

A God Saturated Imagination

1 Sam 17

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Jan 10, 2020

One of the great theological visions found in 1st and 2nd Samuel is that of reversal. This great theme is established by a woman—who is herself a participant and example of the reversal of the understanding of human wisdom and power as opposed to the wisdom and power of God which is often shown in what appears to be foolishness.

Hannah, the mother who waited long and hard for the birth of a son, prays these words in 1 Sam 2:9:

“God will guard the feet of his faithful servants, but the wicked will be silenced in the place of darkness. It is not by strength that one prevails. The most-high will thunder from heaven; the Lord will judge the ends of the earth. He will give strength to his king, and exalt the horn of his anointed”

The entirety of 1 Samuel is predicated on the reality that things are not always as they seem. In Hannah’s humble words, *“It is not by strength that one prevails.”* Instead, God Himself is the supplier of strength to his king, to his anointed one and ultimately to his people.

Perhaps this week stands as a reminder that displays of human leadership, strength and might do hold great power and sway in the imaginations of people. This week we cannot but admit that our heads and hearts are dominated by assumptions. What we have seen this week is an assumed way of being that leads to actions marked by discord to be taken in the name of the strength and vitality of a nation. A story only told twice in the history of the United States (the other in 1814)—but an imagination that is not new at all.

The story referred to as David and Goliath dominates the curriculum of Sunday school programs. One year does not go by without a reference to the young shepherd boy who challenges the great 10-foot giant, Goliath.

Perhaps the time ends with an encouragement—who is your Goliath, what is the greatest challenge facing you, where do you meet the fiercest of oppositions?

As adults you may have rolled your eyes when you read this week’s Scripture passage in the Newsletter. I’ll admit that I had reluctance to teach on 1 Sam 17 because it is one of, if not THE most told story in present day western church curriculums for children.

For some, this story of David may feel similar to a repetitive meal that we have eaten so many times that adding more salt simply does not bring out any more flavors.

The danger of this is when David turns into a model for us to emulate or an impersonal form of following God removed from the realities of life. Models are simple to assess and analyze but

nearly impossible to relate to. Everyday ordinary humans are magnificently messy and yet almost uncomfortably relatable.

The story of David is easily mastered if he is an impersonal representation of what it means to face a challenge and win. When the whole point of 58 verses is “face your giants with God”—we must ask why the story took so long to tell.

The story of David and his interaction with Goliath is complicated. Included in the story is the worker of a menial job, who is constantly in family conflict and is repeatedly disrespected, ignored and chastised because of his age, stature and “life experience.”

David is not simply challenged by Goliath in 1 Sam 17. David is formally challenged on three different occasions, by three different people, all over the same topic. Two of these challenges come from his own family and kin. The third and final, from the infamous Goliath.

The story of David in 1 Sam 17 is more the story of the defeat of a deceived imagination than simply the defeat of an opposing enemy who is big and tough.

David is challenged by an imagination and common deception that victory and success are reserved for the competent—not for those who have tuned themselves into the presence of God.

David’s story exposes a deceived imagination that disregards YHWH’s interaction within, and desire to use, the ordinary stuff of ordinary people. I invite you now to journey with me through a common story and unoriginal story and therefore a crucial one.

Looking from the floor of the valley of Elah we see shadows of an army climbing the horizon to both the east and to the West. Long standing enemies, Israel and the Philistines. Battles in that day were not fought in far off and impersonal ways, like through the camera of a drone, it was intimate, face to face, body to body.

Lumbering down into the valley, a mighty man broke from the communal lines of the Philistine army.

With foggy breath shaped by the morning air this champion shouted out and beckoned for an opponent: *Choose a man and have him come down to me* (17:8)

This battle is for allegiance and dominion—not simply a town, region or plunder. *“If he is able to fight and kill me, we will become your subjects; but if I overcome him and kill him, you will become our subjects and serve us.”* (17:9)

The people of God are faced with a challenge to their whole way of life—where they live, how they worship, who they worship, who governs them—it is a challenge that would make a quick end to God’s initial promise to Saul at his anointing in 10:1 *“You will save the people from their surrounding enemies”*

Goliath challenges the primary grounding of the imagination, the assumed way of thinking and being, of the people of God.

