

The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

June 21, 2015

**"JUST A KID"**

By Pastor Mary Anne Biggs

1 Samuel 17:1, 4-11, 19-23, 32-49 ~ Mark 4:35-41

Do any of you watch *Survivor*? I tried to watch it when it first was aired, but I just couldn't get into it. I didn't feel it was a real survival story at all, but rather one about greed. And the tribal meetings? Give me a break! Real tribes don't exclude each other ... they take care of each other. I kept hoping that the contestants would tell CBS that they refused to play by their rules and they weren't going to kick another friend off the island, not even for a million dollars! Now that would show us all how to survive, wouldn't it?

The Bible gives us two real survival stories today ... The Big Bad Giant and the Perfect Storm. The Big Bad Giant is actually a contest between two peoples ... two religions ... two ways of being in the world. The Perfect Storm asks the age old fair weather faith question, "Does Jesus really care about us or not?" Nobody wins a million dollars, but they do win their lives, and that's not such a bad bargain.

The Valley of Elah is where David met Goliath. It's shaped like a big football stadium, a rocky ridge on one side ... another rocky ridge facing it on the other, with an emerald green valley in between. You can imagine the army of Israel lined up on one ridge looking across at the ranks of the Philistines lined up on the other, sunlight glimmering off their helmets and spears and swords. And in the valley stood Goliath, nine-feet-five in his stocking sandals, taunting Israel's army and Israel's God.

For centuries the tribes of Israel had trouble with the people of the strong city-states on the coastal plain. The Philistines had arrived in the land by sea from the West about the same time the Hebrews (led by Joshua) invaded across the Jordan from the East, and they had been fighting ever since ... the Philistines raiding Israel's farms and villages ... controlling the valleys that led up into the hill country as well as the important trade route that ran across the coastal plain.

The Philistines had weaponry that was far superior to Israel's. They had chariots when Israel was still on foot. The Philistines always acted like, well, a bunch of Philistines. They became so strong that they defeated the Israelites at the battle of Ebenezer, killed four thousand Israelites, and captured the Ark of the Covenant. After that, they decided they might just try to take over the whole land.

This crisis led the twelve tribes to come together at last and choose their first King, Saul, who was more of a general than a ruler. But even the mighty man Saul was no match for the big bad giant Goliath.

*He had a helmet of bronze on his head, and he was armed with a coat of mail; the weight of the coat was five thousand shekels of bronze. He had greaves of bronze on his legs and*

*a javelin of bronze slung between his shoulders. The shaft of his spear was like a weaver's beam, and his spear's head weighed six hundred shekels of iron; and his shield-bearer went before him. (1 Samuel 17:5-7).*

Talk about intimidating! Goliath challenged Israel to a strong man contest ... a winner-take-all duel between Israel's best and himself ... and even Saul shuddered at the thought. Into the camp wandered the shepherd boy David ... bringing a picnic lunch for his brothers in the army. David was just a boy, untested in battle and embarrassed by Israel's fear. He pestered Saul and his generals to let him fight. "You're just a kid," they said. How many times have we heard that? "You're just a kid." "You're just a nobody." "You're just a woman." "You're just an African American." "You're just poor white trash." "You're just a high school drop out." "You're just a layperson." "You're just a little small town church." "Who are you to face the giants?" We hear it so much, we start saying it to ourselves ... we start believing it.

But David insisted, and Saul relented. This seems preposterous, but maybe he figured that it would be such an insult to Goliath, that he would kill David in a rage, which would incense the Israelites, so they would rush into battle, and maybe eight or ten soldiers concentrating on Goliath might bring him down. Not a great plan, but then it was better than Saul having to face Goliath by himself!

Well, you know the story. David refused Saul's armor because he couldn't move in it. Instead, he went down to the Wadi (that's a crick in Wisconsin, or a gully in Texas) and he gathered five smooth stones for his sling. That's it, just five smooth stones to face down the big bad giant. Goliath saw David, and taunted him. We can almost hear the whoosh of the sling ... the whistle ... and the thwack! Then THUD! Goliath dropped like a rock. And David survived, along with Saul and his people and their God.

The Perfect Storm is one of several similar stories in the gospels and it is told with an economy of words. Sudden strong storms were common on the Sea of Galilee and boats could be lost with all hands. On this occasion Jesus was with the disciples in a boat accompanied by a small flotilla of followers. The storm blew and the waves broke and the disciples bailed as the boat started to swamp. And where was Jesus? He was sleeping on a cushion in the stern. *Sleeping!* They woke him up. "Hey! We're dyin' here! Don't you care, Jesus? Jesus, don't you care?" Jesus rose, yawned, and stretched. He said to the wind, "Hey, knock it off already!" He said to the waves, "Y'all calm down now." And suddenly, a sky clear as crystal and a sea smooth as glass. Jesus turned to the disciples and said, "When are all y'all gonna learn? Trust me, fellas. Trust me!" Then he laid back down for a little more sleep, leaving them stunned with surprise. And the disciples and Jesus survived.

When Rembrandt painted "Storm on the Sea of Galilee" he put fourteen people in the boat. Twelve disciples, and Jesus makes thirteen. The fourteenth passenger was Rembrandt himself. Like Rembrandt, we know we're in the same boat as the people in the Bible stories today. We have our taunting giants to face. We have our swamping storms to endure. Sometimes I wish life were effortless. I would like to tell you that if you follow Jesus, you will have an easy time of it from that day on. Every day will be sunny and bright, and you will be prosperous and your

children will be pleasant and your friends will admire you and your business will flourish and God will give every desire of your heart. But it doesn't work that way, as you well know.

