

21 June, 2009
I Samuel 17:4, 8-9, 32-49; Ps 9:9-20
2 Cor 6:1-13; Mark 4:35-41

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In the 1959 movie *The Mouse that Roared*, the impoverished Duchy of Grand Fenwick hatches a daring plan to invade the United States. Their logic is impeccable: they are small; they are poor; they are backwards; they will lose -- and the United States always gives huge amounts of foreign aid to anyone it defeats. Having been conquered, Grand Fenwick's future will be assured! And so they land their entire army -- five or six or eight guys in rusted armor and chain mail, armed with swords and bows -- in New York City, and go off in search of someone who can accept their surrender. Only one thing goes wrong: they win.

It is a fair summary of the life of King David, whose story we begin today and will be reading together for much of the summer. David is hailed as the greatest king of Israel -- the one who united the culturally-different North and South, imposed internal order, defeated all his enemies, the one who was "a man after God's own heart" -- and yet, his own story is one of steady decline as he succumbs to the temptations of wealth, power, and women. His family will fall prey to discord; his marital relations to territorial scheming. He will not even be permitted to build the Temple of the Lord, which was, after all, his idea. Here, at the very beginning, when he is still a nobody, we see him at his best -- as if he still knows something that he will later lose, and the loss will cost him everything.

At the start of the story, Israel has been attacked by their greatest enemies, the Philistines. These were a maritime people with a king, an army, and a strong central government, who posed such a threat to the disunited tribes of Israel that they decided they needed king of their own in self-defense. So the prophet Samuel anoints Saul, who immediately lost the Lord's favor by interfering in religious practice as well as in statecraft. So the first thing to know about David is that he is God's *second* choice to lead Israel.

The story opens when Goliath, a Philistine champion, challenges anyone in the Israeli army to single combat. If he wins, the Philistines win; if the Hebrew champion wins, they win. Either way, the lives of all the other men in the two armies have been spared. The only problem is, Goliath is nine feet tall. Now, even if he grew posthumously the way fish grow after you've caught them, that is still one *tall* man. And the Biblical witness is consistent that there were some very tall tribes living in the general area inhabited by the Philistines. Since the Hebrews were of normal size, Goliath was a frightening opponent, and so, day after humiliating day, Goliath came out and made his challenge, and day after humiliating day, nobody answered it -- not even Saul, who was supposed to have been the anointed warrior of the Lord.

Until, one day, Jesse the Ephrathite sends his youngest son David to bring some food to his big brothers in the army, and to bring back word of them to their father. And so David, who is no warrior, who is not even *in* this army, is on hand to hear the giant's challenge. Now, our reading today omits this detail, but, when he hears it, David asks around the army what will happen to the man who defeats Goliath. And all the men tell him that whoever does it will be made very rich, and will marry the daughter of the King. (I Sam 17:25-27) So by the time David comes forward to answer the challenge, he has already been lured by self-interest as well as by his own courage and honor; he already faces the very temptations which will later bring him down.

And yet, his courage is undeniable. He stands before the King and offers to kill the Philistine, and, when Saul points out that he is only a boy, David replies, "Your servant has killed both lions and bears; and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them, since he has defied the armies of the living God." (I Sam 17:36) To David, it is not only the power of Israel that is at stake here, not only the liberty of his own people, whom he does not wish to see enslaved to the

Philistines; what is at stake here is the honor of the living God, who will ensure the victory of his people.

And so Saul wraps David in his own armor and sends him out, but, like a little boy trying on his father's shoes, David cannot walk in armor. So he takes it off and goes out just as he is, in his shepherd's clothing and carrying his shepherd's weapon, to face the wrath of the giant. And the giant laughs, but David replies: "You come to me with sword and spear and javelin; but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts...whom you have defied...for the battle is the Lord's, and he will give you into our hand." (I Sam 17:45, 47)

Megapastor Rick Warren begins his best-seller *The Purpose-Driven Life* with a simple claim: "It's not about you." Your life, your dreams, your goals, your family -- none of this has ultimate value. If you want to know why you are here, he says, "you must begin with God." (p.11) *That* is where David begins, with God. To be sure, he notices that he has some skills which might help him meet this challenge; he has protected his sheep while he was guarding them. But every man in that army has those skills; they are, after all, warriors. The real thing David has which sets him apart is his trust in God. It's not all about David; it's about what God will do through him.

