

**David, Goliath, & The Living God**  
LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church  
September 15, 2024 AM Sermon  
Reverend Peter Jonker  
I Samuel 17:1-11, 20-29, 34-50

Without a doubt, David and Goliath is one of the best known stories in the Bible. It's in every children's story Bible and it's one of the first stories we tell our children. Even if you rarely darken the door of a church, there's a good chance you know the outline of this classic tale. As with all great Bible passages, there are lots of ways to look at this story. You could preach it from multiple angles, but this week it struck me that this is a story about the imagination.

The imagination. The imagination is a centrally important moral faculty in human life. Your imagination is a powerful force on your morality; your imagination is a powerful influence on the choices you make every day. What are we talking about when we talk about the imagination? Sometimes when we talk about someone with a great imagination, we mean someone who is very creative. A person who can write a book of fiction, create a whole story out of their head is a person with a great imagination. When you think of imagination this way it's like a talent that some people have, and others don't. "She has a great imagination, but not me. I'm not an imaginative person." That's one way to talk about imagination, but it's not the sense of imagination that I'm using. No matter how creative we are, we all have imaginations. We are all imaginative people.

Think of your imagination as a movie theater in your mind and on that screen, movies are always playing. Sometimes a daydream plays up there, what would it be like of the Lions win the super bowl – you imagine the party in the streets of Detroit. Then it's a memory, you picture that time you were mocked in middle school and how humiliating that was. You shudder. Then it's a fantasy – you imagine that you actually have the guts to ask out that girl in your algebra class – you picture sitting with her in a restaurant laughing together. And then it's a worry – my granddaughter is living by herself in the middle of Chicago and you picture her driving by herself at night through the city and it makes you anxious. All day long your little mental movie theater is playing these movies, and these movies have enormous power over your moods, your motives, and your choices.

Here's an example of the way the imagination works, and its power to shape behavior. In 1975 the movie Jaws came out – it was a blockbuster. Millions of people saw it. As you know, it was about a huge Great White Shark that attacked people off the coast of New England. It was graphic and terrifying and it impacted people's imagination. After seeing it they had those scenes, those movies of the shark attacks in their head. The effect of those movies playing in the imagination was substantial. After the movie was released there was a substantial downturn in ocean beach tourism. Someone would briefly consider the possibility of a holiday at the beach, but then that little movie theater in their mind would play the shark attack scenes, and they would say "I'm going to a lake!" You could give these people all kinds of facts and rational arguments about how rare shark attacks actually were and how safe the ocean actually was, but it didn't matter because of what the movie did to their imagination. The imagination movies in our mind have an enormous power over the choices we make.

Choosing whether or not to have a holiday at the beach is a relatively trivial example of how the imagination shapes our choices. There is much more at stake with the movies put into your head at childhood. As we all know, our childhood memories make the most vivid movies. The movies of our childhood stay sharp in the imagination. If you had a happy childhood, that's great! If you had a childhood full of love and support and affirmation, your imagination will forever be filled with these happy, positive hopeful films. On the other hand, if you grew up in a household full of anger and neglect, or even abuse, you will spend your life burdened by these fearful films that keep popping up in your imagination. It's like Jesus says in the Sermon on the mount, "The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eye is healthy your whole body is full of light, but if the light in you is darkness, how great is that darkness."

For the Israelites in our story, it wasn't a Great White Shark filling up the movie screen of their imagination; it was a giant named Goliath. Goliath was 6 cubits and a span of pure intimidation. The author of 1 Samuel gives a rich description of the giant so that we can see him on our screen, just like Israel. He's enormously tall - six cubits and a span. That's 9 feet tall, and he's not a skinny nine-footer; he's thick. His shirt of armor weighs 125 pounds and he wears it like a cotton button-down. The shaft of his spear is like a weaver's rod - which meant that it had a diameter of 2 - 2.5 inches tipped by a 15-pound spear head. So his spear weighed more than an Olympic shot put and yet he was able to hurl it through the air. His enormous head is covered by a massive bronze helmet. His legs are like tree trunks and they are covered by bronze greaves. His shield is so big he has his own shield bearer to carry it before him. Goliath isn't a man, he's a Philistine war machine, a living tank, and beside him the Israelites look like little boys armed with sticks and stones.

Every day, this Philistine war machine comes out to menace Israel. Every day, as the Israelite soldiers huddle in their tents, they can hear the terrible clanking of his armor as he strides up and down the valley of Elah. They can hear the roar of his insults raining down insults on them - cursing them, cursing their God. Our text tells us that when they see Goliath they are dismayed and terrified (11) and they flee from him in great fear (24). This goes on for 40 days. 40 days of terror and dismay. 40 days of waking up and hearing the noise and wondering if today was the day when the Philistines would come and tear you to bits. Those 40 days of bellowing are a kind of psychological warfare, psychological torture. Can you imagine what it did to the soldiers' imaginations? You can see the effect in the passage. David's brothers are a mess. They're on edge. David asks them a simple question, wondering why no one has challenged Goliath yet, and bother Eliab goes off. "What do you know about anything! Go back to your sheep you conceited little so and so!" Eliab's rebuke of his brother is over the top, and in the context of the story, you can see that this comes out of his terrified imagination. Goliath is filling up his screen.

