

Our DNA

We Embrace Courage

1 Samuel 17; Matthew 14:27

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Steve Marsh and I are long-time friends. We went to seminary together and he pastors Geneva Presbyterian Church in Laguna Woods, California. Last Sunday, a Taiwanese congregation that meets in that church was celebrating their pastor who was returning to Taiwan. As they circled around him for a picture, an armed man entered and began firing into the crowd. Almost immediately Dr. John Cheng charged the assailant and was shot and killed. But in the confusion he created, the Taiwanese pastor hit the gunman with a chair and other congregants wrestled him to the ground, disarmed him, and hogtied him until the police arrived. Bravo!

All our staff has received active-shooter training. This response...to fight back, to throw books or chairs at an active shooter rather than grovel and plead...is exactly what we are trained to do. But you never know...if you'll have the courage of Dr. Cheng. To be the first one to fight back. To run toward the threat instead of away from it.

This morning I want to talk about courage. We are in a series called "Our DNA." We are talking about the set of qualities that, taken together, make Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill. The first three we call our "Head" values; or, what we believe. We are Reformed, we are Egalitarian (that is, we ordain both men and women) and we are Spirit-filled (we welcome the Holy Spirit into our midst). These three beliefs—by themselves—form a distinctive subset of American churches. But there's more!

Next, are our three Heart values. We embrace humility, we embrace courage and we embrace accountability. If the first three are about what we believe, the second three are about how we behave. Or...how we hope to behave. We hope all three of these to be true of us. We hope we are humble and courageous and accountable people. It is what we aspire to be. As Pastor Julie spoke of last week, I hope we are and will continue to be a humble church. We are large, influential, and well-resourced. It would be easy to become arrogant and self-sufficient. God help us, I pray we will avoid pride like the plague. (And after the last two years, we understand better what that phrase means, don't we!) I pray that all of us...pastors, elders, leaders, and members...will emulate

the Lord Jesus who came, not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. I pray we will always embrace humility.

And...courage. The kind of courage that doesn't wait for problems to arrive...but moves toward them. The kind of courage displayed by Dr. Cheng. And, I believe, the kind of courage exhibited by this congregation over our 60 years. We live in a time of great challenges. Not unprecedented...but certainly daunting. And if we do not...cannot...dare not...face these challenges with courage, our witness for Jesus Christ will be muted and we will join the thousands of churches that have withered into irrelevancy. I pray we are...and will continue to be, a courageous church. And for our text, we turn to one of the best-known Bible stories: the account of a battle between a gigantic Philistine warrior and a shepherd boy: David and Goliath.

The Philistines and the Israelites are encamped on opposite hillsides overlooking the Elah Valley. The Philistine champion, a giant named Goliath, has challenged the Israelites to send out a champion of their own; a fight to the death between two men, winner takes all. Every morning, Goliath strides into the valley to mock the Israelites...and their God. "I defy the ranks of Israel this day. Give me a man, that we may fight together." For 40 days...Goliath appears and repeats this challenge. But the Israelites are terrified; no man will take up the gauntlet...

...until a young shepherd named David arrives bearing supplies for his brothers. He witnesses Goliath's mockery and is indignant. "...who is this uncircumcised Philistine, that he should defy the armies of the living God?" David asks. Predictably, his big brothers tell David to shut up. He will not. He goes to King Saul and offers to fight the giant. The king says, "You? You are but a youth and he has been a man of war from his youth." But David makes his case. "[I] used to keep sheep for my father. When there came a lion, or a bear, and took a lamb from the flock, I went after him and struck him and delivered it out of his mouth....[I] have struck down both lions and bears, and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them." And...since there wasn't exactly a waiting list of men willing to take on Goliath, Saul reluctantly agreed. We pick up the story in I Samuel 17:40:

"Then [David] took his staff in his hand and chose five smooth stones from the brook and put them in his shepherd's pouch. His sling was in his hand, and he approached the Philistine. And the Philistine moved forward and came near to David, with his shield-bearer in front of him. And when the Philistine looked and saw David, he disdained him, for he was but a youth, ruddy and handsome in appearance. And the Philistine said to David, "Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks?" And the Philistine cursed David by his gods. The Philistine said to David, "Come to me, and I will give your flesh to the birds of the air and to

the beasts of the field.” Then David said to the Philistine, “You come to me with a sword and with a spear and with a 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 day the LORD will deliver you into my hand, and I will strike you down and cut off your head. And I will give the dead bodies of the host of the Philistines this day to the birds of the air and to the wild beasts of the earth, that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel and that all this assembly may know that the LORD saves not with sword and spear. For the battle is the LORD’S, and he will give you into our hand. When the Philistine arose and came and drew near to meet David, David ran quickly toward the battle line to meet the Philistine. And David put his hand in his bag and took out a stone and slung it and struck the Philistine on his forehead. The stone sank into his forehead, and he fell on his face to the ground.”

