

“David: Trusting the Unseen”

1st Samuel 17:1-11; 20-54

June 25th, 2000 – Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons

Few people, back then, liked the Philistines.¹ They were always thought of as aliens who would move in, become successful and take over everything they saw.

Just before the beginning of the 12th century B.C.E., there were various uprooted peoples migrating toward the Egyptian-Palestine area because other empires had taken over their land. Biblical people believed that the Philistines originally came from the island of Crete but they were wrong. Rather, they were among the hoard of nations referred to as the “People of the Sea” who migrated from the North and West. Although there were about five other nationalities in this movement of people, the Philistines are the only ones about which we know much of anything.

They first settled along the coast of Palestine after failing in attempt to take over Egypt (around 1100 B.C.E.). They had their families and a relatively advanced technology for their day – higher than many

¹ **Philistines**, highly civilized inhabitants of the coastal region of Palestine. They lived, from some time in the 12th century BCE, on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea, to the southwest of Judea (a part of what is now the West Bank), from Ekron toward Egypt. According to the Old Testament (see Amos 9:7; Jeremiah 47:4; Deuteronomy 2:23), they came from Caphtor, which may probably be identified with Crete (Kriti). A Pelasgian origin was also suggested, but modern scholars believe that the Philistines, undoubtedly immigrants, came from Crete.

It is not known whether Abimelech, king of Gerar (see Genesis 20-21, 26), was king of these people or merely of the country that later became Philistia. More probably, the Philistine skirmishes with the Danites mark their first appearance as aggressive enemies; the migration of the Danites (see Judges 18) about the 11th century BC is credited to Philistine pressure on their earlier home territory toward the south. They had five princes, who ruled over the five cities of Gaza, Ashdod, Ashqelon, Gath, and Ekron. Under the last of the judges of ancient Israel, Samuel, their rule was terminated by the Battle of Mizpah. At Mount Gilboa, Saul, the first king of ancient Israel, and his sons fell in battle against them. David, king of Judah and Israel, routed them repeatedly, and under Solomon, David's son and successor, their country seems to have been incorporated in the Jewish Empire. The internal troubles of Judah emboldened them once more to resistance, but Hezekiah, a later king of Judah, subdued them in the 8th century BC with the aid of the Egyptians. The Assyrians afterward took Ashdod, and in the time of the Maccabees (2nd and 1st century BCE) the Philistines were Syrian subjects; thereafter the name of the country became lost in that of Palestine.

of the surrounding nations. They built temples to various deities. They had cities organized by lords who acted in council for the common good of the city.²

The art of the Philistines has been found all over Palestine. If you were to walk into the ancient Palestinian stores, corresponding to our Jenns and Pitt Petri, the Wedgwood, Spode and `Lladro pieces of that day would be Philistine pottery. Just for interest, I have a few representations of their pottery in the outline.

The chief types of pottery were buff-colored bowls, beer jugs with spouted strainers as well as cups and vases. Their works were usually made with a white wash or slip on which were painted reddish-purple or black geometrical designs. A popular design was of swans (as you see here) preening themselves.



The Philistines, though, were primarily warrior overlord class fighters who, at the same time, had a civilized society. They were able to muster large numbers of well-armed storm troopers, archers and charioteers. Some ancient clay tablets described their soldiers as wearing kilts and feathered headdresses.³

At the time of the early Israelite monarchy, when David was taking on Goliath, it was the Bronze age and the Philistines were the first people on the block to have ironsmiths. Archeological studies inform us that for years, they had a monopoly on this profession. Their weapons were unmatched.

In general, King Saul and later King David were successful in putting an end to their habit of conquering borderline cities. But Saul was defeated by them in Gilboa. This, as you may remember, was when Saul did himself in when he realized they were about to win the battle.

² They occupied coastal oriented towns like Ashkelon, Ashdod, Gath, and Gaza (names that we are only vaguely familiar with from condemnatory talk of the prophets.)

³ J. C. Greenfield “Philistines” *The Interpreter 's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976) supplementary volume, pp.666-667.

David had better luck and finally broke the Philistine hold over the shores of Palestine and Phoenicia. After their defeat by David's well organized forces, the Philistine drive for expansion ceased. After that, their peoples scattered into individual cities and never again gathered armies to engage in military conquests. In the course of their battles with Saul and David, the ruling Philistine military class had been wiped out and the Philistine culture was gradually assimilated into the native Canaanite population. Later during Solomon's reign, and for the next fifty years, there were lots of small raids and skirmishes, but when Assyria and Babylon stepped into Palestine and carted off the Jews, the Philistines were captured and deported as well.⁴

Of all the people to choose to fight this Philistine thug named Goliath, God sure picked the last person we'd expect to be the hero. If I would have been in heaven, back then, (and I had anything to say about who was going to be in this story), I would have picked someone who knew about politics and spoke fluent Philistine for negotiations. My choice would also have been a 6'8" former linebacker for the Israelite football team who has a black belt in Karate, and is presently working as a special weapons expert in the C.I.A.

