Journey of the Heart: Bon Courage

For the past 3 weeks we have been thinking about how God was working with the nation of Israel as they left the period of the judges and took up a monarchy. Even though it wasn’t God’s first choice he works through the prophet Samuel to call Saul as the first king of Israel. Pastor Jimmy called our attention to the fact that Saul was the king we all would have chosen. On the outside everything looked great, but as he carried out his rule it became apparent that his heart was turning away from the heart of God. And so God asks Samuel to anoint David as the next King and passes over Saul’s heirs to the throne. Through Samuel God retains the primary influence and direction of the kingdom, a kingdom that he was shaping to reflect his holiness, his order, his love; a reflection of his heart.

And now, as we continue this journey of the heart we come to one of the most iconic stories in the Old Testament. Even though biblical literacy is in decline in North America, the story of David and Goliath is still one of the most recognized and remembered stories of ancient literature. The account of this stand-off between the young shepherd and the giant ranks among literature's great moments for a couple of reasons.

First it surprises and delights us with the unexpected. David is the little brother caring for the sheep and sneaks into the battle only because he is bringing his brothers’ supplies as they camp out with the army. We know that God has chosen him and anointed him to be King but we can’t anticipate how or when this will happen. And then in the very next scene he is thrown into this great battle, facing off in a fight to the death with the giant Goliath.

The sheer difference in size between the young shepherd David and the man-giant, said to be 9 feet 9 inches tall, accentuates the drama of the story and endears us to the character that we see in David. This is the iconic underdog story that still captivates our storytelling today. Think of any of your favourite movies or novels and I’ll bet you can identify the underdog theme working to move your sympathy for the hero.

We love rooting for the underdog and that’s why characters who are smaller in stature and power attract our sympathies: Harry Potter, Frodo and Sam, Oliver Twist, Remember the Titans. In all of these stories we identify with the hero because we can see aspects of ourselves in them. We are also measured down from time to time by the giants that we face and so we love rooting for the underdog and seeing that it’s possible for the small hero to surprise and overpower the big scary villain.

And just as we were challenged last week that God looks inside to the character of the heart, here we see that the size and appearance of the enemy may also lead us astray and we can underestimate what God can do when we align our hearts to his. Nevertheless, David is an unlikely hero who faces overwhelming odds.

The second reason this story has held our attention much longer than other stories in the scriptures is that it reveals David’s confidence in the face of this formidable army and monstrous foe. It not only surprises us when David defeats the giant, it surprises us that David has the confidence and faith to even enter the arena to fight.

As Goliath taunts the Israelite armies, David’s heart responds to defend the honour of God by challenging anyone who would defy him. We are told in the previous scene that God judges according to what is in the heart, now we are given the example and evidence of the heart of David. He responds with faith and confidence that the God of Israel will deliver this giant into his hands. David courageously steps into the battlefield because he trusts in the power and presence of God.

 David walks down the northern bank of the valley of Elah and sets his sights on the massive figure. I think the question he was asking himself was “How many Giants am I going to have to take on today? Let’s see there’s this Goliath bloke but I know that he’s got 4 other brothers, so I better take 5 stones, yeah just in case they aren’t too pleased when this big brute gets schooled.”

Goliath bends over and leans on his shield holder, covers his eyes from the sun glaring down on him, and spots this little, tiny, ant? No no, it's bigger than an ant. Slowly getting bigger, yes now he can see, it’s a boy. They sent a boy? Goliath is really puzzled. This contest is not just some random wrestling match to prove his personal strength. Goliath has been striding out to the middle of this valley for 30 days so that he can conquer the whole Israelite nation with one kill. This was a common practice, both sides would send representatives who would battle to the death, and so dramatically minimize the fatalities of their armies.

Each nation's hope completely depends on their representative. So Goliath is really puzzled, but his confusion soon turns to anger as he realizes the nerve of this boy striding out to battle as if he was a champion.

“Am I a dog that you come at me with sticks? Come here and I’ll give your flesh to the birds of the air and the beasts of the field.”

David replied, “You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the Lord will hand you over to me, and I’ll strike you down and cut off your head. Today I will give the carcasses of the Philistine army to the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth, and the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel. All those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the Lord saves; for the battle is the Lord’s and he will give all of you into our hands.”

David’s confidence is remarkable. Despite his youth, his inexperience in battle, his weaponry, and his size, he speaks to Goliath as if he knows exactly what is going to happen next. Goliath makes a move, but struggles to move with any speed under his 150 pounds of armour. David takes advantage and quickly runs toward Goliath taking a stone from his bag and fixing it in his sling he begins to whirl it madly above his head. Suddenly he plants his right foot. He pushes off, and releases the sling at the same time. The sound of thousands of men holding their breath while one stone whistles through the air is deafening. And then it hits. Goliath’s eyes spread wide, his knees buckle, and he collapses onto his face. Without a moment’s hesitation, David keeps moving towards Goliath. He races up, pulls Goliath’s own sword out of the sheath, cuts off his head, and holds it up by the hair! The cheers of the Israelites spread across the valley and the horror of what has just happened hits the Philistines. This little jewish shepherd has killed their giant. They are gobsmacked. They turn around with puzzlement written across their faces and run.

