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Bridge Street United Church
June 23, 2024
Readings: Psalm 9; I Samuel 17:1-54

On Living in Trust

Today's Scripture lesson is probably one many of us know. If our childhood included Sunday School, or Bible story books, or both, we likely heard or read this story. I noticed that on a table in the entryway to the church, on the south side, where there is a table set up for children, a completed jigsaw puzzle. The picture? David and Goliath.

It is an appealing story when we are children, especially if we were a younger child in the family. Or, perhaps, we had the experience when we were in Grade 1 of a big kid in Grade 2 or Grade 3 taking advantage of their superior size to push us into a snowbank on the way to school. The David and Goliath story has the appeal of an underdog story, perhaps most especially when we were children and our size, or our capabilities, put us at a disadvantage compared to older children or grown-ups.

As adults, the story may not carry quite the same weight for us. Some of the disadvantages we experienced when we are young children no longer apply. We may even find ourselves a bit put off by the quite graphic details of Goliath's death.

I chose to preach on this passage, though, for two reasons I noted in the newsletter a couple of weeks ago. One is the fact that these days many ministers tend to preach more often on the Gospel, and the Old Testament becomes neglected as a result. A second reason is that many Old Testament stories, having circulated orally for generations, were compiled and written down

in a time of crisis for the peoples of Israel and Judah. These stories, both in their earlier oral form and in their later written form, often dealt with questions with which we wrestle, too.

When I read the story of David and Goliath, and there are many different angles one could pursue in a sermon, one of the things that stands out in this story is David's trust, his trust in God. I want to focus on that theme today. It is one with which most of us wrestle, at least some of the time. What does it mean to trust? What is the difference between trusting in God and, frankly, being reckless?

David, in this story, shows a remarkable trust in God. He is young. He is not a boy in the literal sense of the word, though Saul calls him that. Saul's words reflected David's inexperience in fighting someone like Goliath. But he is young. Even if full-grown, if he was of average height in that era, David was probably about 5'4" – 5'5". Goliath was not gigantic in the fairy tale sense of that word. He was not like the giant in a book I had as a child, the story of Jack and the Beanstalk. He was probably somewhere in the 6'9" to 7 feet tall range, an enormous height in that era. He would have stood more than head and shoulders above a person of average size, indeed stood well above even a very tall person of that era.

But David shows remarkable trust in taking on Goliath, all the more as he does so without the conventional armour of the day. Goliath is not wrong to see this apparently unarmed youth coming to meet him as something of an insult, if this was the champion the people of Israel was sending to fight him. In the story, David's trust is vindicated by virtue of his triumph. And an important point in the story is that David, prior to his success, urges Saul, the army, and the populace more generally to trust in God.

So, what does trust in God look like? Some people have looked at this story, and at other passages that urge us to trust in God, and have asserted that if we trust enough, God will see that

things go well for us. Some people have made that argument and seen an equation between economic status and improvement and our relative level of trust, or lack thereof, in God. Indeed, one can find books, often written by clergy and often in the “self-help” category, that make such a case. I do think a life lived with a significant focus on God is likely to bring with it habits of hard work and seriousness, along with a sense that God has given us talents to use to their maximum potential. That combination will often enhance our economic well-being. However, I do not think that economic success or political success, or increased social status, are reflections of the level of our trust in God. The equation sometimes made between trust in God and economic well being is a false one.

Equally problematic is the idea if we trust God enough, God will protect us from all dangers. Many years ago I lived in the United States for five years while I was working on my Ph.D. I remember reading about a man who sought to fight a ticket he received for driving his motorcycle without a helmet. His defence was that he was an active Christian and therefore God would protect him from danger. That is recklessness, not trust. In some ways, yet more invidious is the idea that if we only have enough trust in God, and pray enough, a health issue—cancer, a heart condition, a serious illness—will be swept away. That viewpoint is one I reject, and I think that it, too, is a misunderstanding of what it means to trust in God. As I noted in my blurb in this week’s newsletter about today’s sermon, I know too many people who have lived what seem to be exemplary lives, and who have had misfortune of various types come upon them, to accept the equation that trusting in God brings success and well-being, at least as the wider society defines success and well-being.

