

June 21<sup>st</sup>, 2021

## 1 Samuel 17:32-49 “When the Weak Are Powerful”

We're on week three of a series on Israel's lessons about what happens when you're told that it's not a good idea to have a king, but you demand a king anyway. So far, it's going about as well as expected. Thankfully, God is faithful even when we humans are not so faithful, so let's not lose hope. Two Sundays ago we were introduced to Saul, Israel's first train-wreck of a King who God regretted putting into power in the first place. Last week we met an un-king-like young man named David who God chose to be Saul's replacement at some point in the future.

This week we're going to start getting into some familiar territory. The story of David and Goliath is one of those biblical lessons that we use in Sunday school because it's a fun story to tell kids. You've got little David, a kid who wasn't much older than many of the kids in Sunday School, fighting a seasoned warrior who also happens to be a giant. Great story to tell on a flannel board too. David went out on the battlefield with nothing but a stick, a sling and a few stones and he took the giant down with one rock right in between his eyes. Yay! And this, kids, is a lesson in how we can do *anything* when we've got God on our side! But we sanitize the heck out of this story don't we? We rarely turn the page and read the first few verses of chapter 17 where David decapitates Goliath because that's ... well ... inappropriate for little eyes and ears, right? I mean how would you play that out on a flannel board? Would you get a pair of scissors and cut along Goliath's neck so that you could separate it from the body? What kind of sicko Sunday School teacher or camp counselor would do something like that?

You don't have to be a church person to know about the story of David and Goliath. We use the David and Goliath metaphor whenever someone who seems insignificant beats the odds and wins a battle that most people think is unwinnable. Most people know that a “David and Goliath” situation is where the little person takes down the big person.

We use the metaphor in sports. Like when the 1980 US men's Olympic Hockey team took on the Soviet Union's Hockey Team and beat them for the gold medal even after losing to them 10-1 earlier. We also use this metaphor when someone fights and wins a seemingly unwinnable legal battle. Like Erin Brokovich's legal battle against PG&E when she helped a group of residents in Hinkley, California prove that the utility company was at fault for contaminating the town's ground water with chromium-6. These two stories are great examples of David vs Goliath situations. But my favorite story is a business-related David and Goliath story that starts with a man named Reed Hastings.

In 1997 Hastings rented the movie *Apollo 13* from his town's local Blockbuster video store. Well, as many of us have done, he kept the movie a little longer than the due date, and when he returned the movie, he got hit with a \$40 late fee. Ouch. But what are you going to do about it, right? This was Blockbuster and at the time, they were the dominant player in the DVD rental business with \$3.3 billion in revenue, and over \$208 million in profit. Blockbuster also had the financial resources and backing of its primary owner, Viacom, to help defend them against any incoming threats. They seemed bulletproof.

Reed Hastings was so mad about that \$40 late fee that he decided he was going to go into the movie rental business too. So, in 1998 he started a little rental service that only had 925 videos available to rent. And of course, Blockbuster didn't even blink. No competition there. Then in 1999, Hastings decided that he would do away with late fees and offered a DVD on demand subscription service where you could rent a movie online and receive it in the mail. Blockbuster *still* didn't make a competitive move. Why should they? Comparatively speaking, Hastings was still a gnat on the evolutionary scale of the video rental industry. In 2000, Blockbuster had an opportunity to buy Hastings's company for a mere \$50 million but they declined. Again, why bother?

Then in 2004, Blockbuster suddenly realized that Hastings had amassed \$500 million in revenue which put him in the major leagues. But

compared to their now \$6 billion in revenue, Hastings was hardly a competitor. But just to be safe Blockbuster decided they needed to launch a DVD on demand service too. Hastings did seem to have something going for him there, so ... you know ... why not?