 Now, I know this scene isn’t anything new to most of you. You’ve heard this story umpteem times, from flannel graph to veggie tales.

But have you ever noticed that this isn’t just a story about an underdog. It’s a story about unfinished business. If you picked up on the reference to Gath as we read through this chapter you know that it’s the town where Goliath is from. V.4 “A champion named Goliath, who was from Gath, came out of the Philistine camp.”

What’s Gath got to do with it? Gath was one of the Philistine cities that was closest to the Israelite territory that God had delivered into the hands of Joshua and his people as they entered the promised land. Joshua and the Israelites battled for their area but it seems that Gath was far enough away to be considered Philistine land. In Joshua 13 we read “When Joshua was old and well advanced in years, the LORD said to him, "You are very old, and there are still very large areas of land to be taken over. "This is the land that remains: all the regions of the Philistines and Geshurites: from the Shihor River on the east of Egypt to the territory of Ekron on the north, all of it counted as Canaanite (the territory of the five Philistine rulers in Gaza, Ashdod, Ashkelon, Gath and Ekron--that of the Avvites);” Perhaps David chose 5 stones to defeat the 5 Philistine rulers of those cities.

If you want to see an amazing archaeological work, look up the excavations of Aren Meier on the Tell es-Safi. (<https://tellessafi.wordpress.com/>)

 He believes this dig has uncovered the ancient fortified city of Gath, the home of Goliath. What it shows is that Gath was one of the most significant Fortified towns, with temple worship, and smithworks, and was the closest Philistine habitation to the Israelite tribes.

Earlier in Samuel we read about how the ark of the covenant was captured and the Philistines moved it around these cities but in each place God brought a curse against them. At one point, the Philistine God Dagon even falls down and loses his head, and maybe this is a foreshadowing of the beheading of Goliath and defeat of the Philistines.

 The Philistines are pressing in on the Isrealites and even as Goliath comes forward David knows that they should have dealt with him already. David has confidence in battle because he knows the battle belongs to the Lord. God promised Joshua and the Isrealites that he would deliver these nations into their hands and if you remember God first said to Joshua “for the battle is the Lord’s.” David is referring back to the original promise and blessing that this land would be given to YHWH’s people. For whatever reason the job hadn’t been finished and that meant that Gath’s Giant was now threatening the promise, threatening the vision and plan of God.

The man after God’s own heart, responds to the purpose and plan of God and carries the vision forward reminding the whole nation of the promises God had made to them. In the face of the threatening Philistine army he steps forward in confidence and courage and readies the stone in his sling.

Bon Courage

Many years ago Ceri and I were able to go with friends on a bike tour through the South of France. Unfortunately we were not in biking shape when we started our first day which ended up to be a 80km ride up into the green vineyard covered hills surrounding Bordeaux. When we tried to get up the next morning the stiffness in our legs was unreal. I immediately questioned how we were going to ride to our next destination as I was having trouble standing and walking much less riding another several km. But as we got back on the bikes and started moving our legs and working our muscles we slowly gained back enough mobility and strength to reach our next destination.

Along our route were some epic hills which climbed out of the Dordogne valley and challenged our bodies and our wills. But on more than one occasion we would hear encouragement from other bikers or from cars driving by shouting this phrase, “Bon Courage”. You see biking is so respected in France and when you are loaded down with camping gear and heading up a steep grade in the summer heat the French know that you need encouragement. “Bon Courage” Good Courage. We might translate it, Hang in there, You can do it, or Be Strong. But notice that the root of the word Courage in French is Couer for Heart.

Our courage and confidence come from the heart and as we align our hearts with the heart of God we can be enlivened to take on the challenges that we face each day. And I can’t think of a better parting word as I finish off my 25 years of ministry with you. Through this time I’ve experienced the grace and love of a Church community that is truly seeking God’s heart. I’ve been encouraged by your faithfulness and forgiveness. I’ve been surprised at your generosity and love. I can’t express the privilege that it has been to serve you in this role and work with you in living out our Faith.

And now, as we are on the verge of coming out of one of the most challenging times our Church has faced, I encourage you, Bon Courage. Take Heart. Yes, there are many challenges ahead. Some of you are weary and tired from the last 16 months of isolation. Some of you are uneasy about the pace of life ramping back up to what it was before the pandemic. Some of you have been invigorated by the ability to slow down and think a little more. Some of you are so longing to see friends and family and be able to travel to see your grandkids. Take Heart. You got this. Bon Courage.

And I pray that like David, we all would find the courage to face the unfinished business of our lives and the new challenges that await us. Let us seek the mind and heart of God and turn our hearts toward him and ask him to give us the courage that we need for today. Amen.

### **Ps151.1**

[**2**] My hands made a harp,

my fingers fashioned a lyre.

[**3**] And who will declare it to my Lord?

The Lord himself; it is he who hears.

[**4**] It was he who sent his messenger

and took me from my father's sheep,

and anointed me with his anointing oil.

[**5**] My brothers were handsome and tall,

but the Lord was not pleased with them.

[**6**] I went out to meet the Philistine,

and he cursed me by his idols.

[**7**] But I drew his own sword;

I beheaded him, and removed reproach from

the people of Israel.