

Holy Curiosity: God and War

April 24, 2022

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

1 Samuel 17:1-11, 32-51

So today we begin a new sermon series – and this should be a fun one. Because it was put together by *you*. For the last couple of months I have been asking folks to send me their requests for scriptures or topics that you want to hear a little bit more about, with the promise that I would weave those topics into a sermon series titled “Holy Curiosity.”

And I have to say, that you all ask some really good questions. Some really tough questions. And so as we get started I want to note at the outset that some of the questions that you have raised just simply do not have any good, neat and tidy, easy answers. That’s probably why you are asking them. Because some parts of life and faith are messy, and complicated, and confusing. But, I commit to wrestling alongside you as we spend the next seven weeks exploring some hard and complicated topics together.

So just to give you a little taste of what’s coming, here are some of the questions that you have asked:

- In light of the war in Ukraine, what does God have to say about war?
- What does the Bible say about the rapture?
- How does God *really* feel about sinners?
- Are those who die having never heard the word of God, condemned?
- What is meant by the phrase “God’s rest?”
- And how, exactly, does the Holy Spirit move and work inside of us?

So today, we are going to start at the beginning, backing up into the Old Testament, and we are going to do Part 1 of a 2-part little mini series on King David. Because two of you expressed interest in very different parts of King David’s story. So today, we are going to look at David at the beginning of his young life, and then next week we are going to enter into the tragic story of David’s later life, which holds *very* different lessons for us than today’s story does.

So today, we get to turn to what is probably the most famous story from the life of King David: the story of David and Goliath.

This is the kind of story that even people who don’t know much at all about the Bible, or Christianity, or the way God works in the world, they know *this* story. Or, at least, bits and pieces of it. This story is written and illustrated in every single Children’s Bible out there, probably without exception. Probably mostly because it is the closest thing that we get to a Cinderella story in the Bible. Or, more accurately, a “little guy overcoming all the odds” story.

We *love* these kinds of stories – stories in which good wins over evil. Might doesn’t make right. In the words of Veggie Tales, “little guys can do big things too.” Stories in which the unlikely hero triumphs and the big bad boogeyman runs away with his tail between his legs.

It’s basically the plot of just about every kids’ adventure story out there. The young boy Harry Potter defeating the powerful dark wizard Voldemort. The tiny little hobbit Frodo facing off against countless powerful beings to destroy the ring of power. Four children walking through a magical wardrobe and defeating the White Witch in the land of Narnia. A young Kansas girl named Dorothy melting the Wicked Witch of the West with a bucket of water. The overarching theme in every one of these stories being that innocence, and truth, and integrity, and love show themselves in the end to be far more powerful than brute strength and impressive displays of power.

But there is a reason that we tend to categorize these kinds of kids’ stories as “fantasy.” Partly because there is no magical wizarding world, and no such places as Middle Earth, or Narnia, or Oz, where animals talk and scarecrows come alive, and magical rings wield unspeakable power. But also, partly, because there is a little part of *us* that I think, on some level, really believes that the core truth embedded in these kinds of stories is itself a fantasy. Do we really believe that a little girl can melt a powerful witch, or a young wizard can overcome all the forces of darkness around him?

Do we really believe that a young shepherd boy can outmaneuver a giant?
Or that the littlest kid on the playground can get the best of the class bully?
Or that the smaller, weaker country has any chance whatsoever against a stronger country with a nuclear arsenal and a thirst for power?

If we were to be totally and completely honest, I think most of us would want to remain hopeful. But we would also be a bit skeptical.

For starters, we know that we would not be here as a country today, if the little people didn’t sometimes triumph over the giants. There is absolutely no good reason whatsoever that we should have won the American Revolution. England’s troops were bigger, and shinier, and wealthier, and better-trained, but they underestimated the heart of the colonies. And so, here we are today.

And yet, we call these victories unlikely, because they are just that. Unlikely. And we still find ourselves more than a little surprised when the little guy actually pulls it off.

So today, as we turn to this classic story of David and Goliath, we are doing so against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine. A modern-day David and Goliath story, whose ending we have yet to see. And as we turn on the news and see the absolute horror that is taking place *in real time* – as we see people fleeing their homes; refugees who don’t know if they will have homes to go home to in the end; as we see the civilian body count

climbing higher and higher; as we see stories of brave souls sticking around and even holding worship services when surrounded by the atrocities of war and destruction, and then we read the story of David and Goliath, it is no longer a children's story about a little boy and a big giant. This story is real. It causes a visceral reaction inside of us. And it is heartbreaking.

And it leads us to wonder...where is God, in war?

That is a question that the church has struggled with for its entire existence. Some strands of Christianity believe that God is *nowhere* in war – that God is a pacifist, and calls us to be pacifists as well. That we are called to love our enemies, and that means not killing our enemies, even if our enemies mean to kill *us*.

