

The Armor of the Lord

Text: I Samuel 17:32-49; Mark 4:35-41

There is a story told of a young pastor called to his first parish. As the time approached for him to be installed, he became exceedingly anxious, especially about his preaching. So seeking guidance, he went to listen to a famous and dynamic preacher in the same town, a man who could weave spells with his words and hold his congregation in rapt attention. After the service, the young man approached the older man, and asked him what his secret was for overcoming his nervousness and coming across as dynamic and genuine.

“Well,” the older man responded, “it’s really rather simple. You noticed that glass of water I keep on the pulpit? Well, it’s not really water. It’s vodka. Whenever I get nervous, I take just the tiniest sip to steady myself. That’s really all there is to it.”

Somewhat astounded that they didn’t teach this in seminary, and convinced that the evidence for the goodness of the advice rested in the success of the one giving it, the young man went away determined to try it. And try it he did the next Sunday. Whenever he felt nervous, and he was very nervous that day, he took a drink from the glass which everybody thought was water, but which was really filled with vodka. And as far as he could tell, the advice was good advice. Throughout the sermon he felt himself continually emerging into confidence and dynamism, and the longer he talked the more confident and dynamic he felt. He felt that he was riveting and that he came across with conviction, and it seemed that everybody in the congregation was paying very close attention. However, after the service, one of the elders came up to him and remarked on the sermon this way: “that was a terrific sermon, pastor. However, I have to admit that was the first time I ever heard that David kicked the * out of Goliath.”

Now, telling that joke with that punch line may be pushing the envelope a bit in genteel

company, especially in worship, so let me explain myself quickly. What goes on in the joke, and the point in telling it is actually a quite serious matter and one that is a very helpful illustration of something that goes on in the story of David and Goliath.

The story of David and Goliath is a familiar one. Indeed, it has become a symbol for any mismatched contest between the smaller and the larger, and a symbol of hope for anyone facing really long odds. Sports announcers use it; so, too, do political commentators. For three thousand years preachers have used it to encourage their people to have courage and to trust that God will take care of his people, even in desperate circumstances, just as he took care of Israel and just as he took care of David. That is surely the point of the story.

But there is another part of the story that we sometimes overlook and that constitutes some of its greatest advice about what it means to trust that God will take care of his people, and that we can and should have courage in overwhelming circumstances. Immediately after David has rather brashly taken upon himself Goliath's arrogant challenge to single handed combat, we are told that Saul, a great warrior himself, clothed David in his own armor: his bronze helmet, and his coat of mail, and he gave him his sword. But David couldn't even walk in this armor and so he took it off and chose to fight armed only with his slingshot. We know the rest of the story.

David's refusing Saul's armor seems to me to be the most astounding part of the story. What is unfortunately all too common in human life is that when we have to face frightening giants is that, before we engage them in combat, we start looking for some sort of armor to protect us. And why that tendency is unfortunate is for the simple reason that often the armor that is to protect us is precisely what weighs us down, makes us vulnerable and ultimately undoes us. That was the problem with the young preacher. A first sermon, indeed, any first time public speaking adventure usually makes one nervous. But rather than confronting the giant head

on, our young preacher chose armor that he thought would make him safe. It did not; instead, it was his very undoing. Being afraid, he chose to protect himself with the big boy's armor; it weighed him down and made him perform worse rather than better.

Throughout the Bible, but especially in the Old Testament, there are numerous stories of men and women beating great odds, and of the smaller winning over the much larger. David and Goliath is one; the story of Samson who defeats large Philistine armies singlehandedly is another. There are similar stories in the book of Joshua, where God and Joshua deliberately pare down the Hebrew army that is trying to sweep into the promised land so that when they do defeat the larger Canaanite armies, there is no question of who gave them the victory. Surely it was not their size and strength that did it, but God's grace. That is the point of all such stories, including David and Goliath. It is not our strength and armor, but God's grace alone that gives the victory. It is not Saul's or any other big boy's armor that protects us, but God alone.

That is an important theological point, and probably even an obvious one. To overcome great odds and the giants that threaten us we need to trust God, we need to make God, as David did, our only armor. It is a biblical point that has even carried over into a fundamental principle of organizations such as Alcoholics Anonymous, who counsel that the only way to regain real life and to overcome adversity is to trust in a higher power, and not in ourselves, and certainly not in false and weighty armor such as a bottle.

Yet, important, obvious, and simple as that point may be, reinforced in a thousand ways from pulpits and twelve step programs, it is not one that we actually take to heart very often. That we don't take it heart is too often the way that things are with us. The Israelites in the wilderness did not easily trust that God would take care of them and make good on his promises; instead, they longed for the fleshpots of Egypt, even if that meant slavery. Saul himself lost his

kingship when he couldn't wait a day longer for the prophet Samuel to arrive to perform a necessary sacrifice; his impatient need for the secure armor of certainty undid him. To this day, nations believe that security only comes in large armaments and weapons of unimaginable destructive power, although their very invention and productions makes the world more dangerous, as we are witnessing with the nuclear posturing of North Korea and Iran. To this day, in our personal lives, we are continually weighed down by armor that we think makes us more secure but that ultimately makes us less so.