We have giants taunting us. They surround us like so many monsters. Look at them dressed in formidable armor. They look undefeatable. There is the giant of racism. We have fought him these many years, but he's still standing strong. There is the giant of sexism. Can you believe that in the year 2015 there are still dire concerns that a woman is making a bid for the presidency? Can you believe in this day and age there would still be people claiming that the Bible of Ruth and Deborah and Mary and Martha and Phoebe and Priscilla says women aren't equal to men in the household of God? Giants! And look over there at the giant of homophobia, the giant of violence and our country's love affair with hand guns. There's the giant of the death penalty in a system that is far from fair and equitable and fool proof. Can't you see the giants of hunger and poverty, abuse and neglect, and a materialism which leaves children of the poor ... and the mentally ill ... and the frail elderly lying forgotten in jails and alleys and nursing homes? And don't forget that giant which bears the name "Christian" and "Church", but wields terrible power against people and uses the Bible to bash and abuse and spread hatred in the name of God. All these giants stand in the valley before us ... taunting us, saying, "What are you Christians going to do about me?" And we are weak and our weapons are few and we are afraid.

As if they weren't enough, we have our personal giants to fight, too. Some of them are inside us. What is the name of your giant? Is it alcohol or prescription drugs? Is it a marriage gone stale or problems with your kids? Is it declining health or a frightening diagnosis? Do you face that giant named "Depression" or "Discouragement" or "Disappointment?" Maybe it's a giant named "Grief" or "Burnout" or "Doubt" or "Self-Doubt." I bet if I asked you to think for a moment, each of you could identify some giant who has called you by name and you just haven't been able to overcome it. Or maybe the metaphor of the storm speaks even better for you today because you are feeling overwhelmed and you are wondering whether Jesus isn't sleeping, and does he really care about you after all? This isn't about making a million dollars on some TV show. It's about truly surviving. It's about staying alive.

Well, I don't want to leave you feeling hopeless, because, of course, the Big Bad Giant didn't win. And the perfect storm didn't swamp them. So let me offer five smooth stones for you to put in your bag before you go back to the valley to battle the giants today ... to face the storms the world sends you.

First of all, let me offer you *courage*. You will never accomplish anything until you are willing to risk something. You will never beat your giants until you have the nerve to face them. And it seems to me a far better thing to go down fighting than to live in constant fear and be beaten without a fight. But you would be surprised at how many people sit on the hillside paralyzed for most of their lives and never engage what threatens to steal their life and their family and their faith. They even look away, pretend it isn't there. They deny there's any giant out there at all. But take the smooth stone of courage and go after your giants, beloved. They may fall easier than you think.

Second, I offer you *community*. David wasn't entirely alone as he faced Goliath. I think it probably helped that he had an army standing behind him. And yes, they were a lily-livered lot, but they shouted their encouragement and they were quick to respond to his lead. The boat was an early symbol of the church, and while it seemed at times it might go under, Jesus was with

them, and they made it through every storm. And they were never alone because they had each other. Our church relationships seem a little loose sometimes. People come and go and we don't even know everybody's name. And we kind of like it that way. This isn't a place of heavy obligation. But I have never seen a member of this church ask for help and not get it. You take care of each other, and having a caring community is a real treasure in this world

Third, I offer you *preparation*. David wasn't battle tested *per se*, but he knew how to use that sling because he had practiced. There's no substitute for a little disciplined practice. That's why we come together week after week and we pray, and we read scripture, we connect with each other, and when the time comes we are ready. I believe people who don't do those things aren't ready for the spiritual battles life brings, so they have to catch up in a hurry when the pressure is on or they are undone. In his book on D-Day where Stephen Ambrose describes the incredible horror of Omaha beach, he tells how the men, who couldn't think or plan in such a living hell, survived and won the day. They had drilled again and again and again so they knew instinctively what to do. Likewise, those well drilled, oft repeated, basic disciplines of our spiritual lives provide us the deep wired instincts to make it through life's toughest battles.

Fourth, I offer you the smooth stone of *faith*. David didn't listen to that "You're just a kid" stuff. And we shouldn't minimize what God can do through us either. No, you and I don't have the strength to stop the giants or still our storms. But God does, and God is faithful. God is bigger than any giant we are facing. God is stronger than any storm coming down on us. That is the point of both of these stories, not that we can do it. But that we can do it with God's help, and God will help us. "*I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me,*" Paul declared. Sure, anybody can have faith when the going is easy. But when the giants taunt and the storm comes, who you gonna call? When are we going to learn to trust Jesus?

Finally, I offer you the smooth stone of *peace*. The real battle we have to fight in dealing with our fears is the battle inside. David had the inner confidence to face the outer threat, even though he was just a kid. And as one interpreter said, "Jesus does not promise to calm every storm in your life. Jesus does promise to calm you in every storm of life." Paul calls this "the peace which passes understanding," which means it doesn't make sense. How can you stay so calm in the face of such giants ... in the teeth of such storms? Because of what you have inside, that is, who you have inside your heart.

Those are the five smooth stones I find in these stories today. They may not seem like much but I offer them to you: *courage, community, preparation, faith, peace*. Maybe God doesn't take our giants away automatically because we grow by facing and overcoming them. Maybe Jesus doesn't still every storm right away because the storms make us pull together and get our priorities straight. I don't know. But I do know that Jesus cares. And even though at first it might not seem like enough to face our most formidable foes, he provides us with just enough ... just what we need to survive. May we pray?

Our Savior and our God,

We have giants to overcome. We have storms to weather. Are you with us? Do you care? Over and again you have proven true to us. Help us to be true to you and find the faith to face the giants and weather the storms, in Jesus name. Amen.