

Slaying Giants

I Samuel 17:1-11; 31-37, 48-50

Life is filled with giants—giants of remarkable size. I’m not referring to the slam-dunking Raptors in the NBA playoffs or 300-pound offensive tackles in the NFL draft. It’s too early for me to root for the New York Giants and the San Francisco franchise playing baseball on the bay is too far west to interest me.

No. The giants to which I refer are the huge, overwhelming obstacles and problems that we face over the course of life that leave us shaking in our proverbial boots. They are the looming monsters of worry about what’s going to happen to us or to those we love and care about. Sometimes, they are great injustices of society that weigh down on people and need to be corrected. Often, they are the fears that cause our stomachs to churn, our appetites to lessen; the things that leave us tossing and turning in our beds at night. They are titans that cause us to tremble with terror. And because they seem larger and more powerful than we are, that’s why we perceive them as “giants.”

On a personal level, you and I see ogres like these all the time. They lurk whenever someone is facing a serious medical or even life-threatening condition. They’re present in many people paralyzed by personal problems or endless addictions. They raise their ugly heads when couples complain about each other, leading toward irreconcilable differences in their marriage or relationship. Looming monsters rise up when mental illness or dementia eclipse the beautiful spirit we remember within loved ones. They make their presence known when someone has a dream to improve their life or

livelihood but few resources to make it happen. These mammoths plague entire communities when prejudice and discrimination define the boundaries of social value and worth. Giants roam the earth every day and darken the skies when hope escapes people and entire societies.

These titans of trouble intimidate us because they know how to bully people. Those are the mechanics of their power. All they need do is appear too big to address, too large to overcome, so we give up before we even begin to take them on. That's why it's great to be an ogre—all you need do is look ugly and nasty and mean, and like a ritual of submission, people acquiesce and surrender their will!

But, then, not everyone runs away. Some dare to take them on and confront their giants. There are numerous examples, of course, but one that I remember well is the iconic image in Tiananmen Square years ago when a single man stood in the way of a line of armored tanks, preventing their passage. This image symbolizes for the wider world the courage it takes to stand up and face your foes—to make a claim for life over death, to refuse to cower in the face of overwhelming odds, to believe in the value and dignity of your life, to fervently hold onto hope even when there is little support and reason to do so.

Eleanor Roosevelt once said: “You gain strength, courage, and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You must do the thing which you think you cannot do.” That's absolutely true, but it's easier said than done. Nevertheless, circumstances will lead us into moments where we must stop ourselves and candidly ask: Exactly what am I afraid of? What is it

that I think I cannot do? Why am I so intimidated by these people or this situation? Who or what has control over me or bullies me into submission? Each of us have our giants to face. They're lurking in our lives, somewhere.

Fear always has a bullying effect on people. When we are hit with a crisis, or presented with an overwhelming challenge, the first obstacle we have to overcome is our own fearful reaction to it. It's not shameful to admit being afraid. The natural response to any threat is fear.

Of course, it was the husband of Eleanor who said, "The only thing to fear is fear itself!" That's a fair recognition that fear does crazy things to us. It can paralyze us into inaction. It will try to supplant reason and wisdom in a given moment, which is why we are more easily manipulated by the giant's desire to terrorize us.

Courage, of course, is the counterpoint to fear, but rarely is it a reflexive response in anxious times. Heroes who meet the moment are created, not born. Real courage gets cultivated within once one accounts for the reality of the threat and is then willing to meet the challenge head on recognizing the consequences that might be in store.

In times like these, what one needs from God is not a savior, but a conscious awareness of the spiritual power and presence of God within us to fight the giants that oppress us. When that occurs, one can begin to appreciate what it means to have God on your side. With the Spirit of the Lord, there are no giants too great to topple.

That's the message in this ancient story of David and Goliath, and why it is so intriguing and satisfying. It expresses the proverbial

hope within us for slaying the giants in our lives. The Hollywood ending helps by reminding us that even the little guys can stand up to bullies. When we believe that giants can be defeated, that the bullies don't always win, that problems don't have to destroy us, that the inspired underdog actually can be a champion, then we can envision the biblical truth that the last can be first and the first will be last.

The story of David and Goliath is fascinating even if you take it out of the realm of mythology and folklore and view it merely as a psychological profile of human nature. As a tale told, it's not much different than the hero stories of any culture that make for legends.

