

Probable or Possible?

I Samuel 17:3-11, 19-24, 32-49

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Kyle Childress

*History says, don't hope
On this side of the grave.
But then, once in a lifetime
The longed-for tidal wave
Of justice can rise up,
And hope and history rhyme.*

-Seamus Heaney
The Cure at Troy

A friend of mine (Sam Wells) says that the one thing that all 300 million Americans have in common is that we all think we're the little guy, and we're on the side of the little guy.

We love the movie about the small-time attorney, his office in his briefcase, going up against the giant corporation pouring poisons into the river with their army of Ivy League lawyers, or standing against the giant medical center system blaming the lone nurse for their own medical malpractice, or defending the falsely accused even though the powers-that-be have all but already sent him to the electric chair.

We pull for the little guy – the lone housewife fighting city hall, the small, skinny kid in school standing up to the bullies, the outnumbered and out-financed union organizer, the young climate activists going up against the giant pipeline corporation...

It's why we love the underdog upsetting the big favorite in sports – any sport. Like two years ago, when the SFA basketball team upset Duke. Or the recent

movie, *Boys in the Boat*, telling the true story of the 1936 U.S. Men's Olympic rowing team upsetting everyone and winning the gold.

I remember when I was in college when we were all glued to the television watching hockey. None of us knew anything about hockey and couldn't care less about hockey, but on that night the U.S. Olympic hockey team, made up of true amateur youngsters, was going up against the vaunted Soviet Union hockey team, winner of four straight Olympic gold medals, a team filled with the outstanding veteran hockey players in the world. The U.S. team outplayed and out hustled the Russians winning 4-3, and when the final whistle was blown, I remember hearing a roar all over the city, and around the campus, where people everywhere ran out into their yards and stood on their porches yelling and screaming. Known as the "Miracle on Ice," it is considered as the greatest upset in American sports history. Sports writer after sports writer called it the greatest David vs Goliath story in sports.

We love the little guys, David going up against Goliath. And almost anywhere we could go, the term David vs Goliath is so much a part of the cultural imagination most everyone knows what you're talking about.

Well today, we read the greatest David vs Goliath story of all time because it is *the* David vs Goliath story!

I love the way the Bible narrator begins the story: "Now the Philistines gathered their armies for battle. . ." That by itself would be enough to strike fear in the hearts of the Israelites. You see, there is no one who intimidates the Israelites more than the Philistines. Throughout this period of Israel's history, consistently it is the Philistines who give the Israelites trouble and Israel cannot get rid of them or defeat them in battle. Even when they do occasionally defeat them, it seems that

they just keep coming back again and again. So, to simply mention the name “Philistine” is to bring fear and even panic to Israel.

The storyteller continues, “And there came out from the camp of the Philistines a champion named Goliath,” whose height was at least six feet nine and his armor alone weighed 250 pounds. Just the head of his spear weighed nineteen pounds. Also pay attention that it says that Goliath’s spear head was iron. You see the Philistines were just breaking into the Iron Age, while Israel was still in the Bronze Age. The iron spear points, and iron swords could pierce the bronze armor of the Israelites. Back in chapter 13 we are told that the Philistines controlled this advanced technology and would not allow Israel to have access to it.

So, the Israelites are facing the fierce and aggressive Philistines, who never go away and who most always win. Added to it, they’re facing this giant. I think it is interesting that according to the storyteller the Philistines had lots of giants and this particular one, Goliath, was their champion. Four hundred years before (as recorded back in Numbers 13), when the Israelites were first coming to the Promised Land, remember they sent in twelve spies to scout out the country beforehand. When they reported back, they said that the land was filled with giants so much so that they (the Israelites) were like grasshoppers. Fast forward to our own David but onward to II Samuel 21 where we’re told that King David and the Israelites are still battling the Philistines and that the Philistines still have giants. David grows weary and is almost slain.

Now, this morning I’m not particularly interested in historical criticism on who these giants actually were, or even if they really existed. All I want us to know is that for our story the Israelites are always having to go up against the Philistines and they are always going up against giants. They don’t go away. They keep on

coming. They are overwhelming. And you defeat one only to look up and another one or two or twenty are coming right behind them.

