

Sharing the Light: The Light of Faith

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1 Samuel 17:32-37

David said to Saul, "Let no one's heart fail because of him; your servant will go and fight with this Philistine." Saul said to David, "You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him; for you are just a boy, and he has been a warrior from his youth." But David said to Saul, "Your servant used to keep sheep for his father; and whenever a lion or a bear came, and took a lamb from the flock, I went after it and struck it down, rescuing the lamb from its mouth; and if it turned against me, I would catch it by the jaw, strike it down, and kill it. Your servant has killed both lions and bears; and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them, since he has defied the armies of the living God." David said, "The LORD, who saved me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, will save me from the hand of this Philistine." So Saul said to David, "Go, and may the LORD be with you!" 1 Samuel 17:32-37 (NRSV)

Let's pray together. Gracious God open us up. Open our eyes that we might see, and our ears that we might hear, whatever word it is you have in the midst of these words for each one of us and for us as a community. Open our hearts that we might have hearts of compassion. And then, O Lord, open our hands that we might respond to your love in service. In the name of Christ, we pray. Amen

I want to begin with a confession today, and that confession is that sometimes I am afraid. Anxious is maybe a deeper word. I guess there are a few times when I'm gripped with fear, but more often, it's just a certain type of anxiety. Every week before I preach, I have this feeling in my stomach that there are butterflies going, and my hands are shaking a little bit. I have to try and figure out what to do with that.

The other day I was sitting in my office and dealing with some stuff at the church. There was stuff going on at home and I just felt this anxiety in me, and it leads to all sorts of challenges. It makes it so we can't think very well, we can't concentrate. There's certain paralysis that goes with it. It makes us - me anyway - prone to anger, so I've got a much shorter

fuse. I'm also much more judgmental of others. And all that fear and anxiety just seems to be gripping me, and the truth is that it's been that way more often than it used to be as the world has changed around us. We're all learning to adapt to that.

Listen to this poll from the American Psychiatric Association, and it tells me I'm not alone. "New survey results show the anxiety levels of Americans have experienced a sharp increase in the past year. With almost 40% of respondents saying they felt more anxious than they did a year ago. That's a pretty big spike following on the heels of a 36% jump the previous years. And it means that this year's national average anxiety score has tipped over halfway on a 100-point scale. It's now sitting on 51. This year Americans reported feeling more anxious across five key areas in the poll: health, safety, finances, politics, and relationship."

Now listen, here's the kicker. This was in 2018, two years ago. I can't even imagine what the anxiety level right now is in the world around us.

Our story today is a place that was full of fear. The story of David and Goliath I'm sure many of you are familiar with, and it takes place in the valley of Elah. That's just on the edge of the mountains, on the foothills in the southern part of Israel - not all that far from Jerusalem. The Philistines were people who lived along the ocean and the plains on the western border of Israel right along the Mediterranean. Israel was coming from the mountains; the people of Israel were coming from the mountains. And this valley that's right on the edge is where they ran into each other. And the confrontation occurred. And the Philistines were big people, and Goliath was a big man. The Philistines were known as a very warrior people; they were very militaristic; a very violent culture, and it was a violent world that Saul and David lived in at that time. Goliath was their chief warrior, and he steps out and starts hollering. Here's what the Scripture says in chapter seventeen we've been reading, and this is verse eleven: "On hearing the Philistine's words, Saul and all the Israelites were dismayed and terrified..." And it continues in verse twenty-three: "As he was talking with them, Goliath the Philistine champion from Gath, stepped out from his lines and shouted his usual defiance, and David heard it. Whenever the Israelites saw the man, they all fled from him in great fear."

So, what do followers of Jesus - what do worshippers of the true God - do when they walk into a culture of fear? What do we do in this world around us, where so many are struggling with fear and anxiety? Well, we speak about faith. We speak about trusting God. In a world of darkness, we bring a light, the light of faith.

