



# FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

## “PREVENTING HEART FAILURE”

Scripture Lessons: Mark 4:35-41; 1 Samuel 17 (selected verses)

*This sermon was preached by Rev. Maggie F. Beamguard on Sunday, June 21, 2015  
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

### Mark 4: 35-41

<sup>35</sup> On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side." <sup>36</sup> And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. <sup>37</sup> A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. <sup>38</sup> But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" <sup>39</sup> He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. <sup>40</sup> He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" <sup>41</sup> And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

### 1 Samuel 17:1-40, selected verses

<sup>1</sup> Now the Philistines gathered their armies for battle; [...] <sup>4</sup> And there came out from the camp of the Philistines a champion named Goliath, of Gath, whose height was six cubits and a span. <sup>5</sup> He had a helmet of bronze on his head, and he was armed with a coat of mail; the weight of the coat was five thousand shekels of bronze. <sup>6</sup> He had greaves of bronze on his legs and a javelin of bronze slung between his shoulders. <sup>7</sup> The shaft of his spear was like a weaver's beam, and his spear's head weighed six hundred shekels of iron; and his shield-bearer went before him. <sup>8</sup> He stood and shouted to the ranks of Israel, "Why have you come out to draw up for battle? Am I not a Philistine, and are you not servants of Saul? Choose a man for yourselves, and let him come down to me. <sup>9</sup> If he is able to fight with me and kill me, then we will be your servants; but if I prevail against him and kill him, then you shall be our servants and serve us." <sup>10</sup> And the Philistine said, "Today I defy the ranks of Israel! Give me a man, that we may fight together." <sup>11</sup> When Saul and all Israel heard these words of the Philistine, they were dismayed and greatly afraid. [...]

<sup>19</sup> Now Saul, and they, and all the men of Israel, were in the valley of E'lah, fighting with the Philistines. <sup>20</sup> David rose early in the morning, left the sheep with a keeper, took the provisions, and went as Jesse had commanded him. He came to the encampment as the army was going forth to the battle line, shouting the war cry. <sup>21</sup> Israel and the Philistines drew up for battle, army against army. <sup>22</sup> David left the things in charge of the keeper of the baggage, ran to the ranks, and went and greeted his brothers. <sup>23</sup> As he talked with them, the champion, the Philistine of Gath, Goliath by name, came up out of the ranks of the Philistines, and spoke the same words as before. And David heard him. [...]

<sup>32</sup> David said to Saul, "Let no one's heart fail because of him; your servant will go and fight with this Philistine." <sup>33</sup> Saul said to David, "You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him; for you are just a boy, and he has been a warrior from his youth." <sup>34</sup> But David said to Saul, "Your servant used to keep sheep for his father; and whenever a lion or a bear came, and took a lamb from the flock, <sup>35</sup> I went after it and struck it down, rescuing the lamb from its mouth; and if it turned against me, I would catch it by the jaw, strike it down, and kill it. <sup>36</sup> 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." <sup>37</sup> David said, "The LORD, who saved me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, will save me from the hand of this Philistine." So Saul said to David, "Go, and may the LORD be with you!" <sup>38</sup> Saul clothed David with his armor; he put a bronze helmet on his head and clothed him with a coat of mail. <sup>39</sup> David strapped Saul's sword over the armor, and he tried in vain to walk, for he was not used to them. Then David said to Saul, "I cannot walk with these; for I am not used to them." So

David removed them.<sup>40</sup> Then he took his staff in his hand, and chose five smooth stones from the wadi, and put them in his shepherd's bag, in the pouch; his sling was in his hand, and he drew near to the Philistine.

Last Wednesday evening, I met with our Stephen Ministers at First (Scots), and headed home at 7:30. My route took me one mile up Meeting Street. I turned right on Calhoun, and drove past Emanuel AME Church without a glance. 24 hours later, I stood shoulder to shoulder with many of you, Rev. Rogers, ministers from our presbytery and members of our community.

