

Against the Odds

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The Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time
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1 Samuel 17:1-11, 41-49; 2 Corinthians 6:1-10; Mark 4:35-41

Text: “. . . I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts. . . .” -- 1 Samuel 17:45

You may recall from last week that the Israelites were getting wupped by the Amalekites, and God help them out of that tight spot. This week, two chapters later in the first book of Samuel, it's the Philistines, and again the Israelites are getting their clocks cleaned, and again God helps them out, this time with a shepherd boy named David.

I don't think I need to summarize the story of David and Goliath for you because it's so well known. It's one of those colorful, dramatic Bible stories that lend themselves quite easily to the imagination of a child, so we teach it to our children, along with God creating Eve and Adam and the animals in the lovely garden, and Noah saving everyone in the ark – one of the few stories where the animals upstage the people – and Moses parting the Red Sea so the Hebrews could escape from the terrible conditions of slavery, and so on.

We are, of course, selective – judicious, some would say – in how we present these stories, because they're all morally complex and more subtle than we usually realize. We gloss over the more poignant aspects of these stories when we first learn them, and many of us never get or take the opportunity to re-visit them with adult sensibilities.

I can still remember the song I learned at church camp or VBS about little David playing on his harp, hallelu, hallelu, and we children gleefully sang that “little David was a shepherd boy, he killed Goliath and he shouted for joy, Hallelujah!” completely oblivious to the harsh reality of what killing another person or even another living creature means.

And when we did develop a more nuanced moral faculty, and if we've remained in church long enough to hear those stories about killing Goliath and drowning the Egyptians and punishing Adam and Eve for eating a piece of fruit, we've come to realize that if we're not to remain trapped in the literalism of a child's mind, we have to read those stories as being true in some way other than being literally true.

And that takes a certain amount of time and effort, and most of us aren't inclined to expend our limited free time and energy wrestling with troubling stories from somebody else's ancient scriptures, and so we turn instead to a highly selective reading of the New Testament, where Jesus is bathed in sweetness and light.

But the Bible isn't all sweetness and light because life isn't all sweetness and light, and far from trying to persuade us to believe fantastic nonsense, as cynics and skeptics suggest, the Bible actually tries to persuade us to look at reality in a more-than-superficial way, in a more than sound-byte or headline or IM or Twitter or text-messaging sort of way. The problem of literalism is not with the Bible, it's with us.

And so we're back to that improbable story about a cute shepherd boy named David who kills the super-size Philistine named Goliath with a sling and a stone and help from his patron deity, the Lord. That's what David means when he says in this morning's text, “I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts.” He's saying that he comes to this encounter with Goliath with God's help, and he does so because he is part of God's chosen people. David knows that he has a right to expect God's help because God has

invested a lot in Israel already. David's heard the stories; he knows that God intervened time and again to keep the chosen people from disappearing, and David knows that without God's help, the odds are definitely not in Israel's favor in this encounter with the Philistines and the odds have never been in Israel's favor.

It was never likely that a childless old couple named Abraham and Sarah would produce a family with more descendants than you can count, but they did.

It was never likely that the Hebrew people would continue to hear God calling them through years of slavery, wandering, and exile, but they did.

It was never likely that a child conceived of an unwed mother, born into a backwater village in a Roman province, and executed as a political criminal would launch the world's most widespread peaceful revolution, but he did.

The Bible is filled with improbable stories. It is filled with tales of women and men, as individuals and as groups, defying the odds in the name of the God of justice, righteousness, and peace. The Bible is filled with wildly unlikely stories of parting waters and floating ax heads and people being brought back from the dead – all miraculously against the odds – to remind us that the law of averages is not the law we are called to obey. We who claim to be God's chosen people obey a different law, march to a different drummer, answer to a different call.

“There are those who look at things the way they are, and ask why,” Robert Kennedy said. “I dream of things that never were, and ask why not?” That's living a life of vision, a life of possibility, a life touched by the grace of God. That's living against the odds.

Is that the kind of life you're living? Is your life touched with the grace that asks why not instead of the despair that simply shakes its head and asks why? Are you part of the daring, heroic few or the silent, cautious majority? Are you willing to risk for the sake of God's realm, or are you going to pilot the craft of your life safely into the harbor of the grave without ever having made more than the slightest ripple on life's surface? It is true, as Admiral Grace Hopper has said, that ships are safe in harbor, but that's not what ships are for. And she should know.

Most of us live the way we invest in the stock market: cautiously, with a great deal of research, and with careful attention to those areas where we think we'll get the greatest return on our investment. Very few of us invest against the odds, and if we did, the stock market would cease to exist, because the market, like so many other things in our lives, depends on averages, statistical probability, and historical performance. The stock market works – to the extent that it works – because most people live according to the odds. Christians live against the odds.

The odds are that most people will go on being as indifferent to suffering and injustice as they've been to get us to this point in human history. The odds are in the pessimists' favor.

The odds are that we could throw out every official in county government and install an entirely new bunch, and if we give them enough time and little enough attention a certain percentage of them, too, will turn out to be corrupt and incompetent. The odds are in the cynics' favor.

The odds are that Iran and North Korea and several other countries and a whole bunch of terrorists will develop nuclear weapons if they can, and we will continue to spend lives and treasure trying to prevent that. The odds are in the hawks' favor.

But what is likely is never the same as what is right, and we who call ourselves followers of Jesus Christ are in the business of right, not might. We're in the business of discipleship, not salesmanship. We're in the business of living faithfully, not successfully, as the world defines success.

“But Gene,” I can hear some of you saying, “You're setting up a false dichotomy. You're forcing an unnecessary choice between living in the world and living of the world. There's no reason why we can't do both. There's no reason why we can't render unto God *and* unto Caesar. There's no reason why we can't eat our cake and have it, too.”

That's what many Christians think and I think many Christians are wrong. I think they're wrong because of what I read in the Bible, what I've learned in the church, and what I sense from God's Holy Spirit. And I can sum up all of that by saying simply that as far as this world is concerned, the odds are most definitely not in God's favor.

There has never been a time in human history when things went right as God defines right. There was never a time when people weren't fighting over resources or ideas. There was never a time when a good chunk of the human race – perhaps the larger chunk -- wasn't greedy, lazy, and stupid. There was never a time when most people lived lives of sacrificial love so that a minority would be sacrificed regularly to conflict, war, and unnecessary suffering and death. There never was such a time and the odds are that there never will be.

So thank God that we don't live by the odds. Thank God that we don't order our lives by what's likely to happen. Thank God that we don't take as our ideals, our goals, our dreams, and our aspirations that which is statistically most probable.

We who call ourselves Christian believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the most improbable assertion in human history. We don't believe and have never believed in the resuscitation. The church has never taught that. We don't believe that God outsmarted death and brought Jesus back to this life only to have him go off to heaven and die again. We have never believed that and we've never taught that.

We have believed and taught that God overcame death – didn't outsmart death, but overcame the power of death and everything related to death – in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. And there was nothing probable about that. No one could have predicted that it would happen. No one would have said that the odds were in favor of Jesus' being God's long-awaited Messiah. The story of Jesus's life of self-sacrificial love is highly improbable, and that's exactly the story we tell and try to live. We in the church are in the improbability business.

We who call ourselves Christian are followers of a crucified and risen savior; we live against the odds. We who call ourselves Christian live representing the minority viewpoint. We who call ourselves Christian live as the exception, not as the rule. That's what it means to come to our broken and suffering and despairing world – the world that shakes its head in despair and asks why – in the name of the Lord of hosts.

“Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest!”