

July 1, 2018

I Samuel 17: 38-40

Prayer: Dear Lord, Go with us into the study of your word. Give us the courage of the young David as we seek to follow you. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

The King's Armor

I was in college during the Watergate hearings. Many of you may remember that summer in the early 1970s for the changes it brought to our country.

For one thing, the hearings brought down a president – Richard Nixon. For another, they made a civil liberties star of a folksy North Carolina senator named Sam Ervin.

What you may not know is they made journalism the “it” career for thousands and thousands of college students. They all wanted to become the next Bob Woodward or Carl Bernstein, the *Washington Post* reporters who broke the Watergate story.

I had wanted to be a reporter since high school, but now I had company. Lots of company. Lots of competition.

My last semester in college, I wrote application letters to newspapers and TV stations all over the country. And I got rejection letters from newspapers and TV stations all over the country. I could have wallpapered my dorm room with those rejection letters.

The one or two offers I did get paid so poorly I would've required a loan to take the job.

So when *The Greenville News* offered me a job at the decent wage of \$9,000 a year, I grabbed it. But there in the newsroom at 22, I was surrounded by out-of-towners. I had a

bachelor's degree from Wake Forest University, but suddenly a lot of people were coming in with master's degrees from Northwestern. That was the "it" grad school for journalism.

Quite frankly, I was intimidated. All the other reporters had lived other places, done other things. They claimed they had to go to Atlanta to find anything to do on weekends.

And here I was, the girl back in her hometown.

But then, faced with competition from 24-hour news channels and the Internet, newspapers began to change. And the new "it" thing was something called "a sense of place."

Publishers decided that newspapers shouldn't be the McDonalds of their communities. They should be the Tommy's Ham House. The Stax. The Skins Hot Dogs.

They should have color and local context and depth. Newspapers should reflect the places in which they were published.

And who better than the handful of Greenville natives in the newsroom to tell those stories of how the Westside mill villages of Poe and Brandon and Woodside and Judson and Dunean gave rise to the subdivisions and swim teams and shopping malls of the Eastside?

Who better than the sons and daughters of farmers and millworkers and country judges to truly understand this Southern city and how it worked?

Being the hometown girl became not a detriment, but a bonus. It was worthwhile to have someone around who knew what this place had been and was now and could be.

There were things I knew that I didn't even know I knew, things that provided that sense of place.

For instance, picking cotton made your neck sweat and your hands bleed and resulted in only pennies for an hour's labor.

The cotton lint from textile mills got stuck in your hair. Hence, the name lintheads.

Shoeless Joe Jackson presided over a liquor store in West Greenville longer than he presided over the outfield.

Down on our beaches, the Gray Man foretold hurricanes.

The doors and porch ceilings on coastal houses were painted blue to keep the haints out.

No matter how much I admired those people from Chicago and New York and Florida and California, the only person I could authentically be was a daughter of South Carolina, a granddaughter of farmers and mill workers.

The trick was learning to prize it.

For today's Scripture passage, we're going to an Old Testament story of a boy who had to decide who he was before he faced his dragon. We are going to look at a very short section of a very long story in the adventure-filled book of I Samuel.

Before we get there, we need to set the story up.

It's another underdog story, such as we heard last week. And it sounds like no one knew last week's story – that Samuel anointed David king when he was about 12 years old.

That's because these Old Testament stories rose from many different streams of oral traditions. Often we have more than one version of a story – just as Genesis includes two versions of the creation story.

This particular story was surely a popular one that the ancient Israelites told around campfires about their mighty warrior king. This king started out as a shepherd boy who faced down the biggest, most intimidating soldier ever to appear.

A soldier named Goliath.

The armies of the Philistines and the Israelites were at war. And a towering, champion of the Philistines named Goliath strode out of their camp with a challenge.

Goliath's challenge was for the Israelites to send out a single soldier to face him in battle. Their battle would be a surrogate, so all the other soldiers wouldn't be lost in war.

The problem was that Goliath cut a frightening figure -- six foot nine, and covered by the best military metals of the day. According to I Samuel, he "had a helmet of bronze on his head, and he was armored with a coat of mail; the weight of the coat was five thousand shekels of bronze.

⁶He had greaves of bronze on his legs and a javelin of bronze slung between his shoulders. ⁷The shaft of his spear was like a weaver's beam (meaning it had a thong attached for slinging), and his spear's head weighed six hundred shekels of iron; and his shield-bearer went before him. (I Samuel 17: 5-7)

Goliath's spear was made of iron, a relatively new metal at that time that was even harder than bronze.

Well, as Goliath was scaring the Israelites to death, David was out tending his father's sheep. His three oldest brothers were in Israel's army, so his father, Jesse, sent the boy with supplies for them.

While there, the boy heard Goliath's challenge. And he volunteered to go up against the scary Philistine.

Israel's King Saul agreed to it. But he wanted to give this young boy every advantage by giving him the armor of a soldier.

Please turn in your Bibles to **I Samuel 17: 38-40**, and we'll read these central verses:

38 Saul clothed David with his armor; he put a bronze helmet on his head and clothed him with a coat of mail. ³⁹David strapped Saul's sword over the armor, and he tried in vain to walk, for he was not used to them.

Then David said to Saul, 'I cannot walk with these; for I am not used to them.' So David removed them.