This is a stone from the Elah Valley. There is only one brook in that valley where David slew Goliath...and it was from that brook bed that David selected five smooth stones like this one and placed them in his pouch. You know the rest of the story. Everyone does. Even the most irreligious person has heard of David and Goliath. We all know the story. But...a few years ago, I noticed something I’d never seen before. It jumped out at me. I’m going to read it again. See if you spot what I’m talking about in verse 48.

“When the Philistine arose and came and drew near to meet David, David ran quickly toward the battle line to meet the Philistine...”

Did you see it? When Goliath was done talking and mocking...when Goliath decided it was time to crush this annoying little bug...when Goliath “arose and came and drew near to meet David” ...what did David do? He “ran quickly toward the battle line to meet the Philistine.” Listen...it would have been enough if he had merely stood his ground. Goliath was over nine feet tall! His spearhead alone weighed 15 pounds! His coat of mail weighed 125 pounds! He must have looked like a mountain as he lumbered toward David.

Last week on our way home from a family reunion, we stopped in my hometown of Yakima and visited Summitview Elementary School where I was an assistant football coach. I recall one practice when I was frustrated because the running back wasn’t hitting the line hard enough. I said, “Watch...do it like this...tackle me”and I crashed through the defensive line of elementary kids....and promptly broke the arm of our star quarterback.

How much more did Goliath loom over David? For David just to stand his ground would have been courageous. But what did he do? He “ran quickly toward the battle line to meet the Philistine.” He ran toward the giant. Ever since I noticed this, it has become one of my mantras. It is a familiar saying on

our staff. "Run toward the giant." If you have a gigantic problem lumbering toward you...if you've exhausted diplomacy...if this issue isn't going away and, in fact, is barreling down the tracks toward you...don't turn tail and run. Don't even just wait for the battle to come to you. If the battle is inevitable...take the fight to the problem. Run toward the giant.

This is one of the most courageous moments in the Bible. This teenager...this kid armed with a stick and his secret weapon...a slingshot...and more importantly, armed with the power of the Lord in whose name he was prepared to do battle...this kid ran toward the giant. And took him out with one well-placed shot. What courage!

If you look back over the life of this congregation...when the story is written of Chapel Hill's impact upon this community and upon our world...I believe it will be said of us that we were willing to run toward the giant. We didn't look for a fight. We never pick fights. But when confronted with giants...issues of principle we could not ignore...daunting challenges that would have been easier to avoid...I believe it will be said of us that we not only faced the challenge courageously; indeed, we ran toward the giant!

The last two years were hard for the church. We faced an unknown and threatening giant. Your leaders made countless decisions, large and small, and inevitably made someone mad. We wanted to be safe and prudent; we wanted to care for our community and did so by following protocols and providing thousands of tests and vaccinations. But we also felt that churches should be treated equitably by the government. We also felt that, in a time of fear and uncertainty, spiritual health was just as important as physical health. And we determined, as soon as possible, to provide a place where people could return to worship...in person...in the presence of their church family.

We sought to be good citizens. But then came a mandate that forbade singing in worship. Do you remember that? People were not allowed to sing in worship. God commands his people to worship him in song. We were not willing to silence our worshipers. So, your session proclaimed boldly...in writing...that we would not forbid what the Lord requires; that we would allow worshipers to sing. We realized it might result in sanctions against us. But this was a bridge too far. A battle worth fighting. We ran toward that giant. And by the way, I believe the Lord blessed and honored that courageous decision.

10 years ago, we realized that, despite our best efforts, our former denomination was headed in the wrong direction. It wasn't just sexuality stuff; that was only a symptom. Core theological convictions were being abandoned. The Bible was being ignored. I remember sitting at a table with 12 pastors, suggesting we identify basic doctrines upon which we could agree. As a

starting point. "The bodily resurrection of Jesus," I said. "Let's start there. Surely, we can agree on the bodily resurrection of Jesus?" Three of those 12 pastors could not affirm that Jesus was raised from the dead.