Saul too has Goliath filling up his screen. You can see that in the way he's cowering in his tent along with the rest of Israel. You can also see it in what he does when David offers to fight Goliath. First he can't imagine someone like David going against the giant. And second, when he tries to dress David up in his armor, he shows that he can only imagine fighting Goliath on Goliath's terms with Goliath's tools and Goliath's type of power. His imagination is so full of Goliath, he can't imagine that there would be any other kind of power at work in the world other than the kind of power that Goliath represents - Brute force. The Will to Power. Ruthlessness. Saul's imagination

has been Goliath-acized. Goliath is filling up the screen of Saul and Eliab and the rest of the soldiers and they are terrified and dismayed. “When the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness.”

All of us have some dark and painful movies in our head, and just about all of us go through seasons where those dark and fearful movies dominate our imagination. They fill up our screen and, just like Israel, they leave us dismayed and terrified. Your marriage is coming apart and you can’t stop the bleeding. It’s all you can think about. You lie down in your bed at night and the movies are spinning through your mind: mistakes you made in the past. Hurtful things that were said. Frightening movies of a lonely future. You’ve lost someone who is a central pillar of your life and you just can’t escape the grief. Everywhere you go seems to trigger a memory in your mind. The movie start rolling and the grief starts rising. And you wonder if you will ever be happy again. You are really concerned about the situation in the country and you spend a lot of time on line reading stories about how bad things are, who dangerous things are. You doom scroll – all these images of disaster and warning fill up your imagination. And when you finally put away your phone, the images keep scrolling through your imagination. Doom. Disaster. Like the Israelite army, when these things fill our screens, we find ourselves terrified and dismayed.

Now let’s look at David. I think we can agree that David carries himself differently from any other character in the story. His mood is different, his sense of possibility is different, his sense of power is different – his perspective on the valley of Elah is not like the others. When he sees Goliath, unlike the rest of the soldiers, he is neither terrified nor dismayed. And I think that’s because he has a different movie playing in his imagination, and the story makes it pretty clear what that movie is.

It is the movie of the living God. The Living God. Not a god who is far removed and uninvolved. Not a god who is an interesting philosophical concept, not a god who is a social construct useful for maintaining civil order.

No, a living God who is right there in the valley of Elah with him. A living God who sees and hears and knows and acts. A living God who can and will work all things for good for those who love him.

If you want a picture of what the God of David’s imagination looks like, check out Psalm 18. That’s one of David’s Psalms and he shows you the picture of the God on his screen: “Smoke rises from his nostrils. He parts the heavens and comes down He mounts the cherubim and flies. He soars on the wings of the wind. His enemies fall beneath his feet.” Not a weak and passive God; a living God.

And when I say the Living God is playing on David’s screen, I’m not making that up; that’s in the text. “Who is this Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?” The rest of the men see themselves as little boys with sticks and stones before Goliath; David sees them as the army of the Living God. He sees the Living God standing behind them. In verse 36 when David describes to Saul why he thinks he can defeat Goliath he says, “Your servant has killed a lion and a bear and the Philistine will become like one of those because he has defied the army of the living God.” For David, he never thinks he meets his challenges with his own strength, of course God is with him. And then finally when he faces down Goliath he says to him God will give me the victory so that the whole world will know there is a God in Israel.” ... A living God.

What's playing on your movie screen these days? What's the feature show in the theater of your imagination? Is it a disaster movie – full of fear and uncertainty. Is your screen filled up with one of those menacing Giants of your worry – stomping up and down, making you fearful and short tempered? Of course, all of us are going to have dark and fearful movies playing in our imaginations sometimes. That's the thing about bad movies that come out of negative experiences from your past – you can't ever get rid of the movie altogether. You can't just delete the file. God can do that and he will do that in the new creation. But in the meantime those movies are always there.

Nevertheless, they don't have to be the feature presentation in your theater. They don't have to be the feature presentation because they are not the real movie of your life. The real movie of your life has lots of tragic moments and tense moments, but the main plotline is about how you are a beloved child of the living God, and there is no Giant in ancient Israel or in modern America that can take you from his hand or prevent him from giving you the future he has planned for you.

As testimony for that, we have this wonderful story of David, Israel's champion, facing down Goliath and God delivering him. We also have the even more wonderful story of God's other champion, the son of David, Jesus Christ our Lord. Jesus who also goes out on his own to face a giant on behalf of all of us people when he saw that we were dismayed and terrified. He goes out to face the giant of the evil one. He goes out to face the Giant of Sin. He goes out to face the giant of death. And at first it looks like he loses! The giant of death takes hold of him and hurts him and he cries out in pain. But in three days, the Father raises him from the dead and the power of the evil one is smashed, Satan falls like lightening from heaven and everything changes. When you belong to Jesus and that movie is the feature presentation in your head, there is nothing this world can throw at you that you can't face with hope and even a tear-stained joy.

This week all of you will be going back into the valley of Elah. And there will be giants. But there will also and always be the Living God, so don't be afraid. Go out into the valley, face the giant and while you're at it sling a few stones at him. Sing a hymn in the face of disappointment. Put a hopeful movie in the head of your child or grandchild by reading them a Bible story. Forgive someone who hurt you. Talk to a lonely person. Love someone who is difficult. Sing the doxology at a graveside. Say a prayer. Send a card. The Giants hate it when you do that stuff, because it reminds them of their defeat, and it shows the world the face of the living God.

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