We crossed police tape to lay flowers and cards and to say prayers at the church steps of Mother Emanuel, paying tribute to

Rev. Clementa Pinckney,  
Rev. Sharonda Coleman-Singleton,  
Rev. DePayne Middleton-Doctor,  
Cynthia Hurd,  
Susie Jackson,  
Ethel Lance,  
Tywanza Sanders,  
Rev. Daniel Simmons and  
Myra Thompson

who died tragically inside.

A man intent on doing evil entered a sanctuary of our Holy City and murdered nine people. He killed them after they offered him hospitality and shared the gospel of Jesus Christ with him. The evils we deplore<sup>1</sup> entered the heart of our city and our most sacred ground.

With lumps in our throats, and heavy hearts, and breath thick in our lungs, we have stumbled through this week together. We sat vigil, we held hands, we sang, we prayed, we wrote cards and made phone calls.

Last week James and I heard from many of you asking, "What can we do?" As we have shared, we have been asking the same question. It is an important question.

It is the question we often ask when someone has died. What can we do?

We have our ways. People show up, usually with food, and they hug and share comforting words. They tell tales, and they cry and they laugh. And Charleston, Charleston, who does this better than Charleston? We come together in a crisis.

We are not without compassion. Neither are we without courage.

"Courage" comes from the Latin word for "heart."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick "God of Grace and God of Glory" *The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990), #420, stanza 5.

<sup>2</sup> The development of this sermon is credited largely to my friend and colleague Robert Montgomery. We first discussed these texts at a gathering of the Lewisburg Lectionary League including the idea that Jesus sleeping in the boat, those who sleep in church may have absolute confidence in God's care. I'm grateful for his sermon, especially his

Courage is about sticking to what your heart tells you, sticking to what your heart has claimed as its ultimate love. It's about having a "strong heart." Sometimes, though, a situation will overwhelm us, or scare us, or shock us so that our nerves get the better of us. We lose heart.

Having 'courage' means we haven't given up on what our hearts know and love. To use the language of the Bible, having courage means, "we believe." You would not be here today if you were not searching for something in which to believe, for someone in whom you can believe. We all need somewhere to keep our hearts.

Today we hear two stories, one from the Hebrew Scriptures and one from the Gospel of Mark, in which the one of the questions is about whether people's hearts will stay strong or whether their nerves will get the better of them.

The first is the story of David and Goliath, a story which attracts the particular attention of children whose world is dominated by giants, and the attention of adults because, who doesn't love an underdog?<sup>3</sup> And who doesn't think they have ever been one?

While Saul and Israel start to throw up their hands in inevitable defeat at Goliath's challenge to them, David steps forward and speaks the words he was born to speak<sup>4</sup>:

*David said to Saul, "Let no one's heart fail because of him; your servant will go and fight with this Philistine."*

Saul, the King, offers a reality check to the young idealist: "You are not able." "You cannot fight him." "You are a boy." "He is a warrior."

It is solid advice. The danger is real. Goliath is no imaginary threat. The Philistines are out there. It is hard to argue with Saul. It is hard to argue with this kind of pragmatism. Unless courage acknowledges there are real and present dangers, it disintegrates into reckless bravado.

But David sees what is going on with the people of Israel. They are toe to toe with a giant. Their nerves are going haywire. Their hearts are going into an arrhythmia. Intimidated, they cannot imagine any alternative solutions or outcomes. The power of the Philistines is just taken for granted. There is nothing for them to do.

So David's first battle is with his own people, not the Philistine.<sup>5</sup> He tells the one story he has to tell: how he protects his lambs from lions and bears. He rescues, catches, strikes down and kills – all to save the helpless. He explains how this is possible:

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treatment of courage, which I have included here in these paragraphs. "Nerves of Faith" First Presbyterian Church, Pulaski, TN, June 21, 2009

<sup>3</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *David's Truth in Israel's Imagination and Memory* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1985), 31.

<sup>4</sup> Brueggeman, 32.

<sup>5</sup> Montgomery

*David said, "The LORD, who saved me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, will save me from the hand of this Philistine."<sup>6</sup>*

This raw power behind this belief gives him courage.

David who has delivered will be delivered. David, who was protecting the lambs will now be the lamb who is protected.<sup>7</sup>

Saul, ever the pragmatist, will let him go, but insists David meets Goliath on Goliath's terms. Body armor for body armor, weapon for weapon. If Saul is going to send in a fighter, his fighter is going to look like a fighter.