What are we to do? What can we do? We can't win. It's one thing to fight one or two giants and win. But they just keep on coming. I'm exhausted. I'm overwhelmed. Like King Saul and the Israelites, the Bible says, "they were dismayed and greatly afraid." Mary Pipher, in her book, *The Green Boat: Reviving Ourselves in Our Capsized Culture*, said that dismay and great fear over time, unrelenting and never ceasing, shapes us to where it becomes a kind of trauma. It shapes and mis-shapes everything we see and do. This is a kind of systemic trauma, generation after generation of poverty, generation after generation of racism, generation after generation of giants. Over time, we shut down, we isolate, we bunker up, we no longer trust, we become different people.

Well, King Saul and the Israelite army are so afraid, and they've been afraid so long that they are overwhelmed and paralyzed. It is what's called "incapacitating knowledge." So much information of what's going on outside of us and inside of us that we no longer feel we can do anything.

While all of Israel is paralyzed and traumatized, David the youngest son of Jesse, shows up. Goliath demands a man, a champion, a warrior, and gets a shepherd boy who comes carrying a shepherd's staff and a slingshot. The only reason he was at the battlefield was to bring some food to his older brothers. Instead of armor and a spear, he has a sack lunch with him.

Meanwhile, back in the headquarters' tent is King Saul. Saul was chosen king in the first place because he looked the part and had a reputation of being a good fighter. Tall, dark, and handsome, King Saul was in his tent, paralyzed with fear. David walks in and says, "King, I'll fight Goliath."

Saul says, “You can’t fight that great and mighty warrior. Besides, he’s mean and you’re just a shepherd, and a skinny one at that.”

David says that while he was guarding his father’s flock of sheep that he has become pretty good with a slingshot. On top of that, God watches over him. Even lions and bears have not hurt him because of God’s care and this same God will protect him from Goliath (verse 37).

Back in verse 27, while listening to Goliath mock Israel and Israel’s God, David asks, “How can these Philistines defy the living God?” Up until that moment no one had accounted for the living God, no one had paid attention to the living God, and everyone had acted as if the living God was irrelevant to the battle.

But not David. For him, it’s all about the living God. That’s who this story is really about. You can’t protect sheep and battles lions and bears without the living God, and you certainly can’t go up against giants without the living God.

Sojourner Truth was in the crowd listening to her friend Frederick Douglas bemoan the fate of the abolition of slavery. Douglas was despondent in the face of slavery’s protectors. He said he didn’t think slavery would ever end. Sojourner Truth spoke up in her big voice, “Frederick, is God dead?”

Sojourner Truth knew what David the shepherd knew: our God is the living God!

David tells King Saul that God will deliver him, and God will deliver Israel. The conventional way of thinking of giants vs shepherds is that giants win. But with the living God shepherds can defeat the giants.

Young writer and climate activist, Thelma Young Lutunatabua, writing about climate change says, “Nothing is inevitable, and that’s crucial to remember in this fight.” She goes on, “It’s no surprise that so many of the tactics the climate movement is using to tackle fossil-fuel Goliaths are taken straight from the playbooks used to bring down dictators” (from *Not Too Late: Changing the Climate Story from Despair to Possibility*, p. 15).

Journalist/activist Rebecca Solnit, also writing about climate change, says, “What we aspire to seems hard to reach, but the improbable, for better or worse, is not the impossible.” She goes on, referring to the twelfth century Jewish theologian and philosopher, Moses Maimonides, arguing “that hope is belief in the ‘plausibility of the possible’ as opposed to the ‘necessity of the probable.’ While it is always probable that Goliath will win, it is also true that sometimes David wins, a sense of the possible that we experience in our own lives as well. Hope emerges from this sense of possibility, freeing us from the shackles of probability” (*Not Too Late*, p. 137).

As an aside, I think it is very interesting that the David vs Goliath story is referenced by so many young climate activists.

The improbable is our calling. It’s who we are and it’s what we do. All because the living God is part of the equation. Mathematics, along with our exhausted and traumatized worldview says it is probable that we’ll be overwhelmed, and we’ll lose everything, including the world. But with the living God there is the plausibility of the possible.

