

Sermon for Sunday, August 15, 2010

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"Living By the Right Passion"

1 Samuel 17

The college football game was over and 50,000 people were walking to cars in far-flung parking lots. Others were beginning the long walk back to campus. We arrived at a major intersection where a traffic cop was directing automotive traffic and foot traffic with skill and enthusiasm. He kept great lines of cars moving as several hundred pedestrians stacked up around him. He sized up the crowd, blew all the cars to a stop, then waved us ahead, telling us to cross as we pleased.

It is sad but true that even at institutions of higher learning, many fail to realize that drunkenness impairs judgment, so we should not drink and drive. There was a driver at the game who had not learned that lesson. As the crowd washed over the intersection, this driver tried to roll thru the intersection with the people, first moving very slowly, then a little faster through the crowd. He barely missed a couple of shocked people. The traffic cop blasted the whistle, but the car kept going. The policeman jogged, then dashed toward the car that was now accelerating. He grabbed the door handle; the car kept rolling. He unleashed a tremendous kick that put a large dent in the door. The driver rolled down his window and yelled, "Hey what are you doing to my car?" The policeman grabbed him by the shirt, yanked him forward and screamed a rebuke, equal parts eloquent and profane.

The pedestrians burst into applause. His passion, his zeal for safety, for uprightness, was so pure that we could only admire him. I had to wonder what would happen if even a quarter of all believers showed anything like that zeal.

Zeal for God

I hesitate to say it, but I believe the story of David and Goliath is a tale of what happens when one man has a proper passion for God. I hesitate because I do not want to reduce this story of God's redeeming grace to a moralistic lesson.

Sadly, the account of David and Goliath is often reduced to a moral tale which says, "Be courageous and fight your giants as David did." In Sunday School, children learn that even little kids can do big things, if God is with them. We know better, but that does not mean we know everything in this great story.

This we do know: David will be Israel's warrior king (16:18). God gives him strength and victory (1 Sam 2:10, 2 Sam 22:51). Knowing this, and with eyes sensitized to battle more than other matters, we identify David's declaration "The battle is the Lord's" (17:47) as the theme of the episode. That is true. We hear that God does save at the climax of the narrative, as David advances to slay the giant. He delivers Israel from Philistines, from a serious invasion. But there is more.

In 1 Samuel 16 Samuel anointed young David to be the next king. We then met the young man: David is old enough to kill wild animals (17:36) and bear armor at court (16:21), but apparently not old enough – twenty – to enter Israel's standing army (Num 1:3, 26:2). God chose him before tall, impressive Eliab. David is the man after God's own heart (1 Sam. 16:13). Like Jonathan (14:1-15), he rekindles faith in Israel and demonstrates what God can accomplish through a faithful servant.

God's zeal for his people

This is what God accomplished:

Invasion and preparation for battle

In 1 Samuel 17:1-25, the Philistines invade Judah, driving deep into its territory, until an Israelite army meets them, creating a military impasse. No one wants to march up hill and fight a literal up-hill battle (football metaphor). So Goliath, a giant, offers to settle the conflict through battle between two champions.

He taunts the quivering Israelites daily. Saul and his army stand mute, their inaction bearing daily testimony to their faithlessness. The Israelites are God's army and Saul is God's anointed, yet they do nothing while a pagan shames them and their God. But they cannot see that. They are afraid. They wonder "Who will dare to fight the giant (17:25)?"

God brings David to the camp just in time to hear Goliath's taunt (v. 23). He arrives, hears and grows incensed. Who is "this uncircumcised Philistine" to disgrace Israel, to "defy the armies of the living God," and "heap shame" on Israel (vs. 10, 26, 36). David recognizes the affront to God and offers to fight Goliath in the name of his dishonored Lord (vs. 32, 45).

Because the other Israelites have lost sight of God's honor, they cannot fathom David's motivation to fight (vs. 28-37). (David does have a secondary interest in rewards, (17:26). It's a result of his confidence. He expects to win and wonders if there is a reward.) Eliab, David's older brother, accuses David of coming to see blood (vs. 28-30), but we hear the sibling jealousy. God chose David over Eliab in Chap.16:6-7! It is an old theme – think of Jacob and Esau, Joseph and brothers.

Reports of David's resolve work their way to Saul, who investigates. He hesitates to let David attempt an apparent suicide mission (vs. 31-33), but not for long (vs. 37-38). Armed only with a staff and a sling, David advances against a fully-armed giant; the scale armor on his torso weighed 125 lbs; his spear point, fifteen pounds (v. 40).

The verbal conflict preceding the battle lasts longer than the conflict itself. Goliath insults his handsome foe, curses him by his gods, and promises to feed his carcass to the birds (vs. 43-44). So Goliath threatens David with the ultimate disgrace. He will die and his body will go unburied. But the giant's jeers cannot match David's inspired insults (vs. 45-47):

You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the Lord will hand you over to me and I will strike you down and cut off your head. Today I will give the carcasses of the Philistine army to the birds of the air and the beast of the earth and the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel. All those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the Lord saves, for the battle is the Lord's and he will give all of you into our hands.