However, this story serves as a powerful testament when facing insurmountable odds. As the narrative goes, Goliath was a giant, if there ever was one. The Philistines and the Israelites were at war and as they set up for battle, out came the Philistines' ringer—a monster of a man, standing the equivalent of nearly ten feet tall! Dressed up in full armor, with headdress and spear, he presented himself as a frightening sight. Terror was the name of his game. Goliath could psychologically disarm his adversaries before the battle began. He represented absolute control of the battlefield.

As the story unfolds, Goliath used this advantage when he voiced his threats across the ravine and dared one of the Israelites to come out and fight him, one on one. No one was about to take him up on that offer, so he added an incentive: if they defeated him, then the Philistines would become slaves to the Israelites. Even with those spoils no one seemed to be his match. The Israelites to a person were willing to surrender rather than face this giant.

Honestly, it's not surprising. To take on Goliath was a costly gamble. "Run for your life" was the preferred modus operandi of many. For us, the M.O. comes in the form of avoidance and denial: "don't talk about the risks with this surgery!"; "don't tell me I've got a drinking problem!"; "don't involve me in all of your emotional problems and baggage!"; "I don't want to go back into that ugly situation I left behind because of the shame I feel. Please God, don't hound me about my need for forgiveness."

Facing problems are hard because risky situations are intimidating. Worries are the monsters that tower over us. Once the giant has you convinced of this, then the odds increase against you. And without firing a shot, the giant has just about won the battle.

That would have happened in this story were the unexpected, if not unlikely, hero came up short. But, of course, he didn't. The story rides on the fact that David was the only willing volunteer for this deadly assignment. Youth does that to a person; it makes them feel invincible. It's only age and life experience that changes that sense of optimistic confidence.

Yet, David's youthful courage in the face of fear was also coupled with a bit of shrewd calculation. After being dressed up as a warrior, which made him appear ridiculous, David shunned it in favor of a bit of strategic wisdom. One cannot defeat this giant going up against his strength; one must defeat him at his weakest point. Every bully has a weakness; it's just hidden behind the bluster of being mean.

David used a bit of psychological ju-jitsu against Goliath. The giant was insulted that he couldn't show his overpowering might

against a formidable foe. “Am I a dog that you should come against me with a stick?” But what was happening? David was gaining control of the situation by confronting Goliath relatively unarmed and, as a result, mentally disarming the giant. Goliath didn’t know what to do when his adversary didn’t play by the normal rules of engagement. David, the unintimidating shepherd boy, was messing with the head of the giant and taking over control of the contest.

That, by illustration, is half the battle and how anyone slays giants in their life. We can successfully face all those giant obstacles in our life beginning with the strategy of denying them the emotional and mental power they have over us to control us, to worry us, to paralyze us. That is a huge step of resolve. By not giving into our deepest fears, by not letting them get under our skin, by refusing to cower because of them, by not reacting to their provocation, by mentally and emotionally taking the control of the perplexing situation out of their hands, suddenly everything changes. Giants don’t know how to behave! If we don’t respond as a capitulating victim before the battle begins, the giants are the ones who become unnerved.

Giants begin to appear like the old Wizard of Oz who was a mere mortal standing behind the curtain. They begin to stop in their tracks like a line of armored tanks in Tiananmen Square. They’re like those monsters of the night that seem to disappear when you wake in the morning and gain perspective. Once their power to intimidate is dismissed, ogres become amazingly manageable. In some cases, it might only take a small stone to knock an enormous giant to the ground.

Slaying giants is how I think God likes to tell the stories of our lives. God encourages, inspires, and equips us to handle crises with unconventional wisdom and courage, with perspective and trust. Cultivating faith is learning to trust in the “hidden hand” of God to guide us through uncharted territory, aiding us to calm our distress and natural apprehension. For when we stand up to the challenge, we never know what will happen, because we never know what God is doing behind the scenes to make impossible odds suddenly change in our favor.

Remember Eleanor’s words: “You gain strength, courage, and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You must do the thing which you think you cannot do.” Eleanor got it right. That’s the test of faith and trust—in God, in ourselves, and in the way life in its blessed mercy unfolds. In the end, my friends, with wisdom and not worry, it is not the giants, but we, who are the ones who stand tall.

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