“This day I defy the armies of Israel!” Goliath belts in 17:10

Not only did he defy Israel, he whirls them into a cycle of anxiety: “...on hearing the Philistines words, Saul and all the Israelites were dismayed and terrified” we are told in verse 11.

Regardless of accuracy, a common thought is that habits begin to form at the 21-day mark—three weeks. Goliath forms a habit of fear and insecurity over Israel for 40 days in a row—twice a day. The first and last thing that the people of God hear day after day is their own insignificance in the eyes of Goliath.

Goliath’s defying voice has taken a precious position of influence in the day-to-day happenings—that which sets our hearts for the day and that which brings us to peace as we go to bed. While by no means synonymous, perhaps our phones and technology have taken this precious position of first and last voice to our own imaginations each day. Actions that orient us to the voice of God have been overtaken.

Maybe Israel’s response to Goliath does not seem so weak and unapproachable when we realize the repetitive message of shame, mockery and fear that they live within 80 times in 40 days and all the haunting hours in between. Maybe we know this when we are overwhelmed with news updates, trustworthy or false, all day long, where we see the actions and motivations of people that are driven by imaginations consumed by an ideal set by human standards in the name of God.

This exposes an important point for us. We must take note that Goliath’s initial mockery and challenge is toward Israel collectively—not David yet. Maybe we need to look at the way of thinking of Israel, before David himself.

The author creates a scene break in which we are reminded that the oldest and seemingly most “kingworthy” three brothers of David are serving with Saul on the front lines (17:13) while David the youngest was still with his dad doing his mundane job of tending to the sheep even after being anointed as king (17:15).

17:20 shows that David completes his work tasks before he carries his father’s gift package to his brothers at the battle line.

David packs his minivan of donkey’s with cheese and grain, in the place of Canada Post, and makes way to the valley of Elah. He enters the camp at the moment of battle formation.

We read in 17:23—*“as David was talking with them, Goliath, the Philistine champion from Gath stepped out from his lines and shouted his usual defiance”*

And then the author brilliantly creates a rift between the two ways of hearing—*David heard it* we read at the end of 17:23—We are also told in v24 that *Whenever Israelites saw the man, they all fled from him in great fear.*

Israel shares with David the fear that dominates their imaginations in verse 25 “Have you *seen* this man”

They are saying “when you assess goliath, you will realize why we are afraid”

Maybe in our day-to-day life we have had those moments of comparison pointed out by others. We may have heard from others or said ourselves—have you seen how beautiful that person is? Have you seen how perfect their family looks? Just look at him, just look at her, just look at them? Maybe in such comparisons of life, family, friends, health and work you have felt the shame of defeat as Israel may have felt as they sprinted back to their bunks.

David for the first time sees the fear in the eyes of his kinsmen, his people, his family. He is confused we read in 17:26 “*Who is this uncircumcised philistine that he should defy the armies of the living god?*”

Unlike Goliath, David does not claim that this is the army of Saul, it is the army of God’s beloved people.

Eliab, David’s oldest brother, rejected from kingship, is the first of three formal challenges to David in verse 28. As David was talking with people outside of their tents, Eliab “*burned with anger and asked ‘Why have you come down here? With whom did you leave those few sheep in the wilderness? I know how conceited you are and how wicked your heart is.’*”

I don’t know about you but I know that I can see evil in the eyes of those who seek to do good for the LORD—I am blind like Eliab to the sincere motive of people’s hearts who are dedicated to the work of God, and in comparison, I respond in frustration and anger.

Eliab attempts to maintain a position of power but placing “otherness” on David. David’s seemingly insignificant job does not measure up with the dignity of being an armed combatant in Israel’s army—this shows an oversight of where God shows up and who God uses as Hannah prayed...*it is not by strength that one prevails*

Yet David continues in the narrative to be the only one saying anything about the presence of God. His attentiveness to YHWH’s presence is an anomaly and spreads faster than the richest of gossip around the Israelite camp. And because of this verse 31 tells us that he is requested to make an appearance in the king’s royal tent.

The words of this shepherd boy mark the beginning of the scene “*Let no one lose heart on the account of this Philistine; your servant will go and fight him*” (17:33).

David speech begins by witnessing to the failing of heart that Samuel warned Israel of in chapter 12.