David refuses King Saul’s offer of the use of his armor. David knows that shepherds can’t win by conventional methods. He can’t go toe to toe with Goliath. Instead, he goes out thinking outside of the conventional box. When you’re David

in this story, you must be creative, imaginative. David goes out with a slingshot and a shepherd's staff.

Writer Malcolm Gladwell points out that in the ancient world there were three ways to fight – cavalry, infantry, and the artillery of the day: archers or slingers. Archers and slingers were very effective against infantry, especially against heavy, slow-moving infantry like Goliath. For experienced slingers, like a shepherd boy, the slingshot was a devastating weapon of accuracy. It was common for ancient and medieval slingers to hit birds in midflight. (see *David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits, and the Art of Battling Giants*, p.9-10).

All I'm saying is that David knew his strengths and did not fall into the trap of trying to defeat a giant with the giant's own methods. And remember David did not become highly skilled in 5 easy lessons he watched on YouTube. It took hours upon hours of unglamorous tedious preparation, showing up and showing up, and practice, practice, practice for David. Because when you go up against giants, you better be prepared.

Goliath says to David, "Come to me. Let's fight in close." Scholars believe that Goliath was suffering from a disease called acromegaly, caused by a benign tumor of the pituitary gland. It caused an overproduction of human growth hormone – which explains Goliath's size. Interestingly, it also causes vision problems.

It is also interesting that the Bible tells us that Goliath had an armor-bearer, or an attendant. It is likely that the attendant was Goliath's visual guide. Goliath moves slowly because the world beyond a few feet is a blur.

King Saul and the Israelite army looked at Goliath and saw only his size and power. They were intimidated and paralyzed. David looked more carefully and intelligently and creatively. He saw a slow-moving giant who couldn't see very well. The answer: fight him from a distance using a slingshot and use speed. The Bible says David ran at Goliath (v.48).

Now the giants keep coming. But when our lives are rooted in the living God we know in Jesus Christ, we keep coming too. We don't give up.

Rather than being paralyzed by all the giants we are facing. The giants need to be worrying over shepherds who keep showing up, who keep resisting them, outsmarting them, and out maneuvering them. And who never, never give up. Shepherds don't give up because it's not about giants.

It's about the living God.

Malcom Gladwell wrote *David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits, and the Art of Battling Giants* in 2013, which is a primary resource I've read in preparing this sermon. One of his first books many of you will remember was *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*, first published in 2000. A book on battling giants and how underdogs can win using creativity and thinking unconventionally, and a book on how little things can make a big difference, is interesting. I also think it is interesting that he is a Mennonite.

As Gladwell says, Mennonites have a long history of not being convinced of the power of giants (p. 254). Mennonites (aka Anabaptists) have a long history of being a minority and therefore, do not think like majorities. Majorities just assume they have the social power to make a difference. If you have enough money or organization or political power, you can get things to come out the way you want.

Majority minded people assume that if you're facing giants, then we need to come up with our own giants, and fight like giants. Minorities never make this assumption. Minority minded people like Mennonites and by the way, like the Black church, have a long history of using a variety of creative and unconventional methods in an effort to tip things a little toward justice and goodness and healing.

Austin Heights, the Mennonites are our cousins. We're both part of the Anabaptist tradition. Along with our Black church sisters and brothers, we all have a long history of not being convinced of the power of giants. We know that it is probable that giants win, but we also know that it is possible for the little guys to win – especially when the living God is involved.

As I've said earlier, defeat and despair over generations produces a kind of systemic trauma that mis-shapes who we are and how we see the world. But this morning's story reminds us there is another way: that generation after generation we are part of a people who are not convinced of the power of giants. We have learned to see things differently, to think outside of the box, and we know to be shepherd-minded opens opportunities that giant-minded people never see.

Jane read Seamus Heaney before the sermon, who wrote, "History says, don't hope/ On this side of the grave./ But then, once in a lifetime/ The longed-for tidal wave/ Of justice can rise up,/ And hope and history rhyme.

Every once in a while, hope and history come together. Every once in a while, justice happens, goodness breaks forth, and healing happens. Every once in a while, arrogant giants look up and say, "Oh no! Here come those shepherd staff people!"

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,
Mother of us all. Amen.