

June 25, 2006
I Samuel 17:31-40, 48,49, Mark 4:35-41
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"Slaying Giants"

Bill O'Brien served for twenty-one years with the Foreign Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. He writes of the time when his wife had a severe stroke that paralyzed the right side of her body. At that moment, it seemed as if their lives were coming apart. He felt as though he and his wife were caught in "the mother of all squalls." In spite of his faith and years of service, his first reaction was, "My God, we are drowning - don't you care?" (*Living by the Word*, "The Christian Century, June 14, 2003, p. 18.) It was evening when Jesus and the disciples pushed off from shore to reach the other side of the Sea of Galilee. A violent storm arose; waves beat against the boat. The boat was swamped with water. The terrified disciples thought they were drowning. They cried out, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?"

A thousand years before Jesus, the newly formed kingdom of Israel was struggling for its life. It, too, was caught in the "mother of all squalls." The army of King Saul was locked in a deadly struggle with the Philistines and their champion, Goliath. In all of Israel, there was no match for Goliath. When Goliath stood on the mountain ridge, he looked to the terrified Israelites as if he were ten feet tall. Day by day, he taunted the soldiers of Israel with a booming voice: "Send out someone to fight with me!" It was winner-take-all. The contest would determine the fate of Israel. If Goliath won, then all the people of Israel would become the slaves of the Philistines. Day after day, the soldiers endured the mocking with troubled hearts, trembling hands and weak knees. They were paralyzed by fear.

Giants still roam the earth. The things we fear the most look like giants to us. In these uncertain times, we wonder if all the effort we, as a nation, have put into combating terrorism is making us more secure; we wonder what we can do to protect the environment and stop the very real threat of global warming. The problems of domestic violence, child abuse, poverty, crime in our cities, terrify us. Quivering in fear and indecision, some of our political leaders seem to lack the courage to stand up and face the gigantic social and economic problems in our state and nation. Where are the valiant warriors willing to face the giants?

Stormy seas beat upon the fragile craft of our lives. For all of the wonderful gifts that modern medicine has given us, it has also brought us terrifying knowledge. We have learned how to detect diseases early. We are even learning how to identify who may have genetic propensities toward certain diseases. We know the statistics of cancer, heart disease, diabetes and genetic disorders. This knowledge can fill us with fear. Hearing a diagnosis like cancer makes us feel as though we are sinking in a stormy sea.

Trouble and fear make us want to cut and run. We think we can get out of anything unpleasant simply by choosing not to deal with it, changing jobs, changing schools, changing friends, changing churches, changing marriage partners, or moving away.

Once I was counseling a young couple preparing to get married. They told me that they wanted to change the marriage vows. Instead of promising to be faithful as "long as we both shall live," they wanted to promise to be faithful as "long as we both shall love each other." As far as I was concerned, the plans screeched to a halt right there. They said that a lifetime could be awfully long. Even though they loved each other right now, a time might come when they would no longer love each other. If they fell "out of love," they wanted it understood that they were free to get a divorce.

Marriage is not a contract to be easily broken. Marriage is a covenant before God that is intended to last a lifetime. Love is great deal more than a "romantic feeling." Love is a commitment to nurture the other person through the storms of life. When feelings change, it is the covenant of marriage that gives time and space for the feelings of love to grow again. With no more understanding of the commitment and hard work that marriage requires, I could not see that couple making it through the first stormy night. I could not, in good conscience, perform their wedding service.

What if I had been with Saul's army and heard Goliath's voice thunder in my ear? Would my knees have turned to water and would my courage have failed? What would I have done if I had been in the boat with Jesus? The minute the first threatening cloud appeared or the first drop of rain fell, would I have rowed back to shore, called it quits and never ventured out to sea again? Forget about where we were trying to go and what we were trying to accomplish! I suspect I would have cried out, "Lord, do you not care that we are perishing?"

