



Faith Amidst Fear

1 Samuel 17:38-50

How to Respond

Amidst a global pandemic, a national state of emergency, and the restrictions of a statewide stay-at-home directive, I eventually succumbed to my wife's persistent encouragement to wear a mask when mixing with nature's throng at Publix. I am not sure my face mask is helping, but I trust it will lessen the need for Ruth to hose me down and incinerate my clothes before letting me back into the house.

I am clearly not alone in taking this extra precaution, as you can see from this note I received last week:



"My husband and I have now taken to wearing face masks and protective gloves when grocery shopping and visiting the pharmacy. Yesterday, in an unanticipated but delightful surprise, I discovered I had brought home the wrong husband."

There is no doubt that the last couple of months have been challenging at a number of levels as we have responded to the disruptive social and medical restrictions of COVID-19.

The anxiety, uncertainty, and fear caused by this virulent virus is having a significant effect on individuals and families even as we cautiously consider lifting some of the restrictions.

So how should we respond? What action should we take?

In the Old Testament book of 1 Samuel in chapter 17, we find one of the best-known events in the Bible. But one of the difficulties in knowing a story so well is that we think not only that we know what takes place, but also that we have learned the lessons it teaches. So let me invite you to explore again this well-known passage, which

is dominated by fear and uncertainty when David faces the immediate, life-threatening challenge of Goliath.

The Philistines, who were aggressive tribal neighbors to the people of Israel, occupied parts of southwest Palestine from around 1200 to 600 B.C. At various times in their nations' histories, the two groups found themselves at war with each other. In 1 Samuel 17:17-58, Goliath, the Philistines' champion, has issued a challenge to the Israelite army to participate in a representative battle, a one-on-one fight to the death. As the passage begins, Goliath has been issuing this challenge for 40 days, and no one has responded.

Goliath was approximately nine feet tall, physically strong, intimidating, athletic, fearsome, and well equipped, with a successful track record in combat. He clearly dominated the battlefield when challenging the Israelites.

As a result of Goliath's challenge and physical presence, the Israelites were allowing Goliath to determine their thinking and their response. Goliath was defining the terms and conditions of the conflict, bringing intimidation, fear, confusion, and uncertainty to everyone present.

Exploring the entire story, you notice that the same thinking that treated Goliath as important treated David, who was visiting his brothers on the battlefield, as insignificant. Those who were in awe of Goliath were contemptuous of David. They were allowing the circumstances of the challenge and their fear of Goliath to determine their response.

By the time David arrived, the army facing Goliath had been infected by a volatile and lethal atmosphere nourished by fear.

"Let no one lose heart" (17:32)

So what was it that enabled David to respond with courage and determination to an infectious atmosphere of paralyzing fear and uncertainty?

In the years before he faced Goliath, David had learned a number of significant lessons as he encountered God at work in his life in a remarkable manner. God was recalibrating and retuning David's deepest affections and desires as he submitted and surrendered every area of his life to God's rule and reign.

During those days when David was watching over his father's sheep in the hill country of Judea, he learned that in periods of loneliness, isolation, and obscurity, God could be trusted in the most challenging and difficult of circumstances.

David, like so many others since, discovered that the development of a living, vibrant faith is not a function of circumstance, but rather a conscious choice and daily dedication.

David learned to immerse himself in the largeness and immediacy of God, losing himself in the immensity of God's love rather than focusing on the circumstances around him.

Amidst these days of quiet isolation, David was learning lessons that would impact him for the rest of his days. He learned what it meant to be profoundly dependent on Him who is infinite and unchanging in His character, being, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth. David discovered that deep and lasting contentment lies not in the circumstances we face but in God's unending love and grace. God was the one who now dominated David's deepest affections and longings. David learned to have a constructive preoccupation with God Himself, not the circumstances of his life.

When David faced Goliath, he had choices. David could not control the circumstances around him. Neither could he control what Goliath would do or say. David could, however, control his response to the threat that lay before him. In the midst of fear and challenging circumstances, it is always worth remembering that we have choices.

We get to choose how to respond as we continue to face the dangers and uncertainties of COVID-19. And as we do so, we can lay fear to one side and cautiously step forward out of the darkness, the sadness, and the uncertainty, trusting in the love and grace of God for ourselves, our families, and our nation. Lives will be rebuilt; wounds will heal; souls will be renewed. We will learn to live again because at the core of who we are lies the love and grace of God, for "in God we trust."

Dr. Gibbons messages are available online at FirstPresGreenville.org (Media tab) and on Fox Carolina, Sundays at 10:30am.