

The Strengths We've Been Given

Sermon by Pastor Patricia Geiseman

Pentecost 5

June 23-24, 2018

1 Samuel 17:32-49

A couple of weeks ago, I finally watched the film *Wonder*. Maybe you have seen it, too. I recommend it to you.

The film is based on the bestselling novel by R. J. Palacio. The story is about a brave young boy with facial deformities and his first year at a mainstream school. One reviewer wrote that it is more than a good story; that it is a remarkable work that has the power to change lives. Auggie Pullman, who was born with a rare craniofacial condition, learns how to navigate life as an average middle schooler with courage and, most importantly, kindness.

The film is filled with heart-warming words of advice, encouragement, compassion and kindness. Even if you're not in middle school. Such as, "It's not enough to be friendly. You have to be a friend." "Courage, kindness, character. These are the qualities that define us as human beings and propel us, on occasion, to greatness."

Stories of the underdog becoming the champion are not new. Perhaps one of the oldest is the story of the Hebrew shepherd boy versus the Giant Philistine warrior. This old story is more than the small and powerless facing and overcoming the big and powerful.

The story of David and the Philistine Goliath is about trust in God, the sort of trust that enables us to do what we already have the capacities and abilities to do!

Opponents come in varied forms. Sometimes personal, physical, and political.

Our opponents come in different sizes and shapes. Sometimes they are even the people we love! Like a two year old who won't go to sleep. A teenager who doesn't try. A parent who expects perfection. A spouse who is stubborn. A friend who is always right.

We engage in battles small and large, personal and public, in the larger scenes and within ourselves. We battle illnesses and illusions, diseases and diagnoses. We go round and round with anxieties and addictions, depression and disgust. We battle our fears and failures, regrets and resentments. Sometimes our inner tussles tire us out.

And now, of course, there are the larger political battles about borders, of who to let in and who to keep out, who to separate and who to send back. There are so many tweets and turns. It makes us dizzy. And so disappointed. We wonder, "Who is winning?" Really! What *is* winning?

Sometimes we feel as if no one will ever win.

The old story of David and Goliath reminds us that very often our opponents are not what they seem.

A few years ago I read Malcolm Gladwell's book *David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits, and the Art of Battling Giants*. I shared parts of it with you then. It's worth looking at again.

The region of Palestine where the story of David and Goliath takes place is beautiful, with ridges, valleys, vineyards, fields of wheat and forests. Numerous battles have been fought there over the centuries. The valley of Elah is the most storied. This is where the struggling kingdom of Israel squared off against the armies of the Philistines. The Philistines were from Crete. They were sea faring people who had moved into Palestine and settled along the coast. Their goal was to move east and capture the mountain ridge near Bethlehem and split Saul's kingdom in two. The Philistines were battle-tested and dangerous, the sworn enemies of the Israelites.

So our scene is this: The Philistines set up camp on the southern ridge of the Elah while the Israelites were camped along the northern ridge. Neither dared to move. The two armies looked across the ravine at each other.

The Philistines had had enough. They sent their greatest warrior to resolve the deadlock with one-on-one combat. David, a young shepherd insisted on going to battle: "I have fought greater more ferocious opponents."

Gladwell's book tells about what happens when ordinary people confront giants, powerful opponents:

1. Much of what we consider valuable in our world arises out of these kinds of lopsided confrontations because the act of facing overwhelming odds produces greatness and change. (Like a hardworking woman not giving up a seat ... like teens who say "Never Again" ... like women who speak up: "Me Too.")
2. We get conflicts wrong. We misinterpret them. Being an underdog can change people. It opens doors, creates opportunities, educates, enlightens, and makes possibilities. It did for young Auggie ...

And we can see this in our story. Goliath asked for "single combat." This was commonly done in order to avoid heavy bloodshed. Usually hand-to-hand combat. So Goliath prepared for battle. The Bible tells us in detail of his armor and weapons.

Saul tried to outfit David similarly, giving him armor and arms. But David declined: "I can't walk in this stuff!"

David took off and headed down the hill with five smooth stones. It only took one, fired at Goliath's head, and the giant fell.

The battle was more than miraculous.

Slinging took extraordinary skill and practice, and it was a devastating weapon! Slingers were one of three kinds of warriors:

1. Cavalry: horseback and chariots
2. Infantry: armor, swords, and shields
3. Projectile: artillery (these were the archers and slingers)

Projectile warriors were deadly against infantry.

A big lumbering soldier, weighed down with armor and weapons, was a sitting duck. Goliath was heavy infantry, and he anticipated the same. He shouted, "Come to me, that I may give your flesh to the birds."

But David was a *projectile warrior!* He ran toward Goliath, who stood watching with scorn, surprise ... and then horror.

Saul had tried to armor David, but David used what he had and what he knew.

Saul had thought of power in terms of physical might. But Goliath was slow. He had an attendant. It could have been that his eyesight was poor. Maybe he had cataracts! What the Israelites saw from the ridge was an intimidating giant. But his size was his weakness.

The powerful and the strong are not always what they seem.

David came running down from the ridge with courage and faith.

This story is about trust in God, the trust in God that *enables us to do what we have the capacities and abilities to do.*

So the old story asks us: Who or what are our opponents? What do we know? What are our strengths?

We encounter many battles ... at home, with our families, at work ... and in the larger national and international scene. We are concerned about the borders of our lives. For whom do we move over and make space?

Differences lead to disputes and division, ousting and outrage. Sometimes we fight over the wrong things, and we get confused with who the enemy really is.

Sometimes, it seems to me, that the Goliath we fear most is the future consequences of power. We look down in the valley and see it, large, waiting, dangerous and intimidating.

Will the world be safe and welcoming? Will there be enough valleys and vineyards, forests and fields?

The magnificent old story of a young shepherd slinger who trusted in God and the gifts he'd been given compels us to ask ourselves: What are our strengths? As a nation? A community? As a congregation and as persons? What is worth fighting for? And, really, whose world is it?

What strengths do you bring to the battle?

David used the gifts and skills he had been given.

Three years ago, when we last read this story together, we were moving into a pastoral vacancy, getting ready for intentionally working on our vision as a congregation. We were beginning to ask ourselves necessary and important questions: Why are we here? What are our goals? And what is it we wish to conquer?

Three years ago, I asked you, "Are we here to protect what is ours or to share what is God's? Are we open to the future or running from it?"

We decided to be open to the future and to share what is God's. To use our gifts of welcoming, compassion, open-minded faithfulness. We decided to continue to be a place of healing and hope.

In the film *Wonder*, Auggie's teacher, Mr. Browne, said, "Learning who you are is what you are here to do." And ... "We carry with us, as human beings, not just the capacity to be kind, but the very choice of kindness."

So we use the smooth stones of compassion, kindness, justice, insight, and understanding to level the giants of poverty, injustice, loneliness, hunger, despair, homelessness, and bigotry.

We befriend, mentor, feed, clothe, house, support and stand with.

Auggie said, "Be kind; everyone is fighting a hard battle. Be kind."

The administrator at Auggie's school said, "The things we do outlast our mortality. The things we do are like monuments that people build to honor heroes after they've died. They're like the pyramids that the Egyptians built to honor the pharaohs. Only instead of being made of stone, they're made of the memories people have of you.... Your deeds are your monuments."

David put his trust in God. And he did what he knew he could do.

When we share what is God's, the whole world wins.

And it is indeed ... *Wonder*-full.

What stones do you have in your pocket?

Amen.

Resources:

Brueggemann, Walter, *1 & 2 Samuel*
Gladwell, Malcolm, *David and Goliath*

Copyright © 2018 Patricia A. Geiseman