The Lord does care. These stories are not only about fear and desperation; they are also about grace and courage. When David heard the taunting words of Goliath, he was moved to act. He was little more than a young boy. He put his faith in God. Yes, he was brash and impetuous; but he had a confidence that comes not from size or power but from faith. As David wrote in Psalm 27:

"The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?"

The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?"

If we are to serve God, then the first giant we have to slay is the fear that lurks deep within our own hearts. The disciples trembled in the boat. They were terrified. They felt that their Master did not care about them. He slept undisturbed. When they cried out to him, Jesus rebuked the wind and waves with his words, "Peace! Be still!" He asked the disciples the question that must have pierced their hearts, "Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?" Fear leaves no room for faith; faith casts out fear.

When the disciples experienced the power of God, in Jesus, over nature, more than the wind and sea were calmed that day. A new peace reigned in their hearts. This faith empowered them to cross seas, endure hardships, face persecutions and even submit to death for the sake of the gospel. This faith enabled them to transform the Roman world by the truth of the gospel. After the initial shock of his wife's paralysis from her stroke, Bill

O'Brien was reading the Psalms one day. He wrote, "Peace began to settle in even before we would know what the outcome was to be. The miracle of God's presence, accompanied by the power to live in any situation, was all we needed." (*Living by the Word*, The Christian Century, June 14, 2003, p. 18.) Christ had calmed the stormy seas of their troubled hearts.

Some twenty years ago, there was a courageous young woman who served on the Session of our church in Norfolk. The worship ministry was planning a pulpit exchange with an African-American congregation. When the idea was presented to the Session, one of the longtime elders said that he didn't think it was a good idea. Such an exchange might upset some people and "rock the boat." The young woman replied, "Well, if this is going to rock the boat, then maybe it is time that boat got rocked!" We need people of faith who have slain the giants of fear in their own hearts and who are ready and willing to live for Christ.

If we are to be giant slayers, then we need to use the resources and talents God has given us. King Saul tried to prepare David for battle by dressing him in his armor and equipping him with his sword. David was so burdened down with Saul's armor that he couldn't even walk. All David needed was his sling, five smooth stones and a steady aim. The giant came crashing to the earth.

We have to serve in our own way as we follow the leading of God's Spirit within us. It is fruitless to moan and groan about all the things we do not have. We think that if we only had this gift or that talent, then we could really do something. This kind of thinking keeps us dressed in Saul's armor and prevents us from seeing and using the gifts we do have. When Jesus sent the disciples out, he instructed them to travel light - without a change of clothes, without bread and without money. I believe he sent them out with nothing so that they would learn how to lean on God to provide for their needs. He wanted them to discover the powerful resources of the Spirit that lay deep within each one of them.

You have spiritual gifts that you may not even know you have or recognize within yourself. You don't need to put on Saul's armor to slay giants. All you need to do is to come to see the wonderful gifts that God has given to you and to no one else in exactly the same measure or the same combination. God gave David courage and a steady aim. Jesus calmed the wind and seas that so terrified the disciples could discover the power of faith. All it takes is a bit of spiritual discernment to see what God is doing in you and for you.

Each year at the final meeting of Session for the program year, the outgoing elders share something of what they have learned or experienced through their service on Session. Then, the Session welcomes the newly elected elders and celebrates the Lord's Supper together. Last Tuesday evening, at this final meeting, one of the outgoing elders said that she did not know what gifts or qualifications she had for service on Session; but she learned that when she was called to serve, the important thing was showing up and trusting that God would give her what she needed. Over the past three years, she found that God did provide what she needed and equipped her to do things that she never knew she could.

There are so many things that stand against the church and the life of faith. There are times when people feel overwhelmed by the struggles of life. There are giants without and

giants within. Even larger than the giants is the power of God's Spirit. Faith is the only weapon strong enough to cast out fear and give us courage to live as Christians. There are storms that blow hard upon our lives and threaten to sink us. Only the peace of Christ can keep us safe. We open our hearts to receive him. Even now he commands, "Peace! Be still."