

July 2, 2006
1 Samuel 17:31-49
First Parish Church
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Choices of the Heart

Once upon a time, there was a very powerful nation with a professional military. Many of the soldiers had seen action in other battles in other places. They were well trained and followed orders. They had standard issue uniforms and weapons. They clearly out-numbered and out-powered their rag tag opponents. So who were they?

In today's scripture story they were the Philistines. On this Fourth of July weekend, we also recognize this scenario as part of our nation's history. In the 1770's the British Empire was "Goliath" to the "David" of the American colonies. In the western world at that time, the British were the world's super power. They were fearsome. Who could stand up to them?

Well, the minutemen of the American Colonies did just that. Like David, they changed the playing field. Like David, they didn't play by Goliath's rules. They fought in the way that they knew – hiding behind trees and rocks – ambushing the British troops as they marched in formation. The colonists used every skill they had to their advantage.

That's what David did in today's story isn't it? He had spent hours and hours in the fields practicing with his slingshot. He had used it to protect his flock. A

slingshot may look like a child's toy, but it can strike a deadly blow with amazing accuracy.

Surely there were others among the Israelite army who knew how to use a slingshot. Many of them had spent time in the fields with the flocks. Maybe someone else did have this thought, but they were following orders, waiting for the king to tell them what to do. The king however, and therefore the whole army was paralyzed in the face of the awesome Goliath. David, however, was not part of the army itself. So he spoke up.

In last week's story and this week's story there is a reference to heart. Last week God said to Samuel as he was searching for the next king among Jesse's sons, "Don't look at the outward appearance, God looks on the heart." This week David says to Saul, "Let no one's heart fail because of the Philistine." In other words, "Fear not." Partly, I suspect, this comes from the bravado of youth. Yet it also comes from David's being able to imagine the possibilities, to "think outside the box," to realize that a carefully placed stone can topple a giant.

In our nation's history we have seen ourselves as the champion of the little guy, as the fighter for liberty against the

oppressors. In the beginning we were the little guy fighting against the mighty British. In the middle of the 1900's we were one among the allies fighting against the goliath of Hitler.

We have understood ourselves as having the heart of "David" and, yet, now, we also have the overt power of "Goliath." We face the reality that, in terms of military might, we are the superpower. This is a serious challenge to our self-perception of being "David." It is also an enormous responsibility in the world.

Consider for a moment the war in Iraq. Some people look at our military action in Iraq through the lens of a regrettable, but necessary, action to challenge the goliath of Saddam Hussein, who is a bully. Other people ask, "Why Iraq?" Why not other places in the world where other goliaths are bullying people? We all need to ask, "What does it mean as "the" world's super power to enter another country's borders? What does it mean if we don't go when people are being bullied?"

These are crucial questions. They are questions that will continue to be with us in this situation and others as we ponder what it means to be "the" superpower in the world.

Yet, not all goliaths are military. We face many metaphoric goliaths in our lives. On a very personal level some people face a goliath of addiction, which taunts and torments, and threatens to destroy them. It takes a choice of heart to topple such giants. On a communal level, we face the goliath of a culture of consumerism which taunts us to keep up, to wear the right cloths, drive the right cars, and so on. On an international

level, we are facing a goliath that affects the whole world – environmental change.

Ironically, in the case of the environment, we are Goliath. And hopefully, we will also be David. We know that we in the United States use a disproportionate amount of the world's natural resources. We know that in our consumer culture, those things we "use and discard" make for mountains and mountains of garbage that are becoming increasingly difficult to put somewhere else and forget about. And we know that in our burning of fossil fuels we have, and are, changing our atmosphere.

Some of this has crept up on us. We made incremental changes without really thinking of the consequences. Living in Phoenix, I became very aware of this. Phoenix has grown so quickly in the last 50 years you can see some of decisions and consequences quite clearly.

For example, people with breathing difficulties, such as allergies and asthma, used to be told to move to the Southwest because the air was dry and clear. And the native plants there didn't cause many problems. So lots of people moved. The problem was they missed their homeland. They missed the plants they knew. So they brought them in and gave them lots of water, which of course they needed, because they weren't native. However, these plants from other places had been part of the problem in the first place. So now Phoenix has a huge allergy and asthma problem. People use air conditioning, even when it's not necessary for temperature control, to clean the air for breathing. Of course,

this uses more electricity, and on it goes....

It is easy to feel overwhelmed by the environmental issues we face. Many of us often do. It is troubling and disturbing to realize how complicit we have been in creating them. Like sheep, we have put our heads down and nibbled ourselves astray. It is easy to “let our heart’s fail” in the face of it all.

Instead, like David, let us imagine the possibilities, let us think “outside the box.” What smooth stones, carefully aimed, could change the direction of this goliath?

Recently, I have read a couple of reviews of the movie, “An Inconvenient Truth,” which is scheduled to open at the Tontine Mall this Friday. It is about global warming. The presenter is Al Gore. Al Gore’s heart was set on fire about this concern through a class he took in college in the 1960’s. When he lost the presidential election, he made a choice of the heart, to use his public recognition to bring attention to this matter. The reviewers say we will meet a surprisingly personable and even charming Al Gore in this movie. I suspect some people may go just for that reason. But, they also say the film is not just doom and gloom – although I expect it to scare me thoroughly. The film also talks about what we can do. It talks about the possibilities for change. It talks about some “smooth stones” that can change this goliath of our own making.

I am very grateful for the people in our congregation who have formed the “Earthcare team” and for all the opportunities they have given us in the

last couple of years to learn about ways we act with “heart” to care for our home planet.

We have skills. We have experience that we can use in the face of this troubling situation. We have

- Yankee ingenuity
- A flexible economy, with power through our economic choices
- Freedom to vote and speak up to our legislative representatives
- Our discipleship as followers in the Way of Jesus.

May we make choices that express where our hearts are.

Introduction to the Scripture

Today's story of David and Goliath is the third, seemingly independent, story about David that introduces him to us in 1 Samuel. Last week there was the story of the prophet Samuel seeking a new king among the sons of Jesse. God revealed to Samuel that indeed it is Jesse's youngest son, the shepherd boy who is to be anointed king.

Then between last week's reading and today's reading there is the story of David's arrival in Saul's court as the gifted musician whose music soothes the troubled king.

In today's story, Saul seems to meet David again for the first time. The setting is a battle between the mighty Philistines and the Israelites. It says the Philistines stood on the mountain on one side and Israel stood on the mountain on the other side with a valley between them.

Goliath comes out of the camp of the Philistines. He is in full military regalia. *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.*

Daily he taunts the Israelites and they are afraid.

David, who is still in the fields keeping watch over his father's sheep, is sent by his father to bring food to his three oldest brothers, who are with Saul,

facing the Philistines. When he arrives he hears the taunting of Goliath, who the story says has been coming forward, morning and evening for forty days. (Which can be translated, "a heck of a long time.")

David asks of the men around him, "What shall be done for the man who kills this Philistine, and takes away the reproach of Israel? For who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?"

So we pick up the story in 1 Samuel 17, verse 31.