⁴⁰Then he took his staff in his hand, and chose five smooth stones from the wadi (or stream), and put them in his shepherd's bag, in the pouch; his sling was in his hand, and he drew near to the Philistine.

You know how this story ends. David slung his stone and hit Goliath right in the forehead. And the mighty Philistine fell dead.

What is so fascinating about these verses is that King Saul *tried* to clothe David in a soldier's armor, the king's armor. Goliath was intimidating. Shouldn't David have wanted *at least* the protective gear that he had?

But the boy couldn't even walk with the weight of all that metal. The armor and sword didn't fit him, *didn't fit who he was*.

Just like a big out-of-town journalist didn't fit who I was.

David made better use of the simple weapons of a shepherd. He took the simplicity of his own life and put it to work for the Lord.

We always make better use of our gifts, no matter how plain and ordinary they seem to us, than in mimicking someone else's.

I think this is true of churches – who sometimes rush to create a contemporary service or a children's program or a family life center because they heard it worked somewhere else. When what they might be better off doing is matching the gifts of their members to the needs of their setting. By taking a walk around their neighborhood and asking, *Who's right here who needs our help? Who's right here who needs our love? Who's right here who might like to be invited inside our walls?*

We've had calls in the past month from members at our partner, Advent UMC. Apparently, their minister or somebody down there challenged them to look at a several mile radius surrounding their church on Woodruff Road. *Who down there needs their help? What might outreach look like in a setting far different from ours?*

So they wanted to see how we identified our mission.

I've had people say to me, *You guys are lucky. It's obvious that you'd be a mission church to homeless people.*

Well, it may look obvious in hindsight. But in the years before I got here, the brand new board was struggling with what Triune should be. They considered Alzheimers' care. They considered 24-hour daycare. They considered tearing down the fellowship hall and erecting a gleaming new soup kitchen.

All of which might have prevented what we currently do – which is to offer deep help in recovery and rebuilding to people who've lost everything.

Next week, we will be joined by a new case manager, Andrew McDade, who has been working at the Greenville Rescue Mission. That will make a team of seven people here who can help with recovery, accessing health care and housing, getting women out of the sex trade and moving forward with Triune Circles or Faith and Finance. They are David Gay, Robin Barton, Kreg Kimmons, Morgan Rains, Rhonda Lindsey, Cheri Shumate and Andrew.

In addition, our Bon Secours nurse, Migina Timpson, has become a nurse practitioner. So she will be able to write prescriptions and treat patients in new ways when she gets fully set up.

We have slowly grown into this particular ministry as we have figured out who we are and who lives within our radius. Because choosing one thing often means saying no to something else. Choosing a stone and slingshot means saying no to a helmet and sword.

I think this concept is true for churches -- and for individuals.

What talents and gifts do you possess? What do you know that you don't even know you know?

Do you know how to survive on the streets? Do you know where to find a hot meal, a shower, a bus ticket, a free medical clinic, a bike? That's valuable information.

One of my favorite things that we do here is the Round Table, in which people trying to emerge from homelessness share information and resources with each other. Cheri wrote in this month's newsletter about a man at the Round Table who lamented how he used to help people when he owned a business. Now that he was homeless, he didn't think he had anything to offer.

But over the course of the Round Table session, he listened intently and reacted with encouragement as a woman spoke. Cheri said the woman sat a little taller because of his kind words. He never recognized the gift he'd given her.

Homeless parishioners also share with our visitors during Back Yard Mission Days.

They may think, *Doesn't everybody know this stuff?*

Absolutely not.

Do you know how to frame a house, hang drywall, repair a toilet, lay a tile floor? Do you know how to finish a wood floor? Paint a ceiling without dripping? Paint a wall without bleeding onto the woodwork?

I can't. I cannot do a single one of those things.

But I know many, many people in this congregation who can.

Value those skills. Cherish those experiences. Respect those gifts. Just because they are not the skills of banking or managing stock portfolios or gourmet cooking does not mean they are not skills all the same.

The flip side, of course, is that we need to respect each other's gifts. You may not know how to survive on the streets, but you may know how to budget and save money and buy a house. You may have military experience. You may know how to make someone feel welcome in your home – or in our art room.

All of us have unique pools of knowledge and experience.

Many years ago, I spoke at a retirement home in Easley. Afterward, a woman came up, and we talked about Triune because that had been the topic. And as she walked away, the chaplain said, “She was a translator at the United Nations. She speaks five languages.”

Oh my goodness! I had been looking at a woman with amazing gifts. If I hadn't been selling Triune so hard, I might have learned something.

All of our gifts are different. God has gifted us uniquely.

And rather than assuming our gifts are common or inferior, we need to pull them out and polish them. We need to hold them up and scrutinize them. We need to honor them.

The worst thing we can do is look at someone else's gifts and try to emulate them, to put on armor like Goliath's in the hope of defeating him.

Because the only place Goliath was uncovered and vulnerable was a single spot on his forehead. A spot that only a small stone whipped from a sling could find.

Even as a boy, the future King David recognized that he couldn't pretend to be King Saul or Goliath, no matter how he was dressed. He could only be David, a shepherd armed with a slingshot.

I could only be the hometown writer.

When we are authentic, when we learn to appreciate who we are, our gifts are free to blossom and flower, to work for the Lord, to add to the kingdom.

Let us cherish the skills we have been given for what they are – gifts from God.

Amen.