

Reading the Church into the Story of David and Goliath: Defeating Racism and Racial Violence – Teresa Holden

1 Samuel 17:1a, 4-11, 19-23, 32-49; Psalm 9:9-20; 2 Corinthians 6:1-13; Mark 4:35-41

Today's Scriptures are filled with metaphors that inspire us and lead us to greater faith and faithful actions as we confront the evil and hatred that exists in our world, and specifically in the United States. We mourn, today, with the city of Charleston, South Carolina and people of the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church there. We mourn the loss of nine of their church members, three of them whose terms as ministerial candidates had been fulfilled, so that they were received as ministers in the church the very night they were killed. The nine people who died did exactly what God has called us all to do, to live in fellowship together, studying the Bible and loving on strangers who come into our midst. If you are like me, you are both crushed and outraged that race-based violence continues to occur in our nation and that this time it found its way into a place of worship, what we call a sanctuary, a place that is supposed to be a shelter or refuge, where one can connect with God and find peace from the outside world.

Our Scriptures speak to our rage and sadness today. The Gospel reading reminds us that even when Jesus was physically present in the world, storms occurred. The weather scared his disciples, but Jesus was bigger than the storm. Second Corinthians contains a list of counter-perspectives to the claims that had been made against Paul's ministry in Corinth, and ultimately, Paul invokes the church members with a word that we need to hear today. He says: *open wide your hearts*. The Psalm seems to speak directly to our sense of loss this morning when it says, *The LORD is a stronghold for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble. And those who know your name put their trust in you, for you, O LORD, have not forsaken those who seek you. ... Be gracious to me, O LORD. See what I suffer from those who hate me; you are the one who lifts me up from the gates of death, so that I may recount all your praises, and, in the gates of daughter Zion, rejoice in your deliverance.*

I want to focus our attention most of all, however, on our Old Testament reading.

Even before the events of Wednesday night, as I approached this First Samuel Scripture, I thought about how, from the earliest days of black churches in the US, African slaves saw the Old Testament as a text that was personalized to them. This is a practice that makes the Old Testament come alive because, rather than seeing it merely as history, we can recognize God's deep love and care and active intervention for those who hold to faith. Further, we can find direction as we look to Old Testament characters as archetypes whose actions are instructional for us.

Enslaved people in North America did this from the moment they heard the stories of the Bible, beginning during the First Great Awakening. The First Great Awakening was a revival that shook all of the American colonies as British colonists sought a more authentic religious experience than what Anglican, Puritan, Quaker, Lutheran and Presbyterian denominations had offered them. In a brief moment of generosity and after

firmly establishing that God condoned slavery in the Bible, slave masters allowed their slaves to convert to Christianity, and even (for a brief time) allowed them to engage in their own worship services. That is actually how Emanuel AME Church got its start, as an early concession to faith made by slave-owners. Quickly, however, it became clear that enslaved people interpreted the Bible quite differently than white masters. They did exactly what Rick is always talking about. They read themselves into the text, particularly the stories of the Old Testament. The story of the Israelites' enslavement in Egypt was personal to them, and the miracles that God performed to liberate the Israelites seemed possible, and so enslaved people appropriated that part of Scripture for themselves. The songs they sang as they worked and the verses they held in their hearts were those that reminded them that they were God's people, just as the Israelites had been. They believed that God would liberate them, too. These beliefs were seen as dangerous by slaveholders, and so prohibitions against literacy were strengthened and enslaved people were prohibited from meeting together privately. Slaveholders saw that when enslaved people read the Bible their desire for greater personhood and their belief that they would one day be free was strengthened. Faith in God's Old Testament message of justice and liberation sustained slaves until emancipation and carried African Americans through the next 100 years of lynchings and Jim Crow, becoming the spiritual backdrop for the nonviolent portion of the Civil Rights movement in the latter half of the 20th Century.

Today, we will also adopt this belief that we can read ourselves into the text of the story of David and Goliath. In doing that, one central message stands out to me: we must bring our gifts, what we have to offer, to dispel the evil that is in the world, and the evil that we are faced with right now is racism in the United States. Further, we must believe that our efforts are exactly what God wants and what our community and world need. We must be bold and have faith that we are a part of God's answer, just like David was confident that he was the answer to the problem of Goliath.

We are all so familiar with the David and Goliath story. When I was a child, this was my favorite Old Testament story, probably because of the song and the motions that we learned in Vacation Bible School that had us all acting unruly and falling to the ground at the end, like Goliath. Apparently, many people are fascinated by this story, as Biblical scholars and those who study the history of the Near East have paid considerable attention to its details. Many scholarly debates exist about the Biblical story: was Goliath 6'9" tall, or was he 9'9" tall? (The earliest source says the equivalent of 6'9," but Hebrew tradition is what appears in our Scripture—six cubits and a span, which is more like 9'9.") Many believe that Goliath's height is exaggerated to add dramatic effect, but some suggest that Goliath actually had a pituitary disorder that caused him to be so tall. Either way, he was much taller than the average man at that time, who was around five feet tall.