The battle and the lesson

The speeches show that the contest between David and Goliath is a battle between the gods. If David strikes down Goliath, his Lord is vindicated. If not...

The battle itself is almost anticlimactic. David runs, reaches, slings and strikes before the giant moves. Goliath is face-down, dead in twenty seconds, reading time.

David is right, the battle is the Lord's. David is brave, but this is no tale of a brave lad with a sling. It is a contest of the gods. Which deity will go down with his champion? Whose dead will go unburied? Yes, "The battle is the Lord's." Poems that open and close 1 Samuel say it well. Hannah says, "It is not by strength that one prevails; those who oppose the king will be shattered.... He will give strength to his king" (1 Sam. 2:9-10). David's sings, "The Lord is my rock, my fortress, my deliverer" and "You armed me with strength for battle" (1 Sam. 22:2, 40).

The Lord is David's fortress, but this victory is not just David's. David's victory thwarted an invasion by Israel's mortal enemy. He decimated an army that reached half-way across Israel. This victory crushed forces bent on destroying God's people. It preserved the nation. The Lord's anointed risked his life to save his people and God preserved his life.

This is the way of God. He ever protects and defends his people. Truly David's victory foreshadows Jesus' defeat of Satan. Both deliver God's people from a destroying foe. Both deliver from a position of weakness, and that displays God's power. Both are consumed by passion to honor God and fulfill his purposes. Not everyone saw this.

- Crowds of women babble mindless praise. They dance, sing, "Saul has slain his thousands, David his tens of thousands." They see a handsome hero, nothing more.
- **Saul** grew suspicious. Could this be a threat, a rival to me? He hated David.
- **Eliab** envied his younger brother, accused him of evil motives.
- **Jonathan** recognized him as God's chosen deliverer. Jonathan loved and accepted David, even though he took the kingship that could have been Jonathon's (18:1-4).
- **Lesson:** When God acts, everyone who sees must respond somehow. What enables us to respond the right way? This story suggests that it has to do with our interest in honor – our honor or the honor of God. That's the prominent second theme in 1 Sam 17.

The honor of God

The honor theme really starts with dishonor or defiance directed toward God. Then honor has a role at every stage in the drama:

In the beginning, Goliath taunts Israel "I defy the ranks of Israel. Give me a man." He insults the honor of God's army, hence the honor of God himself (v. 10).

The response is dismal. No one rises to God's defense, not regal Saul the anointed, not impressive Eliab. David arrives as Goliath shouts "his usual defiance" (v. 23). The Israelites say, "He comes out to defy Israel" (v. 25). But no one moves, until David does.

David had a zeal, a passion for God that allowed him to see things differently. When Goliath defied Israel, the soldiers shook with fear and asked, "Who will dare to fight the giant?" Saul had promised his daughter in marriage and release from all taxes, but no one came forward because, the soldiers knew, dead men pay no taxes anyway.

But when God brought David to the battle scene just in time to hear the giant's defiance, zeal for God's honor moved him. He turned the question on its head. Not, "Who will dare to fight the giant? But "Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God" (v. 26)? "Who is fool enough to taunt the living God?"

That was the beginning of David's victory. He said, "That giant will pay a price for defying God. He must die!" This David announces first to Saul, then Goliath (vs. 36, 45).

How shall we understand David's courage, strength, and certainty? Was he simply a brave man? He seems brave. He had already killed a lion and a bear in defense of the flock. But the Bible points elsewhere, to David's faith.

David already knows God as his deliverer (vs. 35-37). He is already anointed as king. God brings him to the battle line at the right moment, as Goliath shouts his insults. His love for God inspires him to see the issue as it is, as an affront to God himself. His passion for God's honor makes him burn to protect God's name and remove Goliath's offense. God defends his honor through David, who loves him.

To this day, we expect God to defend his honor. He says, "Those who honor me I will honor, but those who despise me will be disdained" (2:30). But he will often do so thru us, if we have eyes to see.

Let me ask you: Do you have an eye for God's honor? Do you see, do you care, do you do what you can, to defend his name and honor. If not, why not?

Observe the prominence of the question of God's honor in each phase of our story. In the beginning, God is dishonored (17:10). At the turning point David asks how the giant dares to dishonor God (vs. 23-26). At the climax, David says (vs. 45-46): [Repeating] "You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the LORD Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied." He will do this so "the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel."

Faith creates zeal for God

We must answer this question: How did David come to see Goliath and the battle as God does? How did he come to act as God's servant and so deliver Israel? And what can we learn from him?

While there were other believers in the area, none but David acted like one. Saul and his army play the cowards – especially Saul, the anointed king and the tallest, best-armed soldier. David's brothers are busy with their jealousy. Is the lesson, "Don't be cowards, don't be jealous"? Not quite.

Cowardice and jealousy are wrong. But what good is it to command, "Don't be jealous of your siblings" or "Don't be cowards. Don't let others volunteer for tough responsibilities." We have to go to the root of the matter – which is faith. Unbelief breeds inaction and cowardice.