Yet Saul, the king of God's people, is David's second challenger. Saul replies in words nearly identical to the imagination of the enemy Goliath himself: *"You are not able to go out against this Philistine and fight him, you are little more than a boy, and he has been a warrior from his youth"*

Goliath thought the same in 17:42—*"Goliath looked David over and saw that he was little more than a boy"*

David, a young shepherd boy, despite the challenge of his oldest brother, and the challenge from the king of the nation, reveals the basis of his heart response.

David persists because his imagination, his assumed way of being, his total way of life is saturated in the reality that God's presence invades his everyday work of shepherding.

David has no experience in the presence of a battle field, but David has consistent experience of being in the presence of YHWH in his work—not only in the times of conflict, but in the times of chewing on long grass while the sheep feed in the fields.

David has seen that God does not reserve success or victory for the competent, like Hannah's prayer—boasting does not come out of the might of the mighty. We all know how easy it is to claim credibility when we do things well. We may be prone to claim that we have defeated our own lions and bears, we may have succeeded at work projects, we may volunteer at more events than anyone else, we may be a gifted public speaker, perhaps we tithe and donate more than anyone we know, perhaps in the height of our day we tell others that we were "successful"—but in the midst of these lions and bears we may neglect to acknowledge God's presence and empowerment.

Somehow, Saul, the king, concedes and dresses David in the garb of a warrior—the garb of competency.

But the instruments of David's choice are the instruments of his work—the arena where YHWH has grown forth David's imagination.

David would rather fill his same old shepherd bags, his well-worn day pack. Just as we pack our lunch for "just another day of work" so David loads his satchel like he has at the start of his Monday morning work week.

And so we come to Goliath—the most well-known challenger of David. The third of three challengers of David who all exude physical strength, have been described in the narrative as mighty and strong. Garbed in competency

What God sees in David—who is ruddy and handsome—Goliath despised in v 42. He mocks David as Eliab and Saul have done, calling him a dog with a stick. Goliath mocks the tool of David's work as a play toy of no lasting significance—his shepherds staff.

Yet David's purpose in fighting, and his claim to victory, which may often be overlooked, comes in v 46-47: *the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel*. And those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the Lord saves, for the battle is the LORD'S.

The staff that Goliath mocks represents for David a sign of God's presence. What David has seen in the sheep field, he makes known on the battle field.

Many of you will know how the story goes. David goes on to defeat the giant with a sling and a stone. But it appears that his purpose is not simply to challenge one opponent—it is to challenge a deceptive mindset that we have seen in Eliab, Saul and Goliath, alongside all the other characters in the narrative.

David invites us, the whole world, to live a life of imagination that assumes, expects and anticipates that God's presence WILL be evidenced in the big moments, because they are evidenced in the mundane.

David sees what no physical eye naturally perceives, and his heart catches the vision, the assumed way of being, that wisdom, imagination and assumptions cannot be based on innate human or worldly judgments, but rather God's definition of wisdom.

A wisdom that is grounded in the death of a savior, for the victory of the world.

A wisdom grounded not in the model of David, but shown in David as a person, just like us, who is consumed by the all-captivating story exposed in Jesus Christ and anticipated by Hannah.

For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength—God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong, God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him.

Christ sets forth the grand reversal that Hannah prays and David picks up on. The reversal that we humans are dignified, loved and cared for in the midst of what we *perceive* to be our weakness—which is our humanness or createdness. Humans who are often overwhelmed with neglect, insufficiency, and insignificance, are beloved precisely because our Creator, our Lord and our friend Jesus, invites us to join him—to find our grounding and name, our vocations, our passions within His great demonstration of love, and the power of the Spirit that he offers us in the most ordinary of things.

God promises to reveal himself to us in the instruments of our vocations, the instruments of our living and work, through the presence of others who care for us through their own instruments of living and work.

Perhaps instead the story of David invites us to participate in a story that forces us to remember that our physical eyes are prone to analyze the visible in terms of competency and common

sense, rather than to be tuned to an imagination that redefines wisdom and folly—that we may pray with Hannah that *“God will guard the feet of his faithful servants, but the wicked will be silenced in the place of darkness. It is not by strength that one prevails.”*