There's a Scripture verse we're using as a theme for this sermon series: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

There's a statement I've heard, and it has really spoken to me. He says, "There is not enough darkness in the world to snuff out the light of one small candle." We can just be that one candle into the darkness of fear to bring the light of faith.

Let's take a look at this story and see how David brought that light into this culture of fear.

The first thing he did was to challenge their paralysis. I actually love this part of the story because every time twice a day - Goliath, who was 9 1/2 feet tall, and who wore armor that was 125 pounds, would step out and say, "Send me your best person!" And all of the soldiers in the armies of Saul would respond with crickets. Nobody is saying anything. Everyone's staring at their feet. And along comes David and actually as he's standing there, they say, "You know, somebody ought to go fight that guy. If somebody would do that, the king would make them so rich, they would do so many great things, so somebody ought to go fight that guy!"

How many times do we deal with that when there's just this problem, this challenge that's so crippling? And we think to ourselves, "Somebody ought to deal with that. Somebody ought to do that."

Here's what David says, "Let no one's heart fail because of him; your servant will go and fight with this Philistine." You know, David stepped out and he challenged their paralysis. He said, "We're not going to stay frozen."

When our kids were small, sometimes my wife would go off to do something for the day, or even shorter than that. She would leave me in charge. Now that doesn't seem like a big deal, except that we had five daughters. I don't know what we were thinking...maybe we weren't thinking. But I'd always start with a great deal of confidence. I'd say, "We're going to have a great day - it's going to be fine. And here's what we're going to do..." So, I'd start out that way, but it didn't take long before sort of the female version of "The Lord of the Flies" would break out at our house. And it would go crazy, and I wouldn't be able to keep up with it, and I would eventually just lay down on the couch. And I'd turn on the TV to watch sports. And all heck would be going on around me.

And I would be just paralyzed. I thought of myself to be a relatively competent person but at that moment it was overwhelming. And when we get overwhelmed like that between the anxiety and the fear and all of the challenges that are there, we just sort of shut down. Then Dee would

come home, and she'd say, "What are you doing?" And I'd say, "Well, it was going..." And she'd immediately start dealing with the issues. She'd start to get them in line and pick up the mess and start with the dishes and all those things. I was just so frozen that I couldn't do anything.

I just think it's so powerful that David challenged their paralysis and said, "We're not going to be frozen anymore. We're going to take some action and make a difference." This kind of leads to the second point. Here's what he said. This is verse 33: "Saul said to David, 'You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him; for you are just a boy and he has been a warrior from his youth.'" The second thing David was to do was to just ignore the naysayers. There are always going to be naysayers. Here Saul's saying, "You are just a boy. You're too young. You're too small. Do you see how big he is? You're so small you really can't do anything."

There are times when we hear voices in our head - voices from others - who are just saying, "You can't do it. We can't solve the problem. Do you really think you're going to solve the problem - the poverty? Do you really think that you're going to deal with the issues around us? Do you really think you can bring people together in this polarized world? Naaa! You can't do that!"

Well, maybe you can do one small thing. David believed in the power of small. All through Scripture, there are images of things that begin so small, and the Kingdom of God grows from those small things. A mustard seed becomes a giant tree, which is what Jesus teaches. Twelve disciples from the backwoods part of a tiny little country can change the world. Five small stones are what brought down this giant. We can do something - even when it's overwhelming. And even when the naysayers say, "Oh, don't bother."

There is a woman named Yifat Susskind who runs an organization called MADRE, and they work all around the world advocating for women's rights in those cultures where women's rights are subjugated, and women are viewed in a submissive role and are not allowed to do so many things. And she was working in Iraq, and she tells the story of coming across a house painter named Maji, and he was a painter by day, but at night he was working to create the infrastructure for an underground railroad. It was to get women who were being hunted for honor killings out of Iraq. And he was asked, "Why would you put your life at risk for something like that? You're not going to change the culture here. Why would you put your life at risk?" And he said, "If we

want a brighter future, we have to build it now in the dark times so that one day we can live in the light."