Unbelief freezes the army and makes Saul worry about David's lack of armor (vs. 33-40). If there is no God, if he is a mere idea, if there is only a blank hunch, "Yes there is probably a god," then of course no one will fight Goliath! If there is no god, a soldier would be an idiot to fight him!

Same for the jealousy Eliab shows when he castigates David for blood lust (v. 28). This is not a cautionary tale about sibling rivalry. Rather Eliab shows that when someone loses sight of God's honor, it's easy to fall into misguided concern for one's own honor. Questions: Are you too concerned for your own honor? If God's honor is paramount to you, how does it show?

The same holds for Saul's failure to perform his duty. If there is no god, why risk your life to protect God's people and name; why not live to hold onto power? Faithlessness is Saul's root sin. The failures of Saul, Eliab and the army illustrate the consequences of unbelief. No one can be neutral toward God.

David is the sole active believer here, but he is more than an example of courage. Notice that the death of Goliath is not David's primary goal. He does not volunteer saying, "I believe I can beat the giant." David knows he can and will do so to defend God's honor and remove disgrace from Israel.

We abuse our passage if we say Christians must fight giants as David did. The vapid song of the women of Israel (18:6-9) shows that man-praising misses the point. Instead, we should consider what motivated David – it's his relentlessly theocentric outlook. His zeal for God liberates courage (though the language of courage or bravery never appears). He burns to remove Israel's disgrace. The world must know that there is a God in Israel. David fights in God's name, in God's strength, for God's honor (vs. 45-47). In Psalm 69, David explains:

I endure scorn for your sake...
I am a stranger to my brothers...
For zeal for your house consumes me,
and the insults of those who insult you fall upon me.

Zeal for God's honor is the form of faith in 1 Samuel 17. David's zeal to guard God's dignity probes us. What stirs our passions? What makes us angry? We become offended at minor snubs or acts of disrespect. We rage at people who cut us off in traffic or squeeze a yellow light till it bleeds red.

We are quick to anger at personal offenses, but calm over offenses to God. We say, "What do you expect of sinners?" But there is a place for indignation over sin: "The deeds of faithless men I hate.... Every morning I will put to silence all the wicked in the land (Psa. 101:3, 8).

Do we grieve over sin? "Streams of tears flow from my eyes for your law is not obeyed" (Psa. 119:136). "Who sins and I do not inwardly burn?" (2 Cor. 11:29).

Zeal Illustrated Do we understand Paul's burning?

A few years ago I was playing basketball in the gym of a Christian college. Two strangers used obscenities and blasphemies whenever they missed an easy shot or fumbled a pass. It set the Christians on edge, but no one said much. Finally, after an extraordinary blasphemy, the man in charge ignited. "Listen," he roared, "You can say *jackrabbit* or *frapandapolis*. I don't like it, but it's just rude. But you either stop taking the name of my Lord in vain or get off this court!" I am not sure whether the vehemence or the rarity of the speech impressed us more. That was passion, zeal for God's name. He defended God's honor. We should too. But when and how?

It is easier if you are in leadership. You have the right to say: These are our standards for conduct and I ask you to abide by them.

Of course, I'm not just talking about language in the narrow sense. We can establish that our words, goals, values at work, in a club, in a volunteer organization will aim to show respect to God and to all humans.

More than that, I hope we have a desire and an ability to see the world through God's eyes. How did David realize the question is not "Who will dare to fight the giant?" but "Who is this Philistine?" Did David have a random moment of insight? No, we see what we care about, what we have learned to see. David had an eye for God's cause and honor. Let's see the things that matter most and fight for them, not with fists or sword, but with all our skill and wisdom.

When I was finishing seminary, I spoke on David and Goliath in a large Sunday School class. A man had an urgent question "So what are we supposed to do? Go out and fight our giants as David did?"

I said something like, "Well, yes, but not with a sword." I still hesitate to interpret the passage as a call to "go and do as David did." David's battle has a root. His victory rests on his zeal for God's honor, his desire to remove shame from God and Israel. Where then does the story leave us? Let me ask:

Do you know that God has a passion for you that led him to act for you? The Bible calls Jesus David's son, but Jesus is greater than David. Goliath prefigured Satan, in his desire to destroy the people of God, to take their land and slay God's anointed. But Jesus took on Satan himself. Paradoxically, he defeated Satan, by letting Satan's friends kill him. But this was for our good, for when he died, he bore our sins away, tasted death for us, and rose again, in a life that is ours.

Now Jesus is a hero greater than David, and we should be his allies. We should be quick to defend his name, his honor – as quick as to defend family or friend. What do you do when men heap shame on God? Do you burn or yawn? Are you incensed or all too understanding?

If you have a passion, how does it show? You may not take on giants. You may not kick the door of drunk drivers. But it must show somewhere. How would our lives be changed – in thought, word, deed – if our faith led to zeal, confidence and passion for God?

In all, this is not your mere duty, it is the proper response to the God who fought for you, gave his life for you, loves you and lives for you.