Other strands of the church have *perpetrated* war, in the name of Christianity. Used God's name as a justification for senseless violence. The Crusades. The unrest in northern Ireland. Nazi Germany. All of whom believed that they had God on their side and therefore, violence and unspeakable murder were justified.

Probably most folks stand somewhere in between these two extremes. In truth, as we look at the history of our faith through the stories of scripture – especially in the Old Testament – we see war as a universal reality of life, that stems from our fundamental brokenness and fallenness as human beings. In the Old Testament, war is what happens when societies fail to live up to God's standards for them. When the Canaanites worship every little-g "god" under the sun *except* God, God sends the Israelites in to wipe them out. When the Israelites "do evil in the sight of the Lord," God "gives them into the hands of the Philistines." Or the Amalekites. Or the Midianites. Or whatever playground bully is popular at the moment.

We see the prophets repeatedly warning Israel and Judah that if they don't shape up, God is going to allow them to be destroyed...and sure enough, first the Assyrians invade, and then the Babylonians, and the kingdom of Israel is never the same again, from that point forward. But, by the same token, God also vows to punish Babylon for *their* part in the violence and destruction. And sure enough, Persia soon comes in and conquers Babylon.

While war is a human reality, that God allows, the Bible never characterizes it as a good thing. The longing is always for a new heaven and a new earth, in which pain and brokenness and death and fear and terror and destruction do not exist. A place where people live in peace with one another. Where we have *truly* come to love our enemies and turn the other cheek. The prophet Isaiah writes of a time when our swords will be turned into plowshares, when weapons that we use against each other will be re-forged and used instead to peacefully plough the ground and work together to grow something that sustains life.

But in the meantime, there will be times when countries will go head-to-head on the battlefield. Times when it will not be a fair match. Times when power-hungry rulers are just trying to expand their reach, and they don't care who or how many they trample in the process. And people on both sides of the conflict will die. And it is specifically for these exact times that we have stories like the story of David and Goliath.

In this story, God never told Israel to retreat, or to throw up the white flag, or to just lie down and get trampled and consent to serve as the Philistines' slaves. God did not tell them to back down from the battle. While we look forward to a time when war will no longer be a thing, the reality is that war *is* a thing. It is real, and it is devastating, and there are times when we are called to stand up and fight.

But what God shows us again and again throughout scripture is that a battle is not always won based on the strength of one's forces. Israel was not going to defeat Goliath by finding someone bigger and stronger than Goliath to fight him. The Philistines thought that they had this battle in the bag, because they had the most powerful weapon of anybody. But the truth is, the thing that wins in the end isn't a great display of force or might or strength or power. It is just the opposite. It is when Israel surrenders – not to the Philistines, but to God. When Israel places their trust in a God who doesn't always play by our rules, and sometimes uses unconventional means to achieve an end. It is when Israel recognizes that they themselves do not have what it takes to defeat their enemy, and so they give up control of the situation and let God step in and do what *God* does – that is what wins the battle for them.

And what does God do? God turns the whole script upside-down. God puts a kingdom on display, in which the first will be last and the last will be first. A kingdom in which the lowly are raised high, and the lofty are brought low. A kingdom in which the "poor in spirit" and the "meek" and the "merciful" are called blessed. A kingdom in which young shepherd boys are crowned king, and mighty kings are threatened by newborn babies.

In God's kingdom, wars are not won based on the size of a country's military arsenal, but may be won with a slingshot and five river stones, if the person who wields that slingshot knows where their footing lies.

God's kingdom is a place where the unlikely – the impossible – becomes reality. Where the things that we look at with skepticism – dismiss as fantasy – actually take place. God's kingdom is a place where little boys defeat giants with pebbles, and where armies bring down the walls of Jericho by yelling really loudly. It is a place where love, and integrity, and character, and faith *do*, in fact, win out over size and power. It is a place where good triumphs over evil, even if the evil seems like an immovable force. A place where death and pain and suffering do not get the last word.

So what does all this mean for us? Especially in light of the war in Ukraine? We don't know yet. It is still new, and fresh, and scary. The pain and the suffering that are

currently happening are horrific. The full impact of this war on the rest of the world has yet to be seen. But here's what we do know: We have a God who does not play by the normal rules of combat. We have a God who has a heart for the little guy – for the marginalized and the oppressed. We have a God who has a long history of bringing down those who let power go to their heads. And we have a God who ultimately, in the end, longs for (and calls us to) a life of peace and justice.

So for us, who watch from afar and see the events unfold, may we pray for those who are suffering. May we join our hearts together with those who are hurting. And may we keep our eyes open for the ways and the places that God is flipping the script in unusual ways and in so doing, bringing God's kingdom to life here and now.