Why? Well, simply consider the difference between people in twelve step programs and everybody else. People in twelve step programs probably do not find it any easier than others to give themselves over to trust a higher power, but usually they find it a lot more necessary. That is why they are in such programs in the first place. They have reached a point in their lives where they *know* they are facing giants, and even know that the armor they have tried to wear to defend themselves has become one of their biggest problems. But people who haven't reached that point usually don't think they are facing giants or insuperable obstacles, at least none that they can't lick by themselves with just the right equipment. The problem is that we do not usually think that we are in situations where we have to make the big choice of wearing Saul's weighty armor or trusting in God alone. Life actually presents us with very few times that we really have to make big choices. Normally, we simply have to make a lot of little ones.

Unfortunately, though, what usually happens is that after a lifetime of little choices carelessly made, when we do finally face big choices, we find that there seems only one way to decide; we find that we are already committed to a way of being. We are so used to wearing Saul's armor, because we put it on piece by piece, that don't know what to do without it, and cannot even conceive of doing without it, even though that armor may be not the help we need, but the thing

that keeps us from acting effectively.

What is that armor? Most obviously it can be seen in our restless and anxious quest for security and for a lifestyle. Too often as both a teacher and as a pastor I have witnessed people who have made choices in school, career, spouses, and friends for the simple reason that those things will help to protect them from giant Philistines. I have seen students in college majoring in accounting who belong in art schools because they or their parents think that accounting is safer. But it isn't safer when your heart is somewhere else. Similarly, I have seen doctors who became doctors not because they loved medicine or even cared about people, but because somewhere along the line they began to believe that being a doctor would give them the best income, prestige and lifestyle. But it doesn't always. For many who never had their heart in it, that supposed good and secure life has become burdensome to them, making them prey to frustration, depression, and boredom. I have also seen others who didn't become physicians but should have, and they have been desperately unfulfilled. Too often when people start making choices because they are afraid of something, they continue making them that way for the rest of their lives. But the armor doesn't always fit; too often it weighs them down and makes them very vulnerable to the same giants they are trying to protect themselves against. Moreover, because they think they are protected, and because they have never thought that protection could come from any other quarter, they never develop the ability to trust a higher power. When trouble then hits, they simply have no idea of what to do.

The problem with lifestyle choices is obvious. But the too heavy armor that is often most inhibiting to us is worn at a more fundamental level, at the level of our emotions. The ancients used to talk about the emotions of irascibility – emotions such as anger, irritability, revenge, resentment and the like. These are emotions, they argued, that are connected to our sense of

survival, and they come upon us when we are threatened. When our lives, or our pride, or our dignity is threatened we become angry and irritable. When we have been injured, we brood and we become resentful and harbor dreams of vengeance. These immediate emotional reactions to danger are, of course, as entirely natural to us as drawing our hand back from a hot stove; as such they are not to be helped or worried much about. The problem arises when anger, vengeance and resentment becomes a way of life. The problem is when we choose to stay angry; the problem is when our resentment and desire for revenge becomes brooding. We mean to protect ourselves; we soon enough find our lives are not protected but have become a seething cauldron keeping us perpetually unsettled, without peace, and generally a mass of poor choices that mount up. When we use these emotions as our armor, it is small wonder that we then make other bad choices that weigh our lives down and do not save us, but make us prey to Philistine giants, both internal and external.

But if we invite danger by a series of bad choices, we can, nevertheless, learn trust. We can, for example, whenever we are threatened and in danger of getting angry, not let our anger, which is nothing more than a sort of armor that we use to protect ourselves from others, get the best of us and become something that weighs us down. We can trust that God will take care of us, and let the desire for revenge and getting even pass us by before it consumes us.

The point is one that St. Augustine made in commenting on this morning's Gospel lesson, the story of Jesus and the disciples in the boat that was beset by a storm. In high allegorical form, Augustine noted of this passage: "When you have to listen to abuse, that means you are being buffeted by the wind. When your anger is roused, you are being tossed by the waves. So when the winds blow and the waves mount high, the boat is in danger, your heart is imperiled, your heart is taking a battering. On hearing yourself insulted, you long to retaliate; but

the joy of revenge brings with it another kind of misfortune – shipwreck! Why is this? Because Christ sleeps within you. What do I mean? I mean you have forgotten his presence. Rouse him then; remember him, let him keep watch within you, pay heed to him...A temptation arises; it is the wind. It disturbs you; it is the surging of the sea. This is the moment to awaken Christ and let him remind you of those words: ‘Who can this be? Even the winds and the seas obey him.’”

This is high theological drama but it is also pretty concrete. One learns to trust God in big things, by trusting our lives to God first in little things, and by letting God be our only armor when anger, violence, and resentment threaten to become our protection against a threatening world. But how exactly does one do that, how does one waken the Christ sleeping within? One does it simply by praying as David did in times of threat, in the words of his psalm, “Lord, come to my assistance, O Lord, hasten to help me.” One does it by the everyday practice of being quiet and reading and meditating on Scripture. One does it by learning to listen calmly to God’s Word.

There is no doubt that all sorts of Philistine giants threaten us each day; we are threatened by violence, illness, loss of employment. And those are very real threats. But perhaps the greatest threat of all is not the giants, but our failure to trust in Christ as our only armor. As Martin Luther once put it, “the devil does not tempt us to do wrong so that he might own us, for he already owns us. He only has to tempt us to refuse Christ’s help, for it is Christ alone who can save us from evil.” Let us then turn calmly in each and every threat to waken the Christ sleeping within, and let us make him our only armor, and our calm in all storms.