

May 17, 2015
Falcon Heights Church UCC
Falcon Heights, MN
The Rev. Anne Swallow Gillis

Seventh Sunday in Eastertide
I Samuel 17
Children's Musical – David and Goliath

REFLECTIONS ON THE DAVID AND GOLIATH STORY “The Rock Slinger and His Greatest Hit”

In a few moments we will hear a musical telling of the story of David and Goliath. This story is now 3,000 years old and has captured the imaginations of Jews, Christians and Muslims down through the ages. It's a story about the early nation of Israel as it moves from being a bunch of nomadic tribes moving around with their flocks, to a settled group of people with farms, towns, cities and a more organized way of being together. These are people trying to listen to God and allow God's guiding principles of justice, mercy and peace to rule their lives. But this isn't always easy.

Today's musical focuses on a dramatic point in early Israel's history, out on a dusty battlefield, where a young boy faces a huge, fierce Philistine warrior (outlined in 58 verses in I Samuel 17). Yes, there are some gory parts to this tale! But the storyteller wants us to understand how God is able to use all sorts of people, even young, seemingly unskilled and weak people, to carry out God's purpose in the world. God can use any of us for God's work of justice and hope. The narrator also wants us to know that God is always on the side of the underdog, the marginalized, and the oppressed people. And this is exactly what Jesus will talk about, 1,000 years later. But how does young David get here? And what are the Philistines doing harassing the Israelites?

We have to back up a bit. In the middle of the 11th century BCE, the loose community of Israelite tribes was ruled by men, and a few unusual women like Deborah, who were appointed as judges. The judges would help people resolve their arguments and live together peacefully following God's commandments. The community also included honored visionaries, who would pay special attention to God and who had the ability to understand what God was directing the people to do in their lives. Samuel was one of the judges and also a visionary, a prophet.

The Israelites are becoming more prosperous and established. They needed political unity and a way to defend themselves. More and more other people wanted to invade their territory. The Israelites were now surrounded by the aggressive Philistines. Representatives of the tribes of Israel came to Samuel and said “give us a king” to help lead us better. Samuel wasn't sure this is a good idea, but he reluctantly anointed Saul, a great warrior, to be the first King. The King was to be the one who will speak and act for God and who would readily receive ruling instructions through the prophets. But Saul stops paying attention

to the prophet Samuel, gets greedy and doesn't follow the important religious rituals of the day. Both God and Samuel become sorry they appointed Saul to be King. Here's what happens next [read from I Samuel 16:14-17: "Now the spirit of the Lord..."]. This is why King Saul has night headaches and bad dreams. This is how young David comes into the court and gets King Saul's attention.

Fast forward now to the Philistines. Who are these people? Philistines were "Sea Peoples" who migrated from the Aegean Sea region 2,000 years before David's time. They were working for the Pharaoh in Egypt, hired as mercenaries to recapture land for Egypt, and they were a huge menace to Israelite towns and fields, forcing tribes to give up their lands. Philistines were well-organized, had superior weapons and an aggressive military policy. Goliath of Gath was a Philistine warrior, and was huge, invincible, and mean. He would taunt the smaller and less properly attired Israelites with challenges to do battle.

[Read I Samuel 17 1-11, introducing Goliath.] In these days, you had to supply your own soldier with food. Since the shepherd boy David was too young to fight, he brings food to his brothers on the battlefield. David is outraged by Goliath's taunts and volunteers to do battle with the giant. He is inexperienced, has inadequate equipment, but it is clear that God will guide him.

King Saul will eventually recognize David as a true leader when he kills Goliath, but Saul will finally turn jealous of David's success and popularity among the people. Saul will plot David's death, but David will manage to elude capture. Following Saul's death, David will be chosen King and will bring Israel into a time of prosperity and peace.

David's story is not just one about courage. It is about God's ability to work through us, whatever our meager gifts or tentative talents. It's a story about God's constant support for the marginalized and the oppressed. Amen.

(Historical details from "Great People of the Bible and How They Lived," edited by G. Ernest Wright, and "Basic Bible Commentary: First and Second Samuel," by Frank Johnson.)