But David, confident and courageous, shrugs off the armor and weapons. The power he needs does not come from tools and the protection he needs does not come from shields.

He knows there is another way to take down this giant.

Goliath and David talk. Insults are hurled by the bully. But David speaks clearly, confidently, courageously about God:

*David said to the Philistine, "You come to me with sword and spear and javelin; but I come to you in the name of the LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This very day the LORD will deliver you into my hand, [...] so that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, and that all this assembly may know that the LORD does not save by sword and spear; for the battle is the LORD's and he will give you into our hand."*

David knows where he keeps his heart. He knows what he believes. He knows this because God has acted before and trusts God will act again. Goliath, the Philistine, is not going to change that.

This particular encounter does not end in a peace treaty, but it does end in promised deliverance not available to the earthly powers that bring these men toe to toe.

David did not put his heart in his slingshot or stones. He did not put his heart in his physical ability. He did not put his heart in his intelligence, eloquence or ruddy good looks. All of those things can and will fail him. In *this* story, he puts his heart on the thing he believes. God rescued him. God will rescue him again and again.

In our second story today, there are also people in need of rescue.

The disciples cross over the Sea of Galilee in the evening when a windstorm arises and threatens to swamp the boat.

Jesus, the man in whom they have placed their heart, is in the boat with them. The only problem is, he is fast asleep. They are hyperventilating. Their hearts will give out in panic before they end up at the bottom of the sea. Waking Jesus they address him accusatorily: "Do you not care that we are perishing?"

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<sup>6</sup> 1 Samuel 17:37

<sup>7</sup> Brueggeman, 33.

They are supposed to be safe, because he is with them. Instead, they are going to go down with ship. Jesus speaks to the wind and to the sea: “Peace, be still.”

The response of the disciples seems like a normal, natural human response – biological, even. On a very basic level, freaking out when your boat is sinking without a life raft in sight and your insurance policy – napping, is, understandable. This is a real threat to life.

I wonder if there is another way to put our faltering to use. When we are afraid, maybe this is our nerves, not getting the best of us, but alerting us to take preventive measures as soon as possible before our heart’s fail and we forget altogether what matters most to us.

The disciples do wake Jesus. And even though they are not eloquent or particularly kind, they communicate their deepest, darkest fear – that they are surely going to die, and they wonder whether he cares about them at all, to his face.

Jesus wonders why they are afraid. He has not abandoned them. He will not abandon them no matter how edgy they are.

When our nerves get away from us, and our hearts start to fail, we may start to assume that God is absent or God does not care.<sup>8</sup> The Israelites assume God is absent and believe will be slaughtered. The disciples think God does not care and believe they will surely drown.

Certainly there were moments last week when those questions crossed our minds:

How could this happen in a church?

Are there no places left that are sacred and safe?

Where was God?

Does God care about us?

If the disciples can ask them, these are fair questions. It is okay to sit with these questions. And it is important for us to search for God in them and our experience.

My friend Robert Montgomery writes: “The Bible is never blind or glib about those things. Danger is real. Death is real. Suffering is real. Loss is real. But the Bible tells us story after story of people facing the worst in order to reveal that our hearts really can stay strong in the face of those winds and giants. We do not have to give up our faith, or even our joy and our love. Our hearts and our faith can take them. In fact, we know our hearts are staying strong when our faith, hope and love do not forsake us in the face of adversity. And the adversity, whether we know it or not, is no match for them.”

The Bible tells this story and God tells this story through us.

What can we do? We can be courageous and keep telling this story.

What courage, what heart, what belief, has been lived out this week in our community?

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<sup>8</sup> Montgomery

On Friday, Dylann Roof, the gunman accused of nine counts of murder, appeared for a bond hearing. Members of the victims' families spoke, not words of condemnation, but words of forgiveness, words from their broken, courageous hearts:

Like these from the daughter of victim Ethel Lance: "You hurt me. You hurt a lot of people. May God forgive you. And I forgive you."

And these from a family member of Anthony Thompson: "I forgive you and my family forgives you, but we would like you to take this opportunity to repent . . . confess, give your life to the one who matters the most, Christ . . ."

