago, that's exactly what happens.

The Philistines, who are the biggest of enemies of Israel, are living in the coastal plain. They're originally from Crete. They're a seafaring people. And they start to make their way through one of the valleys of the Shephelah up into the mountains, because what they want to do is occupy the highland area right by Bethlehem and split Israel in two.

Now at the time, Israel is headed by King Saul, who catches wind of this plan. King Saul brings his army down from the mountains and he confronts the Philistines in the Valley of Elah, one of the most beautiful of the valleys of the Shephelah. And the Israelites dig in along the northern ridge, and the Philistines dig in along the southern ridge, and the two armies just sit there for weeks and stare at each other, because they're deadlocked. Neither can attack the other, because to attack the other side you've got to come down the mountain into the valley and then up the other side, and you're completely exposed.

So finally, to break the deadlock, the Philistines send their mightiest warrior down into the valley floor, and he calls out and he says to the Israelites, "Send your mightiest warrior down, and we'll have this out, just the two of us."

This was a tradition in ancient warfare called single combat. It was a way of settling disputes without incurring the bloodshed of a major battle. The Philistine who is sent down, their mighty warrior, is a giant. He's 6 foot 9. He's outfitted head to toe in this glittering bronze armor, and he's got a sword and he's got a javelin and he's got his spear. He is absolutely terrifying. And he's so terrifying that

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none of the Israelite soldiers want to fight him. It's a death wish, right? There's no way they think they can take him.

Finally the only person who will come forward is this young shepherd boy, and he goes up to Saul and he says, "I'll fight him."

And King Saul says, "You can't fight him. That's ridiculous. You're this kid. This is this mighty warrior."

But the shepherd is adamant. He says, "No, no, no, you don't understand, I have been defending my flock against lions and wolves for years. I think I can do it."

Well, Saul has no choice. He's got no one else who's come forward. So he says, "All right." And then he turns to the kid, and he says, "But you've got to wear this armor. You can't go as you are."

So he tries to give the shepherd his armor, and the shepherd says, "No." He says, "I can't wear this stuff. I've never worn armor before. You've got to be crazy."

So he reaches down instead on the ground and picks up five stones and puts them in his shepherd's bag and starts to walk down the mountainside to meet the giant. And the giant sees this figure approaching, and calls out, "Come to me so I can feed your flesh to the birds of the heavens and the beasts of the field." He issues this kind of taunt towards this person coming to fight him.

The shepherd draws closer and closer, and the giant sees that he's carrying a staff. That's all he's carrying. Instead of a weapon, just this shepherd's staff, and he says — he's insulted — "Am I a dog that you would come to me with sticks?"

The shepherd boy takes one of his stones out of his pocket, puts it in his sling and rolls it around and lets it fly and it hits the giant right between the eyes — right here, in his most vulnerable spot — and he falls down either dead or unconscious, and the shepherd boy runs up and takes his sword and cuts off his head, and the Philistines see this and they turn and they just run.

And, of course, the name of the giant is Goliath and the name of the shepherd boy is David. And this story is about the courage to come down from the mountain and it turns our understanding upside down.

David, in this story, is supposed to be the underdog, right? So much so that the term, David and Goliath, is used as a metaphor — or a short-cut — to describe an improbable victory by some weak party over someone far stronger. But I think we have this all wrong.

Why do we call David an underdog? Well, we call him an underdog because he's a kid, a little kid, and Goliath is this big, strong giant. We also call him an underdog because Goliath is an experienced warrior, and David is just a shepherd. But most importantly, we call him an underdog because all he has is — it's that Goliath is outfitted with all of this modern weaponry, this glittering coat of armor and a sword and a javelin and a spear, and all David has is this sling.

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This is where we go wrong in understanding this story. In ancient warfare, there are three kinds of warriors. There's cavalry, men on horseback and with chariots. There's heavy infantry, which are foot soldiers, armed foot soldiers with swords and shields and some kind of armor. And there's artillery, and artillery are archers, but, more importantly, slingers. And a slinger is someone who has a leather pouch with two long cords attached to it, and they put a projectile, either a rock or a lead ball, inside the pouch, and they whirl it around like this and they let one of the cords go, and the effect is to send the projectile forward towards its target. That's what David has.

It's important to understand that that sling is not a slingshot. It's not this, right? It's not a child's toy. It's in fact an incredibly devastating weapon. When David rolls it around like this, he's turning the sling around probably at six or seven revolutions per second, and that means that when the rock is released, it's going forward really fast, probably 120 feet per second. Faster than a baseball thrown by even the finest of baseball pitchers. Put a rock in this bag and it becomes an incredibly devastating weapon.

