**The Courage To Be**

1 Samuel 17: 32-49

Mark 4: 35-41

It is good to be at Lakewood: Laura—

The title for my sermon comes from a book written by Paul Tillich about the courage to live fully in a world with theological and philosophical uncertainties. My sermon this morning is about the classic David and Goliath story from the Hebrew Bible.

**Let us pray. Gracious and mysterious God within whom we live and move and have our being: focus our hearts and minds this morning. I pray that the words of MY mouth and the meditations of OUR hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen**

Many of us know the story of David and Goliath. It is often taught as a story about the triumph of the underdog, the triumph of brains over brute, of right over might, of God’s people over God’s enemies. It is a personal story to me. My mother, who died when I was a young 16-year-old, named me after David in the Bible. She told me often, David means “my beloved”. As the shortest kid in my grade at School # 9 in Clifton NJ, I was often bullied and picked on. It was a rough school. On a regular basis my mother used this story to help me face my insecurities. Thanks Mom! I am forever grateful.

**Biblical scholars**, like my OT professor at Princeton Bernie Anderson, write that the story has a folkloric quality and is part of the *“somewhat romanticized account of David’s rise from the sheep folds to the royal throne.[[1]](#footnote-1)”* The story functions to set the stage for David’s reign as a great king.

David and Goliath is a familiar story and often referred to in popular culture when someone or something small confronts an immense obstacle and prevails. The story of the shepherd boy and the giant is a violent one. It is an uncomfortable story in light of today’s realities in the state of Israel. This ancient story is a war story and ends with the decapitation of the enemy’s leader and the rout of the enemy’s camp. In this ancient time Israel’s God was a warrior God bringing military victory and vanquishing their enemies. For most of us in the 21st century our understanding of God has evolved and changed. I believe it is misguided and dangerous when we uncritically appropriate ancient world views and understandings about God and war into our time. I believe that God is a God of peace and not war. War, even a just war, (if such a thing exists) is always a sign of human brokenness.

**What is the point of the story?** First of all, it is to lift up David as a great hero. The story tells us that God uses unlikely and humble means and people to advance God’s way in the world. The story has within it the familiar message that with God, anyone can confront and prevail over great obstacles or challenges, just like David defeated Goliath.

In a world with so many Goliaths, so many challenges, it is a lesson to take to heart. As Margaret Mead once said, “*Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed individuals can change the world.”*

What catches my attention when I look at this morning’s text is not the battle scene but the prelude and the wardrobe conversation that almost undid David’s victory. In the story, King Saul was reluctant to have the shepherd fight Goliath. He was afraid for the boy’s wellbeing. Yet, once David, confident that God was with him, convinced Saul to let him fight, Saul decided to dress David for the battle. He clothed David in his armor, put a bronze helmet on his head and strapped Saul’s own sword over the armor. The image is comical, a size 36 short wearing a size 46 tall. It did not work. The boy could not move dressed in Saul’s clothing. David removed the armor and faced the giant in his own clothes with a staff, a slingshot and five smooth stones. This is the heart of my sermon today.

**David needed to be himself as he faced the giant. He could not be dressed in Saul’s clothing. The message is clear and important. You and I need to be who we are made to be and not try to be something we are not. This is a particularly important message as we come to the end of PRIDE month or, for Tacoma come to the beginning. We need to embrace who we are, each of us as unique human beings. David needed to be David, not Saul.**

God uses who we are as individuals, our unique gifts. All too often we give into the temptation to play dress up thinking we need to be someone else to be pleasing to God. **We don’t.**

We all have room for growth and change but the story warns you and me not to run away from our uniqueness and pretend to be someone we are not. Saul tried to make David something he wasn’t. David stumbled over the clumsy costume and he would have failed in his mission had he worn Saul’s clothes.

Again, each of us is unique. The spiritual life is a journey to embrace our unique giftedness, energy, beauty and passion and to not try to be someone else. I think of a quote from Quaker writer Parker Palmer[[2]](#footnote-2) about Rabbi Zusya who, as an old man said, “In the coming world they will not ask me: ‘Why were you not Moses?’ They will ask me, ‘Why were you not Zusya.’” We all have unique gifts to being to this world. David needed to be David. We all need to learn to be who we are as unique individuals to live in Mary Oliver[[3]](#footnote-3) words, “Our one wild and precious life.”

What is true for individuals is true for the community called church. The institutional church is constantly tempted to dress itself up as something it is not.

In 2024 American religion is going through immense changes: congregations and denominations are afraid of the future, afraid of membership loss, declining relevance and resources. One response to decline is to play dress up, to become something we are not. Some examples: The community called church is tempted:

* To see itself primarily as a social service agency that provides goods and services for those in need. That is part of what we do but it is not who we are.
* To understand itself primarily as a therapeutic community that helps people feel good and face the challenges of daily living. That is part of what we do, but it is not who we are.
* To become primarily a social club that brings people together to have a great time. That is part of what we do but it is not who we are.
* To be primarily an activist community standing for a certain perspective on social issues and making public policy pronouncements. That is part of what we do but it is not who we are.

**The church is a bit of all the things I named but none of them define our core identity.** When we dress up in the clothing of a social service agency, a therapy center, a social club or political activist we will stumble and fall like David wearing Saul’s coat of amour. That does not mean that we shouldn’t provide social services or have a therapeutic heart or encourage community or speak out on the pressing issues of our day. These activities are aspects of our identity but again they are not our core identity. The church is more than any of these things.

Our core identity is to be a gracious community of faith, gathered in response to God’s grace. One writer said the church is to be *“a communal expression of spiritual wonder[[4]](#footnote-4)”* Unlike other institutions the church is ultimately defined not by how effectively we achieve our goals, even though effectiveness is important, but by how faithfully we live our lives in response to the love of God shown in Jesus Christ.

I close:

**Communities and individuals are tempted, especially when they are afraid or faced with change, to play dress up. To pretend to be something they are not. If we do, like David wearing Saul’s cloths We stumble over ourselves.**

As individuals we all have unique gifts. Let us not hide them. Each of you is unique, gifted and amazing. So is Lakewood. Together, let us guard against playing dress up and remember who we are called to be as the church.

A community formed in response to God’s love.

A community centered in worship that seeks to be faithful to the way of Jesus

A community that nourishes spiritual wonder, peacemaking, thoughtfulness,

 laughter and service to our neighbor.

May it be so

In Jesus name

Amen

1. Bernard Anderson, Understanding the Old Testament: Third Edition (Englewood Cliffs N.J.: Prentice Hall. 1975). Pp 177 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Parker Palmer: Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. From the poem: A Summers Day [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. David James Duncan, God Laughs and Plays, ( Barrington MA, Triad Press, 2006) pg.94 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)