

“Let no one’s heart fail”
First Reading: Ephesians 6:10-17
Second Reading: 1 Samuel 17

In the 28th Psalm, the Psalmist prays these words — *“Blessed be the Lord, for he has heard the sound of my pleadings. The Lord is my strength and my shield; in him my heart trusts; so I am helped, and my heart exults, and with my song I give thanks to him.”*

Can a hospice patient offer that prayer? Knowing that life is ebbing from you and all treatments have run their course to little effect, would the words of that prayer offer any comfort or solace, courage or hope, blessing or peace? *“The Lord is my strength and my shield; in him my heart trusts; so I am helped, and my heart exults...”* Surrounded by the forlorn faces of your beloved, all fighting the appetizer of grief that will not wait until the end, could the words of the psalm still warm your spirit and tempt you to gratitude? *“He has heard the sound of my pleadings. The Lord is my strength and my shield...”*

These are heavy questions, but they are important questions to ask alongside the story of David and Goliath, lest it become a placebo enticing us with the illusion that victory or health is the product of a strong faith,

whereas defeat or succumbing to illness are symptoms of a weak faith. Nothing could be further from the truth. Sometimes, many times in life, Goliath wins and a muscular prayer life will not forestall illness or death. However, the saga of Saul, David, and Goliath can offer us a light revealing how God's strength is greater than our fears, granting us the peace to face all threats with the knowledge that God is with us and will not let us go, whether we win or lose, live or die. It is this strength that sustains us and enables us to face the foibles of life and the prospect of death with grace, trust, energy, and hope. With Paul, we can walk into the future knowing that whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. The saga of David and Goliath isn't about slaying giants so much as it is trusting in the faithfulness of God come what may.

The Israelites and the Philistines were not good neighbors and were brawling at every homeowner's meeting, casting aspersions, attacking one another, and always disputing each other's interpretations of the property lines. These contentious neighbors may have arrived in the neighborhood in the same era, the Israelites arriving from the east at the conclusion of the Exodus journey and the Philistines arriving from the west via the Aegean Sea following ethnic upheaval in Greece and the Aegean Islands.

Philistia evolved as a league of city-states on a strip of land along the shores of the Mediterranean northeast of Egypt. They had arrived as a battle tested seafaring people to this commercially attractive coastal region. Though they were defeated by Ramesses III's Egyptian army, they remained an intimidating and aggressive force in the region looking to expand to the west at the same time the Israelites were expanding from the eastern side of Canaan. Inevitably, the two emerging peoples would come into conflict as they sought to claim the same land. The irony is not lost on me that this contentious region encompasses what is today known as Gaza, a place perpetually stained with the blood harvest of hate. In 1 Samuel 14, we read that — *“There was hard fighting against the Philistines all the days of Saul; and when Saul saw any strong or valiant warrior, he took him into his service.”*

Fast forward two chapters and Saul's army is once again battling the Philistines, and Jesse, still unaware of the Lord's royal plans for his youngest son David, patriotically sends three of his older sons into the battle to defend Israel against the Philistine threat. Meanwhile, David continues to keep up with his chores and shepherd the sheep, only now, in addition, he is asked to deliver food and supplies to his brothers up at the front line of the

battle. What David witnessed at the front was a lot of fear and little confidence. It was bad enough that they had to go up against the perpetually malevolent and battle-tested Philistines, but now there was this new guy who showed up who, understandably, no one wanted to go up against. Goliath. Immediately, there was a horde of Israelites crowded around the volunteer list, pushing their way forward to scratch their names off the list, and everybody was covering their name tags with stickers declaring, Not Me!

It could be that you are familiar with the feeling, perhaps a memory from your days playing Pop Warner football when “that kid” showed up, the hulk who had a full beard in the third grade; who blocked the sun towering over the poor guy playing center for you, and outweighed him by 130 lbs. Remember that guy?

Some of you are old enough to remember the Chicago Bears’ legendary linebacker, Dick Butkus, the Monster of the Midway. Some time ago, ESPN’s Larry Schwartz wrote that Butkus was perhaps, “the meanest, nastiest, fiercest linebacker to ever put on a helmet. [Decades] after his retirement there remains the Butkus image, one of the middle linebacker

wrapping up a running back and viciously slamming him to the ground like an unwanted toy.” His former teammate Dick Buffone observed — “To play this game -- and I've always said this -- you have to have a Neanderthal gene. Butkus had two.” NFL Films producer Steve Sabol said Butkus “was like Moby Dick in a goldfish bowl.” Hall of Fame running back Floyd Little recalled his encounter with Butkus — “Dick Butkus hit me so hard my body almost liquified. He helps me up and says ‘You Ok?’ I said, ‘Yeah of course.’ He says, ‘Well if you’re ok, why are you in our huddle?’ He’d hit me so hard I’d followed him into the Bears huddle. He turned me around and sent me back”