Although Blockbuster was bigger, it didn't mean they were better. Blockbuster was a hulking bureaucracy completely lacking in a culture of innovation. Even after launching DVD-on-demand, its CEO and board were in constant disagreement about how to compete, and there wasn't a clear vision about how to move this on-demand service forward. Blockbuster also made some bad business decisions and ended up saddled with debt. Meanwhile, Hastings' company kept growing and his executives and employees were single-minded in their vision about where they wanted to go and what they wanted to be. They didn't have Blockbuster's bloated bureaucracy weighing them down. So, for six years, the two companies waged price wars and engaged in head-to-head competition until finally in 2010 the dust settled and Blockbuster fell into bankruptcy leaving Hastings' company on top. Anyone want to take a guess at what Hastings' company is called? That's right. Netflix. To me, this is a prime example of a David and Goliath situation in the business world and logistically speaking is closer to the Biblical story than Erin Brockovich or the 1980 men's hockey team.

Here's the thing about the Biblical David and Goliath story that people don't always understand or appreciate. David did not win the fight against Goliath because he was a better fighter. Think about it. He wasn't a fighter at all. His experience was in shepherding, not armed combat. The kid was so small that he couldn't even put on Saul's armor to meet Goliath on the battlefield. If he went out on the battlefield in the traditional manner as he was expected to he would have been obliterated. Goliath would have eaten him for lunch. The reason David won the battle was because he changed the fight. He adapted to the challenge. He sort of changed the rules, but not in a bad "I'm cheating" sort of way, because there were no referees on the battlefield with a rule book to say, "Hey, you can't do that!"

David didn't know how to fight with a sword and a shield. And even if he could wear the armor and wield the sword without falling over, he certainly didn't know how to assume a proper battle stance let alone thrust, dodge or parry in a sword fight. What David *did* know was how to protect a flock of sheep from predators like wolves and lions. One does not fight lions and wolves with swords and shields. If you tried to protect your sheep with a sword, you'd have a lot of dead sheep in the pasture before you even got around to stopping a lion or a wolf. The most effective weapon against a predator stalking your herd was a sling. A sling had a range of 200 yards and a skilled user could target a predator's most vulnerable weaknesses and put them out of commission before they could do any serious damage to the flock. That's what David brought to the battlefield, and that's what he used to take out the Philistine's most feared champion. Again, David did not beat Goliath because he was the better warrior, he won because he fought the battle on his terms, not Goliath's.

This story is about adaptive change. This is why I think the Netflix story is the best example of a modern-day David and Goliath story. Reed Hastings couldn't fight Blockbuster on their terms, so he had to learn and discover new tools and approaches in order to even define the problem which then led him to resolve the challenges and develop solutions. Blockbuster only knew how to do things the way they always did them. Netflix came along and changed the reality. The Philistines were the best at the traditional old-school way of fighting - Attack, kill and win. Israel had to adapt if it was going to overcome the Philistines. Saul was incapable of adapting. He tried to address the problem in the same old way, with armor, sword and shield. David came in and changed the fight. He had to. Otherwise Israel would have been laid flat before they ever got off the ground to fulfill God's promise that they'd be a great nation.

Israel had done everything wrong up to this point. They demanded a king when God told them they didn't need a king. They picked a bad

king even after God told them what a good king should look like. But as I said earlier, God is faithful even when we humans are not so faithful, so we should not lose hope, even when we've veered off the path that God wants us to travel.

Our Regional Minister, Rev. Dr. LaTaunya Bynum wrote an article on adaptive change this past week in her weekly Regional Voices article. She was writing about some important points the church needs to consider as we move forward into post-COVID times. We're facing a lot of the same sort of temptations that Israel faced when they encountered Goliath and the Philistines. We are tempted to carry on in the same way that we did before the pandemic shut everything down, but we can't carry on in the same way if we are going to continue to be engaged in mission and ministry here and now. We can't bet everything on a physical return to our building. We can't measure success by the number of people who attend in person. We can't think of our online ministry as an afterthought or a lesser form of ministry or worship. We can't return to pre-pandemic worship formats. We cannot think of the church building as the sole place for ministry. And we cannot exclude younger generations from the table as we discover new ways to reach out to our community. In other words, we need to be the Davids who practice adaptive change and use the tools that we have in front of us to do ministry instead of relying on the old tools and old ways that may not have even been working that great before the pandemic.

The most important thing to remember about this story, though, is that God has been and will continue to be faithful and present the church and will present opportunities to succeed even when we may have failed in the past. In other words, God is good (all the time, and all the time, God is good, great is the Lord and greatly to be praised.)