Alana Simmons, granddaughter of victim Daniel Simmons concluded her statement at Friday's bond hearing by saying, "Hate won't win." A relative added, "I am a work in progress and I acknowledge that I am very angry. But we are the family that love built. We have no room for hate, so we have to forgive."

This is the way to undo all Goliaths. They never see it coming.

The power of the Philistine is so often simply taken for granted. The Philistine counts on that. The Philistine counts on our fear of that power. The Philistine bullies, insults, intimidates and kills. The Philistine does not expect the confidence and courage of those who have power he cannot see, power that comes from a source that cannot be defeated, a power that rescues the helpless and refuses to abandon the vulnerable.<sup>9</sup>

David says, "Let not your hearts fail on account of this Philistine."

David sees him for who he is. We caught a glimpse of him this week, too.

When faced with a Goliath, we speak the only story we can tell: The one that makes our hearts sing: "We shall overcome." The one story that says, "God rescues us again and again." The one story that says, "Emanuel, God with us." The one story that says, "We are the family that love built. We have no room for hate. We have to forgive."

This is the story that gives our community raw power to face any challenge together, to be the family that love built.

Tell it, but do not mistake Dylann Roof's hate for the only threat this week, in our lives or community or in our world.

What Goliath's intimidate us? What other Goliath's make us think there is nothing we can do? How many Goliath's are we unwilling to face? Because it is not the "right time," or because "they" have all the right tools and armor, or because they have the political advantage, or "they" have the money and control of the investments, or all the right looks, or because... things are the way they are.

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<sup>9</sup> Jill Duffield, "12th Sunday of Ordinary Time – June 21, 2015" The Presbyterian Outlook, <http://pres-outlook.org/2015/06/12th-sunday-of-ordinary-time-june-21-2015/>

I mean, that was Saul's argument. The pragmatist. You can't fight. You are a boy. He is a warrior.

Daniel Mendelsohn, in his book about family members killed in the Holocaust titled, "The Lost: A Search for Six of Six Million," writes this: "The Holocaust is so big, the scale of it is so gigantic, so enormous, that it becomes easy to think of it as something mechanical. Anonymous. But everything that happened, happened because someone made a decision. To pull a trigger, to flip a switch, to close a cattle car door, to hide, to betray."<sup>10</sup>

Each day presents us with choices that reveal who we believe has power. We can cave to Goliath, or keep our hearts with God.

"Let not your hearts fail," says David.

Dylann Roof, with his hate-filled speech and symbols, wanted to spark a race war.

Let not our hearts fail. Let the outpouring of love and compassion that has begun in our grief spark instead meaningful conversations with all our neighbors, specifically about racism as it is experienced in our community so we can understand it, our role in it, and begin to dismantle structures that support it and encourage it. May we listen to understand the point of view of the other rather than simply validating our own. Perhaps we can reach out with intention to our historically black Presbyterian churches and build those relationships and worship regularly together. Perhaps we need to confront the Goliath within – the one that downplays racism, allows the bigoted comment or joke to slide, or excuses inequalities based on race.

Beware, we know there is a Goliath trudging around whenever people start throwing up their hands in defeat, or whenever people start being especially pragmatic about how to confront it.

Courageous people are not separated from reality. They know: Goliath is. . . big and threatening and armed and dangerous. Courageous people aren't people without fear.

Courageous people are just people who stick to their ultimate love.

For Christian people, our ultimate love is, of course, Jesus, who first loved us.

He does not abandon us, ever, even when our hearts falter. We are a grieving community which has faced its share of Goliaths.

What do we do?

If we are to be included in the family that love built, we will let not our hearts fail us now. We put our arms around each other, prepared to face any Goliath toe to toe, ready to cry to Jesus the moment we fear he has gone. And we courageously invoke in word and deed our love story, the only one worth telling:

Emanuel!  
Emanuel!

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<sup>10</sup> As quoted by Jill Duffield

Emanuel!  
Emanuel!  
Emanuel!  
Emanuel!  
Emanuel!  
Emanuel!  
Emanuel!

God with us.

Amen.