

“Shaped by Story”

Introduction: This morning we come to one of the most well-known stories in perhaps all of literature – the encounter of David with Goliath. Even people who know nothing about the Bible, or who don’t even know there is a Bible, seem to know this story. Unfortunately, what tends to happen is that the story is understood to discuss the overwhelming odds one can face in life and how, with some combination of faith and courage, these odds can be overcome. The story is told to inspire us, and we are exhorted to be brave, to be courageous, and to be like David.

Now, don’t get me wrong. There is a sense in which we’re called to be like David. But we won’t hear the story correctly, and we cannot be like David, until we understand what shaped David and until we learn that we need a David to fight for us, and even *as* us. That is the story that needs to shape our lives. It is the story of God. It is the story that shaped David. It is the story that needs to shape us so that we will not grow weary and lose heart. What we see is that there are several stories within this David and Goliath story, alternative stories to God’s story that do not serve those who hold them very well. They are stories of fear and resentment. Let’s begin there.

I. Stories of Fear and Resentment

A. The story of fear was the story that shaped King Saul and the Israelite army. They were on one hill and their arch rivals, the Philistines, were on another. The valley of Elah that separated them was about a mile wide. As Eugene Peterson describes it, in his inimitable way, this valley was “a cauldron in which fear and hate and arrogance had been stirred and cooked for weeks into a volatile and lethal brew.” The primary “cook” of this lethal brew was a giant of a man named Goliath who, also heavily armed, came out of the Philistine camp and, while twirling his twenty-pound spear with the ease of a drum majorette, taunted the Israelites. In particular, he challenged one of them to come out and fight him in a winner take all duel. The loser would cause his people to become servants of the winner. “On hearing the Philistines words,” we read, “Saul and all the Israelites were dismayed and terrified.” This had gone on for forty days, both day and night. Eventually, they had lost heart (v. 11, cf. v. 32).

B. Now, recall the history of these people. Saul and his army had experienced the power and provision of God. God had enabled them to score incredible military victories in the past. And recall what happened in chapter 5? There we read that in the Philistine temple in a place called Ashdod, the Philistine god Dagon had fallen over and lay flat on his face before the LORD who was present in the ark of the covenant. The Philistine god was nothing more than an idol who could not stand. But when the soldiers hear Goliath’s challenge, they act as if the LORD has never helped them before, they act as if this God is powerless. What are they doing? They are letting Goliath write the story for them. They are allowing his version of the facts to shape their lives. There is a God who rules over all, who is living, who acts on behalf of those who wait for him. “False news!” taunts Goliath. Christian psychologist Dr. Vern McNally has said: “You don’t live with the facts; you live with the story you tell yourself about the facts.” Saul and the Israelites were living with and being shaped by Goliath’s version of the facts. It led them to cower in fear and to lose heart.

We are certainly not strangers to losing heart. Not only day and night, but almost every hour, it sometimes seems, disturbing news comes across our news feeds. Children continue to get murdered

while at school, racism and sexism continue to rear their ugly heads, dictators and terrorists throughout the world keep us on edge in our living rooms, our nation's leaders continue to refuse to work together on any number of significant issues, and one never knows what will come out of the White House next! So, at those times, what is the story we listen to? What are the facts that give shape to our lives? Is it a story that leads us to believe that God is absent or powerless? If so, we will find ourselves mired in fear.

C. There's another story we find here within the David and Goliath story, another alternative story that does not serve its holder very well and that is the story that shapes Eliab, David's oldest brother. It is the story, we might say, of resentment. Eliab, recall, was the guy we said probably looked a lot like Gronkowski. He was tall and handsome but had gotten passed over as king. He thought he was deserving, that he should have been first in line, but instead, his scrawny little brother David had gotten the nod from God. David hadn't even been at the front where Goliath was operating because he had gotten stuck, again, with the sheep duty. But when he did show up, having been instructed by his father to help resupply the soldiers, Eliab reamed him out, accusing him of neglecting his duty with the sheep and thinking only of himself. The story that Eliab was telling himself about the facts served only to produce resentment in his heart against his brother, and probably against God for passing him over and choosing the runt. He didn't want to have to rely on, or honor, David in any way shape or form. But this story did nothing to enable or empower Eliab to confront the challenge of Goliath.