Instead, David was an 18 year old shepherd, the youngest of eight brothers – the baby in the family. He was a guitar-playing folk singer, for goodness sake. Why on earth did God pick David to be on top when all this ended? After all, David standing up against Goliath was like trying to beat a forty-ton armored tank with a pea shooter. Perhaps we can see why if we look at the four victories in this event. How David dealt with each of the conflicts shows something of his greatness.

In this skirmish, the Israelites and the Philistines were at a stalemate. Each army was occupying a hill and if either of them went down into the valley to attack, they'd lose their advantage. The Philistines, then, sent their champion Goliath down to start a fight.

Some texts vary on his height but essentially Goliath (even in his stocking feet), stood 2 ½ feet taller than anyone. He wore a size 20 collar, a 9 ½ hat and a 52 inch belt. When he put his full armor on, he not only

⁴ J. C. Greenfield, "Philistines", *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962) Volume 3, pp.791-795.

looked like a Sherman tank but weighed as much as one.⁵

He was decked out in the latest bronze armor and weapons. Every day for the last month Goliath had come out and insulted the Israelies, hoping to get one of them mad enough to engage in a winner-take-all bet. At first he probably said things like, "Your sisters were beat with an ugly stick!" Maybe he even resorted to bad jokes, beginning with: "Say, what's the difference between an Israelite and a Coward? – (*Nobody knows!*)" Later on Goliath used the vilest of language, cursing them and their God.

David happened to be in the Israelie camp because he was delivering grain and bread to his three older brothers in the army. He even had some cheese from Hickory farms for his older brother's commanding officer.

The first thing David had to overcome is the military scene itself. As Goliath was making these threats, it says that Saul and all Israel heard them and were dismayed. Even the generals were pacing back and forth saying: "What are we gonna' do?" So as David is coming through camp, Goliath comes out and starts up again – verse 23 says everyone ran away in terror."

While everyone else is running back up to the top of the hill, talking about the suicidal act of actually trying to fight a man like that, David is asking why they don't get rid of this disgusting fellow. After all, he has some nerve messing around with God's army. For some reason, David was able to overcome the initial fear of the whole battle scene. He saw this unusual human fighting machine and the first thing he thought of was: how disgraceful it was that God's people were inconvenienced by this heathen. David's first victory was over the surface hysteria of his peers.

The next challenge David had to overcome was his older brothers. You know how family members can be. David's oldest brother, Eliab, was angry with his little squirt brother and said, in effect: "What are you doing here? Did you lose your little sheep in the woods? Real men don't carry shepherd's crooks." (Wouldn't you like to jump in a time machine and go back there to see his face when his little brother beat Goliath?)

While most of his family was telling David to get out of the camp, David was still able to ask the most

⁵ Frederick Buechner, *Particular Treasures, A Biblical Who's Who* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979) p.41.

important question: ‘What are we going to do about this hyper pituitary gland with the mean mouth?’ So David’s second victory was that he braved and even ignored the insults of his older brothers and kept on getting involved. That brought him right into the King’s presence.

Saul heard about this energetic youth asking a lot of questions and Saul didn’t have anything else to do but wait, so he called him in. Before he knew it, David was in the headquarters tent, telling him shepherd stories about lions and bears.

“Look Davie,” Saul probably said, “I like your enthusiasm but you’re just a youngster. This man out there is a highly trained soldier. I couldn’t even handle him.”

Yet, David persevered. He was even starting to sound convincing. Perhaps it was his bare-faced determination with the God-talk of a prophet. Saul eventually agreed, knowing the boy would be killed but he had no intention of signing a surrender if he was killed. The third victory David had was in braving the reasoned logic, experience and authority of the King himself.

David soon took off the armor he was handed because he couldn’t move, (like a child who can’t move in a padded snow suit). Imagine Saul’s face when he watched David strip down to his jogging shorts and T-shirt and walk off to battle carrying just his shepherd’s crook and a sling shot. David overcame the obstacle of even the King’s conventional thinking and he dared to think differently – approaching the conflict by trusting what his own experiences had taught him. What was most important was he trusted in God, not armor or physical strength (even in a culture where physical strength was highly valued.)

Goliath was his final victory. But when Goliath saw this skinny kid come out in front of him, he was insulted. He was so mad at the obvious stupidity of this, that he began to cuss David out in his own Philistine language.

Now someone who has no doubts is not normal. Someone once said that if you don’t have any doubts, you are either kidding yourself or you are asleep.⁶ David *had* doubts but was probably playing on

⁶ “Doubts are the ants in the paths of faith. They keep you awake and moving.” Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking, A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p.20.

Goliath’s anger when he threatened him, . . . saying that *he* is the one in trouble and was about to lose his head because God was going to help him. With that, he snapped his sling and landed a rock right between his eyes. As Goliath staggered over, stunned, David grabbed his sword and finished him off.

All the Israelites had on their minds was what they could see. They saw Mr. T out there armed to the teeth and from appearances, they were overwhelmingly convinced that they had no chance. They trusted only in themselves and alone, they didn’t have a chance in the world.

