

*So That All the Earth May Know... - 1 Samuel 17:41-49*

**Rev. Matt Nieman**

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Last Sunday, we spent time with the story from 1 Samuel of David and Goliath. It's a very famous story, obviously. It resonates beyond the church. It has echoes throughout our culture when we see someone overcome long odds against what seems like an insurmountable foe.

And we talked about David and how he formed this amazing self-confidence through his being self-aware of his talents and skills and trusting in the God who made him and sent him. And those are good lessons for us as we navigate the challenges we face.

There's another aspect of the story, though, that we didn't touch on. It's the conclusion of the story, the famous part—the part that describes the confrontation itself—the dialogue between David and Goliath and the action that took place which resulted in Goliath's death.

It's detailed in verses 41-49 of 1 Samuel 17:

“The Philistine came on and drew near to David, with his shield-bearer in front of him. When the Philistine looked and saw David, he disdained him, for he was only a youth, ruddy and handsome in appearance. The Philistine said to David, ‘Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks?’ And the Philistine cursed David by his gods. The Philistine said to David, ‘Come to me, and I will give your flesh to the birds of the air and to the wild animals of the field.’ But David said to the Philistine, ‘You come to me with sword and spear and javelin; but I come to you in the name of the Lord of

hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This very day the Lord will deliver you into my hand, and I will strike you down and cut off your head; and I will give the dead bodies of the Philistine army this very day to the birds of the air and to the wild animals of the earth, so that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, and that all this assembly may know that the Lord does not save by sword and spear; for the battle is the Lord's and he will give you into our hand.'

"When the Philistine drew nearer to meet David, David ran quickly towards the battle line to meet the Philistine. David put his hand in his bag, took out a stone, slung it, and struck the Philistine on his forehead; the stone sank into his forehead, and he fell face down on the ground."

The book from which we read this story, the Bible, is the document we lay claim to as our guide in faith and practice. We are followers of Christ who have a deep commitment to living the word of God. And yet, within the written word of God, there are troubling parts that make our total commitment to the God who inspired it more difficult.

Specifically, many of us, who show our allegiance to the God of peace and mercy, find certain texts in the Bible that seem to sanction violence difficult to swallow. For example, in the seventh chapter of the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy, God commands the people of Israel to "utterly destroy" the people of the nations that God hands over to them.

There's to be no negotiation: "Make no treaty with them, and show them no mercy," they are told. They were

to “break down their altars, smash their sacred stones, cut down their Asherah poles and burn their idols in the fire.”

There are other texts in the Old Testament, passages where genocide seems to be sanctioned by God. God commands certain rulers to wipe out whole nations and legions of people. And after reading such stories, our hearts and our minds go back to that list of Ten Commandments. And the command to not murder raises a red flag for us as we ponder what seems like to us the inconsistency of the Biblical text.

Instances of violence are not limited to the Old Testament either. Indeed, one of the most crucial and defining events of the Christian story is laced with violence. Jesus’ death and how that death occurs is not for the faint of heart. That God would allow God’s son to be crucified has raised questions in some people’s minds about the compassion of God.

And then we come to today’s story of David and Goliath. It is a feel-good story that is so familiar and so filled with lessons that have seeped into our contemporary culture. It is a lesson for how the little guy can overcome long odds and be successful. It has motivated small businesses, small towns, small schools, and small churches to be successful despite the daunting presence from entities bigger than them.

And yet, if we simply read the story, we learn that the tale of David and Goliath is a story about confrontation, disagreement, and a violent solution. The Philistine said to David, “Come to me, and I will give your flesh to the birds of the air and to the wild animals of the field.” David said to

the Philistine, “I will strike you down and cut off your head; and I will give the dead bodies of the Philistine army this very day to the birds of the air and to the wild animals of the earth...”

How do we make sense of this story and all the other stories like it, where violence seems to be sanctioned by God.

It gets tougher and tougher to read and digest such stories in the Biblical text, particularly because we are confronted by news of violence on a daily basis. We only have to read the newspaper (or your online newsfeed) or watch the headlines on television to know that there are all kinds of instances where folks are lashing out at others. The continuing violence in Gaza and Ukraine make us long for stories of peace and reconciliation and turn away from the maddening violence we can't seem to avoid.

So what do we make of these violent Bible stories? The first thing we have to remember is that every part of the Bible, while inspired by God, was written by human hands. And those who charted these stories lived within the culture of the day. The Confession of 1967 says the church “has an obligation to approach the Scriptures with literary and historical understanding.”

And so when we read about the people of Israel being told by God to take on and destroy all comers, we have to understand it in light of Israel's continuing struggle in that day to sustain itself and withstand all of the efforts by others to destroy them. We have to remember that they too lived in an extremely violent world, and they were struggling for their own survival. And so the writers of these accounts

recorded these stories through the lenses of a violent world in which they were living.

But even understanding the historical and literary context of these stories still doesn't give us the comfort we seek when we read of God sanctioning Israel's actions or the actions of David in killing the mammoth Philistine. We want a more significant understanding.

I think we find a clue in verse 46 of the David and Goliath passage. When David says to Goliath, "and I will give the dead bodies of the Philistine army this very day to the birds of the air and to the wild animals of the earth," he concludes this statement by saying, "so that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel."

That was the ultimate purpose for this confrontation. That was the main reason that David sunk a stone into the forehead of Goliath and killed him. It wasn't to promote this kind of warfare. It wasn't even to preserve David himself, God's chosen king. It was to bring home the point that the God of Israel was alive and through those who trusted in him could overcome the greatest of odds and win the most important battles.

The stories of the Bible that seem to sanction violence and oppression are those whose main objective is to stress the primacy of God and the fact that this God is a God of life who seeks to preserve it for all who call him Lord. That's where our focus should be. There is a greater plan that God has in place. And the Bible is primarily designed to push us toward a greater realization that our ultimate allegiance is to the God who desires for us life and prosperity.

There are other instances in the Bible where the actual action that takes place is secondary to a more important purpose. When Jesus healed the sick and performed other miracles, he did so to help and assist those who were the recipients of his blessing. Such is the case in our gospel reading today about Jesus healing both a bleeding woman and the man Jairus' dying daughter.

But, more importantly, Jesus performed them to convince his audience of who he was. It took extraordinary acts to point people to the life-giving and life-saving God that Jesus was.

The stories of the Bible, more than being acts recorded in history, are primary ways to get us to know God better. On the surface, there are stories that make us cringe, stories that we will probably always be uncomfortable with. But, if we find one or two stories we're uncomfortable with and hold them up in light of the rest of the Bible, we can then form a more accurate impression of God. And that God is one who is enormously powerful, enormously loyal, enormously compassionate, and a God who covets our allegiance.

The story of David and Goliath is about many things, but as David himself said, it is primarily "so that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel."

What will it take for the world to know more fully the Triune God? What will it take for each of us to fully embrace this God who is not about genocide and violence but about love and compassion?

We must become the tellers of the story. We must become the mouthpiece of God.

You know, every two years, the Presbyterian Church grabs headlines in newspapers and on television across the country during its General Assembly gathering. This year has been no different. (I encourage you to go online and read about the actions of this year's assembly.) And as I watch us make news every couple years, I wish we had the ability of getting in the news on a more frequent basis concerning other things when it comes to the church: sharing the story of God's redemptive love for all in Jesus Christ, sharing the Biblical story with honesty and integrity, and sharing the story in ways so that those who have not heard it will not be put off by it but might find ways to embrace it for themselves.

We can certainly do that, through a greater commitment to knowing the story and the real reasons why it came to be in the first place. "So that all the earth may know" that this God is real and alive in this world. Amen.