So often, when we face a challenge, we find ourselves blind-sided, looking around for the perfect person to come and rescue us. We look for the person with all the skills, all the gifts, the track record of proven achievement. And if that person fails to appear, we want to pretend to be that person. Like David, we put on the armor of Saul, armor made for someone else, piece by piece, feign a power, a confidence, a competence which we do not have. Facing a job interview, a presentation, a dissertation defense, we put on our best clothes, apply our best make-up, do our best to look professional, to act professional, hoping that others will believe that we are professional. In a family crisis, we remember our parents and mentors, try to act as they would act. We pretend to be warriors, when inside our armor, we are quaking like field-mice.

And it works well enough, until we come to the challenge it can't meet. Maybe the bottom drops out of the economy, and nobody living remembers how to get through when there is no work. Maybe someone we love dies, and no amount of pretending will get us through the grief. Maybe it's an illness which strips our dignity, a betrayal which destroys a friendship. Whatever it is, we put on our usual armor, erect our usual defenses, and realize that, wearing them, we can no longer walk. They are getting in the way of what needs to be done.

At those times, we need the courage of David, who looked, and saw, and realized, and took the armor off. He did not need to pretend to be anything other than he was; he only needed to trust that God was with him. In today's Gospel, the disciples are in a boat that is caught in a storm, and they cry out, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" (Matt 4:38) *Lord, do you not care?* It is the cry that haunts our sleep, troubles our mind when we see the suffering of others, when we taste the bitterness of fear. *Do you not care?* Not, "Let me be all-powerful," but, simply, "Let me not be alone." When the night is dark and the clock ticks slowly and we lie awake in our fear, we want to know that God is not indifferent.

And David's answer comes roaring to us from the past: "I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts." In all our times of trial, in all our hours of testing, God cares. God is with us. God may strip us down to nothing, allow all our usual defenses to fail, but naked as we are, mere human creatures of flesh and blood and heart, we will be enough when God is on our side. We do not need to be more than we are. We need only be what we are. We have been shaped by the hands of God, and that is enough.

When David took off the armor of Saul, he put on another set of armor that is more powerful by far -- the armor St. Paul describes in his letter to the Ephesians. "Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on

the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints.” (Eph 6:13-18) This armor is not made of brass or of iron, but of truthfulness, righteous integrity, peace, faith, trust in the Holy Spirit, prayer, and mercy toward others. This armor nobody can take from you; this armor will never trip you up. But only you can decide to put it on.

Two weeks ago, we celebrated the twentieth anniversary of the protests at Tiananmen Square. After seven weeks of demonstrations in favor of democracy and the reform of a corrupt government, the leadership of China sent tanks into the Square and rolled them over the protesters. The image we all remember has become an icon: a lone man in dark pants and an ordinary white shirt, facing down a line of advancing tanks -- David and Goliath in the age of mechanical warfare. And although thousands died, somehow, the remaining people took heart. Things changed from that day. Somehow, the power of the tanks did not win.

This week, hundreds of thousands more have marched in the streets of Tehran. We do not know what will happen, but we can guess how they got there. They put on that holy armor, the one which can only be seen with the eyes of faith, and decided that they would have the courage of their convictions, come what may.

The thing about the armor of faith is not that it's powerless; it's that it is so powerful that we may feel we are not worthy of it. We may believe that we are too frightened for it to work for us, too weak in faith to cling to its protection, too small to be worthy of the notice of God. We are so many Prufrocks, looking at our lives and shrinking back,

But though I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed,
Though I have seen my head [grown slightly bald] brought in upon a platter,
I am no prophet—and here's no great matter;
I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,
And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker,
And in short, I was afraid. (T.S.Eliot, “The Love-Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”)

But the good news of God in Jesus Christ is that, in Jesus Christ, God became the god of small things as well as of the great, the god of small people as well as of the great, the god of second chances. He is with babies born in barns as well as with kings; he hovers among the poor as often as he haunts the doorsteps of the rich. There is nothing in our lives that is beneath God's notice, because we are God's beloved, and this is God's world. All of it, all of it, is God's. When we miss God, often is because we are looking too high, when God is walking among us all the time.

Do you not care?, the disciples cry out, but the very accusation is a form of praise. It is, after all, directed toward Christ. When we cry out in fear, in pain, in anger, we are not renouncing God: we are wrestling with that angel who hovers always near. We may be wounded; we may walk with a limp forever; but we will know the face of that angel; we will hear his voice as he calls our name; we will walk forever in the presence of the Lord, even when it seems we walk alone.