

Our first reading was from the letter to the Ephesians. Today marks the end of our series on Ephesians which we have been reading through over the past several weeks.

Today I want to allow the Ephesians passage that we read to lead us into a familiar story from the Old Testament that we are about to read and then we will journey back into the Ephesians text. The Old Testament text is a familiar one, but I hope to provide some information today that will invite us to read this story in a very different way than we have ever read it before.

Our reading will be the first part of the story we know today as the story of David and Goliath. This is a story where we interpret the underdog David overcoming a superior foe. But reading David as the underdog may be a misreading of this text.

This story comes about in the 11th Century BC. Israel is transitioning from a loose collection of tribes into a nation state. The Israelites want a king like other countries and so Saul is anointed king with the anointing from Samuel.

Israel that we read about in the Old Testament includes a region in the mountains and the coastal plain. Enemies of Israel lived along the coastal plain with valleys between the mountain region down into the coastal plain. The Philistines, one of these enemies of Israel, lived in the coastal plain as they were described as people of the sea. That sea being the Mediterranean Sea.

The Philistines sought to establish a foothold in the mountains for strategic advantage for the area. We are going to be reading of their attempt to expand their territory.

Read I Samuel 17:1-11

The Philistines encroach the mountainous region, so Saul brings the Israelite army down toward the coastal plain. Imagine the valley of Elah with the Philistine army on one side of the valley and the Israelite army on the other side of the valley. Both armies encamp there for weeks because neither army wants to expose themselves to the other.

Finally, the Philistines make the first move. They send their mightiest warrior down into the valley and he calls out to the Israelites to send out their mightiest warrior and the two of them would have a one to one combat. This type of combat was not uncommon. Sometimes two opposing armies would choose one member from each army to fight the other so that disputes would be settled without a lot of bloodshed. That appears to be the case here.

The Philistines send down Goliath into the valley. Goliath measures 6'9". Goliath is fitted with armor, a javelin, a spear, and a sword. He is so terrifying that none of the Israelites want to fight him.

David is presented in the story as a shepherd boy who has been tending his family's sheep nearby. David is the youngest child and is the most unlikely of candidates to fight Goliath. But when David hears that there is no one willing to challenge Goliath after 40 days of threats, he volunteers for the role.

David's brothers try to discourage him, but Saul eventually allows him to represent the Israelite army because no one else is willing to volunteer. David says he has protected sheep from lions and bears and he can protect the Israelites.

Saul prepares David for warfare with the only tools he knows. Saul dresses David up in his armor but that does not work for David. David is a shepherd and David is a slinger.

In ancient warfare, there were 3 kinds of warriors. There were the cavalry which were soldiers who rode on horseback and chariots. There were the heavy infantrymen who were foot soldiers with swords and shields. And there were artillerymen which were slingers like David. Goliath, however, was a heavy infantryman.

Artillerymen like David had a very potent weapon. A good slinger could throw a projectile about 75 miles per hour using his slingshot that he would spin around. A good slinger could hit a target from about 200 yards away. In this encounter with Goliath, David will be a lot closer than that.

David also was able to choose a rock like this. These rocks I picked up in Israel when I visited this very same valley, the Valley of Elah, where this battle is identified as taking place. These rocks are a very dense rock and carry quite a punch if thrown hard at someone. These rocks, if thrown at 75 miles an hour from about 50 feet away, are deadly. Goliath was a sitting duck.

Goliath is not what he seems to be. Even though he was very tall, Goliath had to be led to the valley by an attendant. He moves slowly. He takes a long time to react. And he seems to be confused and says that David has many sticks when David only has one.

How do we explain this about Goliath? Modern interpreters of this story assume that Goliath suffered from a disease called Acromegaly. This is caused by a benign tumor on the pituitary gland that causes over production of human growth hormone. Think Andrew the Giant, think about the actor that played Jaws in the James Bond movie, and think about the tallest man in the world.

People who are afflicted with Acromegaly are nearsighted or have double vision. Goliath needs David to come closer to him because he can't see him very well. Goliath thinks that David has multiply sticks because he possibly has double vision.

So, in other words. Goliath is not as strong and powerful as he seems. He just looks to be that way on the outside. But if David uses what he knows how to do well, then David is really the one who has the advantage.

And as we probably know, David uses the stone and his skills to project the stone into the forehead of Goliath. David can overcome his adversary.

Now let's look back into the Ephesians text. Paul acknowledges that there are battles that we find ourselves in. Paul acknowledges that there are dark forces in the world. But Paul also says that we have the advantage. We have the advantage of the whole armor of God. In this armor we are given the ideals like truth and righteousness. We have the Spirit and we have salvation.

According to this passage, we use truth and righteousness to proclaim a gospel of peace. Proclaiming God's peace in an age of war is not easy. Our passage can be confusing because the images used are war images of helmets and shields and armor.

But ultimately, we face the darkness with the weapon of peace. We do not need to fight fire with fire. But we can fight fire with peace.

We may think that the battles we are called into are too difficult and what we fight against is too strong. But just remember that Goliath was not as strong as he was presented to be.

Just remember that David was really the one with the advantage as long as he used the skills he was given and the ones he acquired.

May God give you strength to fight your battles with the weapons that God has given to you. May you use your strength to share a gospel of peace. AMEN.

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-Gladwell, Malcolm, TED Talk,
https://www.ted.com/talks/malcolm_gladwell_the_unheard_story_of_david_and_goliath#t-924618

-First text: Ephesians 6:10-23

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