In the darkness, we work to build, to light that small candle, so that the light will grow.

I love what Susskind said when he was being interviewed. She said, "When I was growing up, whether we were stuck in traffic or dealing with a family tragedy, my mother would say, 'Something good is going to happen - we just don't know what it is yet.' Now I will admit that my brothers and I make fun of her from this. And people ask me all the time how I deal with the suffering that I see in my work in refugee camps and disaster zones. But I think of my mom and that seed of possibility she planted in me. Because when you believe that something good is coming and you're part of making it happen, you start to be able to see beyond the suffering of how things could be."

David just pushed away those naysayers and saw what could be. And when we are overwhelmed by the challenges of the world, it isn't so much that we need to whine and gripe with all of the negativity about how terrible things are and why isn't anybody doing anything. Instead, we can speak into the world around us and the possibilities that are there. And move toward them, ignoring the naysayers.

Here's the third thing it says. David then goes into an explanation of why he's willing to step out." But David said to Saul, "Your servant used to keep sheep for his father; and whenever a lion or a bear came and took a lamb from the flock, I went after it and struck it down, rescuing the lamb from its mouth; and if it turned against me, I would catch it by the jaw, strike it down, and kill it. Your servant has killed both lions and bears; and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them since he has defied the armies of the living God." David said, "The LORD, who saved me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, will save me"

I love that. David remembered God's great works in his life, what God had already done, how God had seen him through so many challenges.

David is known as the composer of the Psalms, the lyricist for the Psalms. And Psalm 66 is really one of my favorites. He is reciting God's past faithfulness. In verse five, he says, "Come and see what God has done. He is awesome in his deeds among mortals." And then in verse eight, he continues, "Bless our God, O peoples, and let the sound of his praise be heard." Then in verse sixteen, "Come and hear all you who fear God and I will tell you what he has done for me." He's reciting, he's remembering what God has done for him already.

I am not very good at remembering. My wife remembers almost everything. She has a terrible memory - she remembers everything as they say. But my memory is not so good. We were talking with some people not long ago when they asked, "Why is it that I can remember my childhood telephone number, but I can't remember the password I created yesterday." I love that picture. But here's why - for all those years, we recited our childhood telephone number. We told it to people over and over again. And in telling it to people over and over again, it became a part of us and a part of our core.

So, as we recite the things that God has done for us, as we lift those up, as we celebrate those great things God has done for us, then the faithfulness of God becomes engrained in us. And it begins to assuage our fear about tomorrow or the next day or whatever is about to come. We have to practice reciting what God has done.

Sometimes I'll encourage people to write a spiritual memoir. You don't have to go through your whole life and identify every single thing. But to just begin to say, "What has God done in my life all through these years?" Just a sentence or two along the way to remind yourself of all that God has done.

Every year at Annual Conference, when the Texas Annual Conference gathers together, we watch these little videos of pastors who are retiring. They're really endearing. I love to watch them. They used to have the pastors get up and make a live speech before all the videos came in. That was a little dangerous because these are pastors now retiring, and they don't have anything to lose, so they'll say almost anything. One guy cracked me up. He said, "I am standing here today in the same suit and the same underwear that I wore when I was ordained." That was the thing he was remembering.

It's interesting because the vast majority of these retirees can remember some specific things but overall, what they're speaking of is their gratitude for how God has got them through. How God's been with them through it all. Through the good times and the bad times, through the victories and the challenges and the defeats. And through all of that, God has shepherded them through different churches they served, and different people they loved and were loved by. And through it all, the thread that runs through that is God's faithfulness. So, they recite that faithfulness.

Perhaps the most familiar hymn has as its second verse, "Through many dangers, toils and snares, we have already come. 'Tis grace has brought us safe this far and grace will see us home." This sense of remembering God's faithfulness.

Here's the last thing I want you to see in this. David trusted in the power and the love of God. Here's what he says, "The Lord, who saved me from the paw of the lion and from the jaw of the bear, will save me from the hand of this Philistine."