Yes, David had a deep trust in God. That trust gave him the strength and the resources to take on Goliath, and he was blessed with success in that venture. Further, as I noted earlier,

David not only had such trust himself but he also urged King Saul, the army, and the wider populace to recover their sense of trust in God. Note how frequently in the story he references the living God or the armies of the living God as he expresses his expectation that God can be trusted to bring them through this crisis.

But we might remind ourselves that Jesus, who stood in the Davidic line, according to Scripture, also exhibited such trust in God and called others to a similar trust. By no standards of the world can his life be deemed a success. Dying on a cross is not a definition of success in any way, shape, or form. Those who would equate trusting in God with financial prosperity, social status, or good health would struggle to make that case for Jesus, great David's greater son, as one hymn identifies him.

Trusting in God also does not mean passivity in the situations we face. In other words, the notion that if God wants something done, God will see it gets done. That understanding has been held by some. In this story, David does not stand by. He acts, and not only in the physical confrontation with Goliath but also in terms of urging Saul, the army, and the people that they ought to trust in God. When David first hears Goliath's taunts, his reaction is to wonder why no one is responding.

By virtue of his physical size, his youth, his lack of training, he seemed a most unlikely candidate. Yet he steps forward when he feels himself called to do so, trusting in God to see him through.

The Biblical tradition, and our own denominational tradition, is that God does call and equip us to try to shape this world to become what we believe God wishes it to be. One of the great insights of Martin Luther in particular, but echoed by other key leaders of the Protestant Reformation, was that God calls people to many different things, many different roles in the

world. Call is not something restricted to ministry and other things in the life of the church. I would add to that that God calls us to different things at different points in our lives—some things such as a line of work, but other things such as a task in an organization of which we are a part, or an activity such as being part of the choir or some other body here at the church, or some one-off thing on the street where we live.

David did not seem to have any doubts, at least in this story, about what he was called to do. Maybe he did, but the storyteller does not share that or give that impression. We may well have doubts about some of the things we are called to do. But one aspect of trusting God is a willingness to step out and respond when we feel called. We may not feel we have the necessary gifts for some task, but if others are encouraging us to take something like that on, perhaps they see in us something we do not yet see in ourselves.

A final point about trusting in God. The Scriptural witness is that when we are able to trust, God will see us through whatever circumstance we face. In that sense, trust in God is a confidence that God will see us through, a kind of bedrock confidence, if you like. Sometimes we may, like David in this story, have obvious success in the task, whatever the task might be. But in other instances that success does not come immediately, and sometimes it does not come at all, at least not in the way our society and world describe success. Let me offer an example. I think about Martin Luther King, Jr., and some of the other early leaders of the civil rights movement in the United States. Their deeply held Christian convictions, their vision of what a society reflecting Christian values would look like, and their deep trust in God led them to experience jail, police brutality, hostile opposition, and for a few, death. But their trust in God, both in terms of what they believed God was calling them to do and their trust that God would

see them through, empowered them to face opposition most of us would find difficult. Let me rephrase that, opposition I would find difficult. I ought not to speak for others of you.

There are instances, too, where God seeing us through may not look like success in the eyes of the world. It may be God seeing us through a time of loss—the ending of a relationship, the loss of some significant dream we have held for many years, the death of a loved one, an issue with our own health that brings uncertainty to our future, and the list goes on. But it is that sense of trust that enables us to try things, things that sometimes seem impossible (here, again, I think, for example, of the civil rights movement, though I could name other examples from history where a strong sense of trust in God has enabled an individual or a group to stand for some cause in the face of much opposition). Trust in God enables, in many ways, less spectacular things we may do in life, and, finally, to face the ending of life itself.

We gather as a people of faith. And most of us struggle, at least some of the time, to trust. As we think about this story, as we think about the story of Jesus' life and death and his sense of trust, as we look at other examples of persons whose trust has enabled them to overcome significant challenges in their lives or challenges from the wider society, may we find the courage to trust, to trust in God, for in that capacity to trust we can find life itself.

And to the God who made us and who loves us, to the one through whom we have come to know that God most fully, and to the Holy Spirit, the presence of that God with us now and with us always be all honour, glory, and praise, Amen.

Resources

Brueggemann, Walter. *First and Second Samuel*. Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990.

Roth, Brad. "June 23: Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time." *The Christian Century*. June 2024, p. 29.

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/>; Accessed June 17, 2024.