Right then I knew we had to change denominations. Your Session agreed. We ran toward that giant. After a year of careful, prayerful and respectful discernment, we made the daunting decision to leave our denomination and enter the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. It may be the most significant milestone in my 35 years here. It was absolutely the right decision...and we had to run toward the giant to do it!

(By the way, in two weeks, on June 5th, we will celebrate the 10-year anniversary of our move into the EPC. It will be a single service at 10:00 in the morning. We will have some special guests...a wonderful trip down memory lane...and a huge party to celebrate. Put it in your calendar now.)

These are just two examples of courage. When the city was considering allowing marijuana shops in town, we turned out en masse to oppose it. When a leader has suffered a moral lapse, we have not swept it under the rug. We move toward it and deal with it, graciously but courageously. When we were the object of unfair journalistic attacks, we responded with truth, courage, and frankly...righteous anger...until the accusations were retracted.

Like David, we are not looking for a fight...we are not eager for a fight...but if the witness of Jesus is impaired or impugned, we have always been willing to do what needs to be done to defend the name of Christ. We embrace courage. We run toward the giant. If you are new to us...you ought to know that about us. And...I pray that this value leeches down into the lives of every single member of this church family. Because every one of us has giants...looming threats that mock us and frighten us and challenge us. We can hide from them. We can cower as they march toward us. Or...we can rise up and run toward the giant.

And here's the kicker: we don't do this in our own strength. Biblical courage is not about gritting our teeth, taking a deep breath, and bucking up. When Goliath threatened David, his response was, "...I come to you in the name of the LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied!" We live lives of courage, not because we decide to be courageous but because we remember whose we are and who empowers us.

Jesus was the most courageous person to ever live. Knowing what awaited him, we are told that he "set his face to go to Jerusalem." His disciples urged him to flee! To run away from Jerusalem...back to the safety of Galilee. But he knew the battle had to be joined. Knowing the betrayal and pain and fear and

brutality that lay ahead...Jesus moved toward it anyhow. It is the power of Christ that allows us to embrace courage as a church, and as a people.

When Jesus came walking on the water, Matthew tells us the disciples were terrified. They thought he was a ghost. And Jesus spoke these empowering words: "Take courage; it is I. Don't be afraid." "Take courage," Jesus says. "Don't be afraid," Jesus says. But it is those middle three words that make it possible to embrace courage whatever giant we face. "It is I," Jesus says. Those three words...are the Greek translation of the holy name of God. Yahweh! I am who I am. When Jesus commands us to take courage; when he commands us not to be afraid...that command is grounded in one life-giving, encouraging affirmation: It is I. Yahweh. I am who I am...the creator of all. That is the one who is filling you with courage and purging you of fear!

We do not embrace courage because we are determined to do so. We embrace the courage Christ gives us. "You are not able to face this alone...but with me, you can. You're not strong enough...but I am. You're not brave enough...but I am. You're not steady enough...but I am. You're not powerful enough...but I am. You're not rich enough, influential enough, connected enough, smart enough...but I am."

There are plenty of things to frighten us these days. A Covid resurgence? "Take courage, it is I!" A market meltdown? "Take courage, it is I." Nuclear saber-rattling? "Take courage, it is I!" Sexual brokenness and propaganda? Take courage; it is I!" I spoke to a man last week who hates his job but is afraid to look for something else. "Take courage, it is I!" Another man's marriage is in peril. "Take courage, it is I!" I spoke with another whose heart is working at 10 percent capacity. "Take courage, it is I!" Whatever giant you face...whatever Goliath is lumbering towards you...he is nothing in the face of Yahweh who lives within you. "Take courage," Jesus says. "It is I! Do not be afraid! Run toward that giant!"

What giant do you face this day? The loss of a loved one...I'm so sorry. A bad diagnosis? A crumbling marriage? A rebellious child? A meaningless job? A retirement account shrinking by the day? (I understand that fear!) An uncertain future? I have my own Goliath...and it is easy for me to focus on how big he seems...and forget how big...and powerful...is He who lives in me! "Take courage...it is I...do not be afraid!"