When David lines up and fires that thing at Goliath, he has every intention and every expectation of being able to hit Goliath at his most vulnerable spot between his eyes.

So what's Goliath? He's heavy infantry, and his expectation when he challenges the Israelites to a duel is that he's going to be fighting another heavy infantryman. When he says, "Come to me that I might feed your flesh to the birds of the heavens and the beasts of the field," the key phrase is "Come to me." Come up to me because we're going to fight, hand to hand, like this. Saul has the same expectation.

David says, "I want to fight Goliath," and Saul tries to give him his armor, because Saul is thinking, "Oh, when you say 'fight Goliath,' you mean 'fight him in hand-to-hand combat,' infantry on infantry." But David has absolutely no expectation. He's not going to fight him that way. Why would he? He's a shepherd. He's spent his entire career using a sling to defend his flock against lions and wolves. That's where his strength lies.

So here he is, this shepherd, experienced in the use of a devastating weapon, up against this lumbering giant weighed down by a hundred pounds of armor and these incredibly heavy weapons that are useful only in short-range combat. Goliath is a sitting duck. He doesn't have a chance. So why do we keep calling David an underdog, and why do we keep referring to his victory as improbable?

There's a second piece of this that's important. It's not just that we misunderstand David and his choice of weaponry. It's also that we profoundly misunderstand Goliath. Goliath is not what he seems to be.

There are all kinds of hints in the Biblical text, things that are quite puzzling and don't square with his image as this mighty warrior. The Bible says that Goliath is led onto the valley floor by an attendant. Now that is weird, right? Here is this mighty warrior challenging the Israelites to one-on-one combat. Why is he being led by the hand by some young boy, presumably, to the point of combat?

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Secondly, the Bible story makes special note of how slowly Goliath moves, another odd thing to say when you're describing the mightiest warrior known to man at that point. And then there's this whole weird thing about how long it takes Goliath to react to the sight of David.

So David's coming down the mountain, and he's clearly not preparing for hand-to-hand combat. There is nothing about him that says, "I am about to fight you like this." He's not even carrying a sword. Why does Goliath not react to that? It's as if he's oblivious to what's going on that day. And then there's that strange comment he makes to David: "Am I a dog that you should come to me with sticks?" Sticks? David only has one stick.

Well, it turns out that there's been a great deal of speculation over the years about whether there is something fundamentally, even medically wrong with Goliath, an attempt to make sense of all of those apparent anomalies. There have been many articles written. The first one was in 1960 in the Indiana Medical Journal, and it started a chain of speculation that starts with an explanation for Goliath's height.

So the tallest person of all time was a guy named Robert Wadlow who was still growing when he died at the age of 24 and he was 8 foot 11. He had acromegaly – the most common form of gigantism. Do you remember the wrestler André the Giant? Famous. He had acromegaly. There's even speculation that Abraham Lincoln had acromegaly.

Acromegaly has a very distinct set of side effects associated with it, principally having to do with vision.

So when people have started to speculate about what might have been wrong with Goliath, they've said, "Wait a minute, he looks and sounds an awful lot like someone who has acromegaly." And that would also explain so much of what was strange about his behavior that day.

Why does he move so slowly and have to be escorted down into the valley floor by an attendant? Because he can't make his way on his own.

Why is he so strangely oblivious to David that he doesn't understand that David's not going to fight him until the very last moment? Because he can't see him. When he says, ""come to me" is a hint also of his vulnerability. Come to me because I can't see you.

And then there's, "Am I a dog that you should come to me with sticks?" He sees two sticks when David has only one.

So the Israelites up on the mountain ridge looking down on him thought he was this extraordinarily powerful foe. What they didn't understand was that the very thing that was the source of his apparent strength was also the source of his greatest weakness.

And there it is. A very important lesson for all of us.

In this day and age, right now in the world, in the midst of the anger and hate, in the midst of racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, in the midst of poverty and economic oppression, it is easy to

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be overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of problems and the intensity of the vitriol that spews from the mouths of so-called leaders.

You can see the world from the vantage point of the mountaintop and it can be overwhelming and frightening. It was to the disciples. It was to the Israelites. And what can you do? You are just one person?

And then you remember, you cannot do everything but you can do something. You have skills and talents, you have heart and soul, and you have vision and courage.

You see, giants are not as strong and powerful as they seem. And sometimes the shepherd boy has a sling in his pocket. Amen.