Into a culture of fear, David speaks about trusting in the power and love of God.

One of the most famous stories about John Wesley has to do with his relationship with the Moravians. He was really influenced by the Moravians. They were a Protestant sect of Christianity that really originated a hundred years before Martin Luther. Maybe they were the first Protestant denomination. They were a very Spirit-filled people, and Wesley referred to them as "The Germans." He was really impacted by their faith. One day he's on a ship on the way to America. Let me read his account of it. This is from his Journal on January 25, 1736. He writes, "At 7 I went to the Germans [that's the Moravians] I had long before observed the great seriousness of their behavior. Of their humility, they had given a continual proof by performing those servile offices for the other passengers which none of the English would undertake. For which they desired and would not receive any pay saying, 'It was good for their proud hearts.'"

I was thinking about last week when we talked about the light of service. They're practicing the light of service.

Wesley goes on: "There was now an opportunity of trying whether they were delivered from the spirit of fear as well as from that of pride, anger and revenge. In the midst of the psalm wherewith their service began, the sea broke over, split the mainsail in pieces, covered the ship, and poured in between the decks. As if a great deep had swallowed us up. A terrible screaming began among the English. The Germans calmly sung on. I asked one of them afterward, "Was you not afraid?" He answered, "I thank God, but no."

I just can't imagine on that ship, these Christians singing their hymns, not being afraid. A witness to the world around them, the people around them, of the goodness love of God.

I don't expect we'd ever be the people who never get afraid. It doesn't seem realistic to me. But it does seem to me that we can summon from inside our core the ability to share the light of faith in God, of trust in God that God will indeed get us through just as God has got us through before.

It isn't that nothing bad will happen to us. That isn't what the Moravians necessarily believed. It was that if I've got God, then we can handle any of it no matter what happens to us.

Romans 8 is just such a powerful passage. It says, "If God is for us, who can be against us. Who can separate us from the love of God? Can distress, or peril or nakedness or famine, or sword? No, I am sure then that in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. Neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

If God is for us, who can be against us? The love of God is just overwhelming.

I've been teaching in our Men's Life class about the book by Eugene Peterson called *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society*. It's a great book. Now Peterson died in 2018, and the preface to the new addition to this book has the eulogy that was given by his son Leif Peterson. And in it, Leif talks about his dad and his dad's preaching and message that his dad wanted to share. And he wrote a poem called "The Message." And it really struck me, and I want to close with sharing that with you.

He's talking about his dad, and he says, "It's almost laughable how you fooled them. How for 30 years, every week you made them think you were saying something new. And they didn't know what a fraud you were. They didn't know how simple it all was that they were blind to your secret. It's so funny, they didn't notice. So many times, I've wanted to expose you, tell them all what you've been up to, only my inheritance keeps me from giving you away. Because I alone know your secret. I alone know what you've been doing. How you fooled them all, taking something so simple, something a child could understand and making it into a career, a vocation, an empire. I know because for 50 years you've been telling me the secret. For 50 years, you've stealed into my room at night and whispered softly to my sleeping head, it's the same message over and over, and you don't vary it one bit. God loves you, he's on your side, he's coming after you, he's relentless."

There are some in the secular world who would call that blind optimism, or delusion or superstition. But it's something so much deeper than that. It's at our core; there is a sense of trust. Someone who's love can never be defeated.

Friends, in a world where there is the darkness of fear, we can offer them the light of trusting in the love of God. Will you join me as we offer that to them?

Let's pray together. *Gracious God, yes, we are surrounded by the darkness of fear. We experience it ourselves at the core of our being sometimes, in our gut. We pray, God, that you would pour your love into our hearts in such a way that it would wash away that fear. That your love would cast out all of that fear. And that we would be able to carry that message of faith in you into the darkness of a world that's anxious and afraid. In the name of Christ, we pray, Amen.*