If we're honest, I don't think we're strangers to resentment, to perhaps being fussed at the way God has ordered things, particularly when it comes to the way God has ordered our rescue when facing the giants of sin, evil, and death. The cross seems so absurd. A Messiah who would win by dying seems preposterous. Paul writes to the church in Corinth that Christ crucified is a stumbling block to the Jews and seems like foolishness to the Gentiles (1 Cor. 1:23), and we can be inclined to agree! We can resent being told we can't put ourselves right with God, or anyone else, through our own hard work and effort and good behavior. If that's the story we're living by, if that's the story that is shaping us, it will eventually lead to frustration and failure. We'll never be good enough.

Illustration: The sign in front of the house read, "Talking Dog for Sale." Curious, the man rings the doorbell and is told the dog is in the backyard. He goes into the backyard and sees a black mutt just sitting there. "You talk?" he asks. "Yep," the mutt replies. "So, what's your story?" The mutt looks up and says, "Well, I discovered this gift when I was young. I wanted to help the government, so I told the CIA about my gift and in no time they had me jetting from country to country, sitting in rooms with spies and world leaders because no one figured a dog would be eavesdropping. For eight years I was one of their most valuable spies. But the jetting around really began to wear me out so I signed up for a local job at the airport to do some undercover security work. Mostly I wandered near suspicious characters and listened in. I uncovered some incredible dealings there and was awarded a batch of medals. During that time I found a girl and we had a mess of puppies. Now I'm recently retired and just taking life easy." The man listening was astounded. He goes back to house and asks the owner, "What do you want for the dog?" "Ten bucks" is the answer. The man says, "But this dog is amazing. Why on earth are you selling him so cheap?" The owner replies, "He's such a liar. He didn't do any of that stuff."

What is our perception of reality? What is shaping us? What are the facts we are living with? What is the story we're telling ourselves about the facts?

II. The Story of God

A. Fortunately, there's a better story for the shaping of our lives that we find here. It's the story that shaped David; it's God's story. Yes, David had been given the junk job of the family. It was dirty work, caring for those sheep, boring too, lonely, and sometimes dangerous. Others looked down on him. Those were the facts. But those weren't the only facts. There was also the presence of God, and David's history with God. In comparison to the dead, idol god in Ashdod, David's God was living. He had created everything and was present everywhere. With his harp, David reminded himself about this God by composing and singing songs in praise of this God. When a lion or a bear attacked his flock, David went after it, rescuing the sheep and killing its predator where necessary. David knew that his God had been behind these entire rescue operations. These facts so shaped him that he knew the hand of the Philistine Goliath would be no more oppressive than the hand of the lion or bear had been. David had been telling himself such a true story about God's power and provision he knew that while Goliath may have a spear, a sword, and a javelin, as well as a big mouth, David was backed by the fact that really mattered, the presence and power of the LORD Almighty.

B. Observe that Saul, his soldiers, Eliab, and David all lived in the same country and faced the same enemy. But in the encounter with Goliath, Saul, the army, and Eliab failed to see clearly. They failed to see clearly because they were not being shaped by God's story but by alternative stories. David, on the other hand, had had his heart had shaped by the story of God. As a result, he was able to see the situation the way God saw it.

C. The apostle Paul declares that to live well as God's people, and not lose heart, we need to be careful about the stories that feed our minds: "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (12:2). The prophet Jeremiah seems to have experienced this. In Lamentations, he begins with several chapters of weeping and wailing and even whining, complaining that God has let him down, confused him, and allowed his people to suffer. But finally, 65 verses in, Jeremiah starts telling himself a different story: "Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. I say to myself [I remind myself of God's story], 'The LORD is my portion; therefore, I will wait for him'" (Lam. 3:21-24).

The early church came to know this shaping story as well. In his first letter to the church in Thessalonica, perhaps the earliest letter we have, Paul celebrates reports he's received of the following news: "They tell us how you have turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who saves us from the coming wrath" (1 Th. 1:9f). These folks had been shaped by the story of resurrection and the Spirit. It enabled them to serve in the present and to persevere in the midst of challenging circumstances while they rested in the promise of God's restorative justice coming to bear on the whole created order.

God's story tells us that there is more to reality than the immediate facts we see. It tells us that we have been given by God a good and beautiful world, and even though we have messed it up, God has sent us a champion (to whom David points, as we will consider next week) that has defeated sin and evil and death for us and therefore provided for us an additional set of facts that will enable us to live and not lose heart and even be a part of healing the brokenness and restoring the world's goodness and beauty. So may we not be overcome by fear, or be mired in resentment, but be filled with hope in the story that reveals the faithfulness and sovereign will of God.