

The Rev. Dean Lindsey

June 21, 2009

Facing Goliath

The Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 17:14-21; 1 Samuel 17:19-23, 26, 28-37

We're not the story tellers we once were. Stories take time, and that is something that seems to be in short supply. For sure, we'll pay good money for the occasional visit to the Cineplex or the video store. Contemporary movies tell some powerful stories backed up with whiz-bang special effects, but what about you and me? Do we tell many stories among our family and friends, or has our communication become much more clipped, distilled down, utilitarian in purpose?

Just this past week came the news of the National Texting Championship. It was won by a 15-year-old Iowa teenager who regularly sends out over 14,000 text messages a month. No doubt, the great majority of these are cryptic messages or strings of abbreviations that would be hard for the uninitiated to interpret: OMG! BTW, LOL, TTYL.

New forms of communication have been growing so explosively, that the etiquette and ground rules for dealing with them are slow to catch up. Teachers struggle with this on a daily basis. Young people may be sitting in a biology lecture, but they are texting under their desk or even in their pocket. It's called

multi-tasking, but it's really just not paying attention. I've seen it even in some of my graduate classes. Students have their laptops open on the desk, ostensibly to take notes, but with their screen turned away from the teacher, I've noticed some of them checking their email, surfing the web, or even playing solitaire.

We are so easily distracted, and let's face it, there is so much that can distract us. To tell a story or to listen to one requires thought, concentration, and time. It takes discipline and attentiveness.

These are some of the first skills that children have to master in order to be ready for school. Crucial skills, really, to be able to sit still, for a time, and to listen and comprehend. We help them to practice these skills by telling them simple stories, childhood stories.

That does not mean they are childish stories and there is a difference, because childhood stories often confront some complex issues. They are worth re-telling again and again, because as we mature and gain in experience, our understanding of the story matures and grows. Like a friendship that changes over time, there are always new dimensions for us to ponder and explore among the best of these stories.

The story of David and Goliath is certainly among the best. For sure, it's been widely told. People who've never set foot in a church, never opened a Bible, never heard of the Old Testament or the New, have heard this tale. It's been

depicted by artists and sculptors, retold by film makers and novelists, and interpreted by poets and professors.

The downside of all of this exposure is that the story can become something of a cliché, claimed by sportswriters to describe the victory of an underdog team which knocks off a highly ranked opponent or by political analyst composing a headline after an unheralded candidate wins an election contest. “David beats Goliath” once again. But, these are the shorthand versions, the text message renderings which fail to plumb the depths of an ancient tale or to grapple with what it might mean for you and me.

David versus Goliath is not simply a story about beating the odds, or an unlikely, perhaps even a lucky victory over a strong opponent. It is about the struggle against despair, the confrontation with powerful evil, and the creation of new possibilities when the future seems closed.

These are issues that can be explored only within the fuller context of the whole story. That is why in reading from Scripture this morning, I’ve left off before the climactic moment arrives, that rocket shot from a simple sling which fells the giant. We all know how the story ends, but what we also need to know is how David comes to step onto that battlefield in the first place and whether he goes there because of courage, faith, or on a foolish whim.

Sent with provisions for the hungry soldiers, David follows the men from their encampment to the place where the battle lines have been drawn. Not everyone wants him there. His oldest brother sneers at him, “Aren’t there some sheep to tend?”, but the real drama is being played out in front of them and within earshot of the two opposing armies. Goliath dominates this scene: taunting, provoking, yelling insults, cursing the army of Israel and their God. Bombastic, bullying, brutal: all eyes and ears are locked onto him. Saul and his army are frozen in fear.

Unfortunately we can meet up with the Goliath-type in a variety of situations. He lurks in our schools. We find him in our neighborhood. He sometimes show up in church. Even worse, some of us have to work for him, or even live with him. Maybe even more than one of him. Lacking empathy of any kind, these Goliath-types heap scorn upon anyone they consider weaker than themselves. Completely self-absorbed, they communicate primarily through shouting and screaming. Using threats, they may be willing to damage themselves if it will bring harm to someone else. (And, oh yes) Talking to them or reasoning with them or trying to calm them down never seems to help.

In books and seminars and through counselors, there is a lot of advice on this subject. The best of that advice encourages an inventory of what power we have even when faced with what seems like an impossible situation. “Discover your

own strength and the opposition's vulnerability," is the way two authors describe an important tactic they urge upon a secretary who's dealing with "a boss from hell."¹

At first, she resists their advice. "What power do I have against him?" But, when pushed she discovers her power, first of all to leave that job behind and get a new one. Next, to realize that she is more valuable to the boss than he is to her. Finally, to gain the composure and the courage to confront him firmly.

If gaining awareness of one's own power is an important step in dealing with a bully, young David takes it a giant step forward. He is aware of the power of God. Lacking that awareness, the other soldiers, his brothers, even the king himself are locked down, stuck in place, suffering spiritual and physical incapacity because of Goliath's terror. David himself is incredulous, "Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?" David's orientation is completely different than the others. They can only see Goliath and his power. David sees only the power of God.

And, what do we see when we look out at the world? Do we see only Goliath? Yes, there are many Goliath's out there. Just turn on the news, and you will hear all about them. Tyrants who demand total obedience. Oppressors who have great power because we or others have handed it over to them. Bullies who are pleased to suck the life from everyone around them.

Who will win these battles? Who is connected to the real power, the power that matters most?

Goliath lives, not simply in the self-absorbed deeds of hoodlums or despots, but also in forces which terrorize us and feed on our deepest fears: crimes against children, economic turmoil, poverty, hunger, addiction, injustice.

In his youthful enthusiasm, David abandons the self-protective impulse, makes himself vulnerable before power, and goes about his work unafraid. To some, it may look like foolishness, but in fact it is faith, the same faith which offers us a new relation to the worldly powers which threaten to choke us and hold us in check.

Some time ago, I mentioned an old friend of mine who would periodically challenge me with a question which plagued him in his later years. “Dean,” he would say, “don’t you ever get the feeling that evil is winning in our world?”

He may have asked me that question two or three dozen times, but my answer was always the same. “No way can I believe that evil has won or is winning or will ever win.”

To entertain that possibility even for a moment is to listen to Goliath. And I refuse to listen to him, for all he offers is death. I may falter in my resolve. We all do.

Fortunately, we have a story to challenge us, inspire us, and maybe even correct us. To help us to live, not in fear of worldly powers, but in confident hope, trusting the power of God.

Someone may think that it's only a story for Children. In fact, it is the story of our life, lived in faith.

Amen.

¹ *Bullies, Tyrants, and Impossible People: How To Beat Them Without Joining Them* by Ronald Shapiro, Mark Jankowski, and James Dale (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2007).