Another question that scholars have studied is whether the armor that Goliath wore, and that the Scripture describes in such detail, really dates from this period of history. This question has led one scholar to suggest (fairly conclusively) that Goliath was really not an infantry man, but rather was a chariot warrior. In that case, all of the named body armor

and weapons are plausible, especially since they represent technology that had evolved over the previous 150 years. Today, we are less concerned about the story's authenticity and more concerned with what the metaphors in the story communicate to us about our responsibility to our community and our nation.

Like racist attitudes and the evil forces that sustain them today, Goliath seemed to be a foe who would be impossible to defeat because of his size, his protective wear and his weaponry. First Samuel provides rich details that help us see the deep contrasts between the threatening Philistine giant, Goliath, and the youth, David, from the sheepherding family. Not only was Goliath huge in comparison with everyone else, he also was decked out in protective armor and an array of weaponry. The Scripture lists three specific types of armor that he wore: a bronze helmet, a coat of mail that was so thick that it weighed around 80 pounds and greaves that were protective wear for his shins. He had two weapons: a javelin and a spear. He also had a shield-bearer, whose entire purpose was to hold a shield to protect Goliath. Presumably the shield-bearer was a defense against Goliath's most glaring vulnerability—his lack of mobility.

In contrast, David was a youth, not a fully mature man. He had no protection, and his only weapon was a sling and five tennis-ball-sized stones; nevertheless, these were weapons that he was quite adept with. Today we don't think of slings as being very threatening, but they were used in warfare through the medieval period by those who wore limited armor. They allowed people to be at a distance from the antagonist while also posing a threat. Still, those around David felt that he was at significant risk, so that King Saul outfitted him with a bronze helmet and a coat of mail; these were so cumbersome that David couldn't even walk in them.

This part of the story reminds me of my oldest daughter's very brief stint as catcher for her softball team, when she was seven or eight years old. Somehow Lindsey ended up playing up with an older group of girls on a fairly competitive team when she was this age, so she was by far the smallest on the team. Not surprisingly, her one and only gift to the team was her speed. (If you don't know, she ended up being a state champion sprinter in high school.) Lindsey would go up to bat and hit the ball as hard as she possibly could. This would result in the equivalent of a bunt for someone else. The ball would bounce about a yard in front of home plate, and Lindsey would take off like a jet to first base and would almost always make it on base. With good hitters behind her, she could always be counted on to score. When the team played defense, Lindsey was relegated to the outfield, but what she really wanted to play was catcher. She kept begging the coach to let her play catcher, so finally, one day when their competition wasn't so good and their team was winning by quite a bit, we could see Lindsey in the dugout getting outfitted in the catching gear. All of the straps on each piece of equipment had to be cinched tighter than it ever had been before in order to get them to stay on her. In fact the game stopped for a few minutes, as everyone in our dugout was occupied with trying to get all of the catcher's gear to stay on Lindsey. By the time they were done, Lindsey hobbled very slowly to her position as catcher. Because of how big all of the equipment was on her, she stood rather than crouched in position. She lasted for only an

inning, because her ability to contribute to the team was greatly hampered by her inability to move.

Similarly, David understood that he had one outstanding skill that he was very practiced at. With that skill he didn't need the king's armor. He just needed to contribute what he could do.

We also need to contribute what we can to fight the rampant racial tension and acts of violence that are racially motivated in our country. Our faith requires us to step forward, like David, and be the moral conscience of the nation—not in little ways, but by taking big bold stands in our individual lives and as a church community. We are a **Free** Methodist church; if we hope to promote racial reconciliation, then we need to advertise ourselves as being people who are interested in doing this. We must *open wide our hearts* and partner with African American congregations, inviting black ministers to our pulpit to help us learn about our blind spots so that we can stand in solidarity against racism. We need to sing some gospel songs that take us out of our comfort zone and help us to memorialize and honor a form of worship that is deeply American and faithful. We need to embrace the awkwardness of stepping out of our own little world. Further, the Free Methodist denomination should lead throughout our nation in this endeavor. It's part of our heritage, but it isn't a responsibility that we have fully embraced.

I understand that some people struggle with seeing the deaths of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Eddie Grey and the nine church members in Charleston as part of a continuum. The circumstances of some of their deaths appear murky to some; they lack clarity about what actually happened. Let me gently remind you that in 1955 the torture and death of 14-year-old Emmitt Till wasn't enough for some white American Christians to become outraged. Some weren't sure what happened there; certainly he must have done something wrong, they thought. All of the people who were lynched and persecuted just trying to vote in the South—those events weren't enough for some white American Christians to take a stand against racism. “We can't do anything about that,” they said. “That's a states' rights issue.” The gunning down of Civil Rights leader Medgar Evers outside his home in June of 1963 wasn't enough. With hindsight, we have gained greater clarity about the evil and injustice that was taking place at that time. It took the deaths of four African American girls, killed when their 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham was bombed in September of 1963, for the nation, and particularly Christians in the United States, to decide that this was not what we wanted to have happening in our country.

Lord, help us to see this time for what it is. Remove the blinders from our eyes, and give us the strength and the courage to fight injustice and to take the difficult and sometimes awkward steps that promote reconciliation in our town, our region and our country.