That’s Goliath, right? Goliath wasn’t a giant in the vein of the giant in *Jack and the Beanstalk* and *King Kong*, but was a large, fearsome, aggressive, and arrogant presence who deflated, demoralized, and pummeled his opponents to the point that whole armies would despair the call to face him. Just the shaft of Goliath’s spear weighed 16 lbs. and his coat of mail weighed 125 lbs. From the other side of the Valley of Elah, Goliath taunted the Israelites, “*Today I defy the ranks of Israel! Give me a man, that we may fight together.*” And we read — “*When Saul and all Israel heard these words of the Philistine, they were dismayed and greatly afraid.*”

In the meantime, David had finished up his morning chores with the sheep, and was sent by his father with provisions for his brothers at the front. As he approached, he heard the battle cry of Israel's army and rushed to find a spot to see the spectacle, a spectacle that struck David as odd. At first, it looks like a scene of some Hollywood epic — Trojans vs. Spartans; William Wallace and the Scots vs. Edward I and the Brits; the Union army vs. the Confederacy; Butkus' Bears vs. Lombardi's Packers; Marvel vs. DC Comics; Taylor Swift vs. Katy Perry — their armies lined up across the valley from each other.

Shouting their war cry, Saul's army stood across the valley from the Philistines, and David, standing in the cheap seats, strained his neck to see through the crowd and keep up with the action. Yet, before David could even take the first bite from his bag of popcorn, Goliath stepped into the no-man's land between the armies, all bowed up and taunting Israel's army as if playing to the cameras and crowd at Wrestlemania — *“Am I not a Philistine, and are you not servants of Saul? Choose a man for yourselves, and let him come down to me.”*

David's thinking, *Oh, this ought to be good. Let's get ready to rummmmmble!* Except, upon seeing and hearing the Philistine thug, we read — *“All the Israelites, when they saw the man, fled from him and were very much afraid.” ... Here I am, Lord, don't send me!*

Witnessing this, David is confused, and perhaps even offended — *“Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?”* I think it could be said that David's question here is more essential to the text than Goliath or Saul or Goliath's armor or David's slingshot or even David's excellent aim. You see, as the battle approaches; as the armies gather, leaving their families, their sheep, and their fields behind; as Saul meets with his war cabinet; as Goliath taunts Israel; and as Israel retreats, there is no mention of the Lord, no mention of the God who delivered Israel from Pharaoh's enslavement, the God who protected them in the wilderness, and no mention of the God who brought them to this promised land of milk and honey.

It is as if they had forgotten the words of Joshua, spoken when they entered this promised land — *“You know in your hearts and souls, all of you, that not one thing has failed of all the good things that the Lord your God*

promised concerning you; all have come to pass for you, not one of them has failed ... I gave you a land on which you had not labored, and towns that you had not built, and you live in them; you eat the fruit of vineyards and oliveyards that you did not plant. Now therefore revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness...”

As Saul marshals his army, as they go up against the threat of the Philistines, and as they retreat in fear before the battle even starts, there is no mention of the Lord. David is the first to raise the question of what role the Lord plays in the face of the threat. *“Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?”*

Are we going to fear Goliath more than we trust in the Lord? That’s the fundamental question David puts before us — Are we going to fear Goliath more than we trust in the Lord? How we answer that question can transform how we experience these days, rendering the result of whether David or Goliath survives the smackdown irrelevant. Moses challenged David’s ancestors, *“I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your*

God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days.”

We give death too much power, allowing fear to take up so much real estate in our heads that we have no space left — for experiences of joy and laughter; for encounters of fellowship unburdened by suspicion; for the opportunities for work that betters the life of another; for the peace that passes all understanding which crowds out the paralyzing anxiety over what tomorrow may or may not bring. The Apostle Paul said, *“I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”*

What we see in David at this point in his journey is that he'd rather live embracing the steadfast love of God, than hunker down with the living dead, fearing death more than loving the life God had given them. David would rather face death than miss life. Just this morning, driving to the church, I happened upon a gospel choir on the radio, singing and fervently repeating the line — “It’s good to be alive, but it’s best to live.”

So, David finds Saul back in the bunker and volunteers — *“Let no one's heart fail because of him; your servant will go and fight with this Philistine.”*

Well, you may know the details from the rest of the story: the comical sight of a boy clanking and stumbling around in soldier's gear, far too heavy and cumbersome for him; David's familiarity with the simple efficiency of sling and stone; the sound of a shocked Goliath crashing to the ground.

Yet, in the end, the felling of Goliath doesn't matter nearly as much as a young boy's trust in the steadfast love of God, who gave him the strength and the peace to walk with the living no matter the threat, instead of existing with the living dead whose fear of losing their lives prevented them from living the lives they had. It's good to be alive, but it's best to live.

The Psalmist prays, *“Blessed be the Lord, for he has heard the sound of my pleadings. The Lord is my strength and my shield; in him my heart trusts; so I am helped, and my heart exults, and with my song I give thanks to him.”*

So, can a hospice patient offer that prayer? Absolutely, for the threats we face tomorrow cannot rob us of the precious moments we have now, no longer afraid, trusting the steadfast love of a God who will face tomorrow with us and hold us close no matter what comes our way. Amen.