In contrast, David didn’t go by appearances, logic or logistics. He trusted in the reality of the invisible God, Whom he knew to be on his side. David was quietly aware of God’s presence in his life as he met each of the conflicts leading up to his fight with the giant. In fact, David knew God was with him for years through all those lonely nights out with the sheep. David’s strength was not only in what he knew and had experienced but also in the One Whom he had trusted – no matter where he was.

The story invites us to ask ourselves: Do we know that God is with us and on our side? Our tendency is to admit that David and Goliath was a good story, but we often feel that David’s victories have nothing to do with *our* conflicts today. After all, *we* don’t fight giants, . . . or do we?

That person whom you had recently gotten to know. You’d hate to be in their shoes, even though (on the surface) they seem to be doing all right and they’re pleasant enough. Do they ever have a giant of a problem.

So we tell ourselves: “What they need is a counselor, a minister or some other professional.” But what they really need is for a friend to risk getting involved with them and letting them know someone else cares enough to be present.

Why is it that people have so few “significant others” in their lives – people with whom they can talk who will intelligently and sensitively listen to their concerns – without instantly snapping to a quick and easy judgment? People who are willing to offer (when asked) perspective from their own experiences? I think that’s why our doctors’ offices are filled with patients, 80% of whom are there with ailments brought on by emotional and psychological stress. Many people have few people of integrity in their lives so they end up going from one day to the next overwhelmed by their stress and anxiety and sometimes a seriously distorted

perspective of reality. How willing are we to courageously face the giant problems our friends have? You know, when they tell us about their problems, they are asking for help.

Those of you who are working in a business face giants of your own. Going against the higher ups can be a career threatener. You can end up on your superiors' bad list, be demoted, fired and suffer all kinds of frightening economic turns of events. Where money is at stake, it gets scarier.

One of the similarities of our culture, with that of David's time, is that society has chosen to worship power. We don't do too well, as a rule, in relationships when we become obsessed with control. Many people do not know how to cherish and love another person because they insist that everything and every person be controllable and predictable. Consequently, people in our society have reduced other people to commodities – using them to obtain their personal goals.

For a minute, take a look at the list of values of our surrounding society.⁷ This is the giant that all of us face today. These are the predominant values of our Western Culture. See if you agree.

1. Everything can be measured.
2. Measurable things can be *controlled*.
3. We shouldn't ask unanswerable questions.
4. Knowledge is power.
5. We can essentially do anything because humans are the highest authority – we are autonomous.
6. Time is money.
7. The future is predictable because we think we can actually *control* the present.
8. All there is to reality are things that can be understood.
9. Knowledge is thought only to consist of organized facts.
10. All human conduct should be governed by mind.
11. Emotion is irrational and immature.
12. The most reasonable, powerful and controlling individuals are of most value to society and they should be governing us.
13. Nature is imperfectly formed and should be restructured by human goals.

⁷ also printed in the sermon outline in the bulletin

14. Women are less aggressive, less rational and less valuable than males and like nature, they should be *controlled* and excluded from positions of responsibility.
15. Child-rearing, homemaking and nurturing arts are less important than production work outside of the home.
16. Wealth is created by fabricating natural, raw materials into finished products and the production of these goods is the highest of values.
17. Money is the measure of value.
18. Human life should be organized around the laws of the market.
19. Economics has replaced religion as the ultimate concern.
20. The chief motivation of human beings is to accumulate and to consume.
21. Advertising and propaganda are the chief passions of the modern age.⁸

Today, people are looking for some Davids. People we know often only set their goals and aspirations in life by what the media shows them. Like the soldiers in Saul's camp, our society is wringing its hands, asking what can be done that would make any difference and for what should one live? And not only are there the giants of the secular value system (that I mentioned), but there are the results of that human-centered set of values that may bring horrible world-wide suffering.

In a way, the world is turning to us. As people are going about their routines, they are watching us out of the corner of their eyes. We are the Davids walking through the camp of this threatened world. In their eyes, we are the weak do-gooders, the "patsies," the ones who have to have the "crutch" of religion (because of our weakness) they think.

At the same time they are asking for help. They want a David to come into their lives to convince them that there is more to life than what they see in People and Us magazines or on CNN or the Internet. They're asking themselves: "Why is it that these non-profit organizations survive in such rugged economic situations?" They're looking for us to show them our trust in the unseen.

Take stock of your own history. Think through the

⁸ Adapted from the 23 suggested social priorities mentioned in Sam Keen, *The Passionate Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983) pp.23-24.

significant experiences you have had – and I’m talking about the times when you felt that you had nothing left and you were surviving out of the bare core of who you are as a person. Think back to what God had you learn from that dead end experience.

As you do that, think of how God has been a presence in your life through all these years. Think about your trust in God. Then slowly turn to face giant conflicts that are now in your life.

The odds favor the opposition to win, but after all, all the betters know is only what they can see. ■

