

Confidence in God

A sermon by the Rev. Beverly Andrews

In her sermon following the killings at historic Emanuel A.M.E. Church in Charleston, S.C., on June 17, the Rev. Beverly Andrews, pastor of Chiques UMC, Mount Joy (Lancaster County), invoked the invincible courage of David when he faced the enormous, evil Goliath with a weapon far greater than any earthly power or principality: his "Confidence in God." She preaches that "racial and ethnic hatred is the Goliath of our day...and we must be ready, like David, to step up and use the tools God has given us as God's people."

"You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty..." 1 Samuel 17:45

In the Middle East, in biblical times as well as now, knowing a person's family heritage is very important. For many Lancaster County natives that is also true. Knowing the lineage tells us something of the environment in which a person was raised, some sense of family characteristics, and so on. None of these things always holds true, of course, but they help in initial meetings and early dealings with someone we don't directly know. They give us a sense of what we might expect.

As Gary indicated in his message last week, we often believe we know the best ways to judge others and to assess their readiness for the task at hand. Just as God showed Samuel a different way of selecting a king, today's passage about David shows a different way of assessing what equips us to win the battles of life.

As I've thought about this message, I have, of course, also been thinking about the tragedy which happened in the oldest southern congregation of the African Methodist Episcopal church in Charleston, SC. For the most part, we have always thought of church as a place of safety, of refuge – of sanctuary, in the classic meaning of that word.

There have been other murders in church sanctuaries: Thomas Beckett in medieval England was murdered in Canterbury Cathedral because of disagreements with King Henry II over the roles of the church and the state. Bishop Oscar Romero was murdered in his church in El Salvador because of his support of the rights of the poor. Last

Thursday, June 18, nine people were murdered in a church, attending a Bible study to which the shooter was welcomed as a potential friend. The “crime” of these victims was the color of their skin. And yet, many of their family members offered forgiveness to the shooter and prayers for his soul – like the Amish who mourned their children at Nickel Mines School several years ago.

In each of these tragedies, we can see the transforming power of God at work in what at first seems to be a total loss. I am not in any way saying these deaths were not horrible. They were. They made me sick to my stomach. I know way too much about this type of death-dealing hatred. I have seen it up close and smelled its stench. I lived in Alabama when four little girls were killed in a bomb explosion at the 16th Street Baptist Church. I have also seen that, whatever outward appearances may be, this hatred destroys its bearers from within. Like an aggressive cancer it eats away at the life until it is gone – leaving a hollow shell that looks like a person but is not a truly human being.

Let me be clear about this, racism is sin before God. In this world one of the most persistent evidences of evil is racial and ethnic hatred. We’ve all seen its’ footprints, felt its’ heat, and known the fear of it. This hatred is a giant loose in our world. Just like Goliath, hatred brags about its size and strength and its ability to control the world. Like Goliath, hatred has no respect for individuals, meanings, or even God. Hatred just wants more of what hatred wants and to wipe out everything that is not what it wants. What can we learn from David about different ways of responding to hatred?

First of all, we can learn not to be intimidated by size or big talk. Goliath was a giant among men. David was still a boy at the time of this story. It must have been very clear that Goliath was much, much larger than David. But David remembered that, with God’s help, he had killed bears that were bigger than he was too. Goliath talked in very gory terms about what he would do to any man who dared to face him in battle. His talk was so intimidating that none of the grown men of Israel would step out to face him. David didn’t seem to pay much attention to the talk. He came back with talk of his own – talk about God and his trust in God’s empowering presence with him. He didn’t call Goliath names or make fun of his big feet. He focused on talking about his trust in God.

You remember that when David volunteered to fight Goliath King Saul put his own armor on David to protect him. But David wound up taking it all off, because it didn't fit him. It wasn't how he was designed to work. We can learn from David that we don't have to "suit up" in someone else's idea of what looks right or use other peoples' favorite weapons to confront evil in our world. David taught Saul that panicky reactions can separate us from those who would help, just as they separate us from God. David used the tools God gave him.

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is quoted as saying "Unarmed truth is the most powerful thing in the universe." That's a huge statement. We've seen it in action in the non-violent movements which have changed the shape of our world. Who would have thought the Berlin Wall would come down? Or that apartheid would end in South Africa? Or that people of different races would all eat at the same restaurant – and share tables - in Alabama?

In all these situations, changes came about primarily by those working for freedom and justice using non-violent means. Instead of shooting or stabbing people, they walked, talked and showed the truth. Over and over and over again, they spoke and marched and sat in. They did what they knew how to do. What God had gifted them to do. And they trusted in God. "In quietness and confidence is your strength," we read in Isaiah 30:15. David teaches us to use the tools we know and have practiced using effectively.

The other thing David did, was to look at this battle in terms of God's activity in the world. Dr. Bruce Birch, Professor of Old Testament at Wesley Theological Seminary where I did much of my seminary work, makes this point saying that "God opposes arrogant, self-serving power and its violence." David was steeped in the history of God's special relationship with Israel: bringing them out of slavery, guiding and guarding them through 40 years of wandering in the desert, and bringing them at last to the land God has promised to their forefather Abraham.

He knew that there had been many struggles with groups who didn't want the Israelites in their territory; with conditions in nature that worked against them; and with their own internal squabbles and distractions. He knew himself and his family to be a part of that nation which had come through so much by the presence and help of Almighty God.

And so, he looked squarely at Goliath and pegged him as another hurdle to be crossed on the journey of God's people to fully realize God's promise in themselves. And he knew that God would fight this battle with him. In the African-American church tradition there is a wonderful refrain you often hear: "Where there is no way, God will make a way."

On Friday, we heard news reports of the families of the Charleston victims saying to the shooter, "I forgive." They didn't say the shootings didn't matter. They named and owned their terrible losses to the face of the man who took precious lives. And they claimed the power that God gives us to break our connection with hatred by not letting it live in our own hearts, whatever it may have done to us. Breaking connection with hatred releases us from being forever tied to the person, the incident, the horror of whatever evil we face.

God, as we acknowledge and call upon God's power, enables us to look evil in the eye, turn on our heels, and walk into the light of God. You may have noticed in our Gospel lesson that Jesus simply addressed the storm, told it to calm down, and sat back down in the boat – calm and comfortable.

That point brings up another one, equally important. David did not see this as a test of *his* strength or a way to prove *his* manhood. His purpose in fighting Goliath was not to "win" for himself. He stated his purpose as: "that all may know there is a God." When we make every fight personal, we lose sight of the bigger picture and we inhibit our ability to use the tools God offers us.

Have you ever been so angry you stumbled over your own feet – or words? The truth of the matter is that, as David says, "the battle is the Lord's." This same phrase is also heard in 2 Chronicles 20:15, when Israel was threatened by huge armies of some of the very territories that God led them around peacefully as they moved toward the Promised Land. "Do not be afraid or discouraged because of this vast army. For the battle is not yours, but God's."

As we come to see ourselves as actors in the history of God's activity in this world, then we also can see God at work in all sorts of situations we might previously have felt were

assaults on our personal dignity or pride. But that last point doesn't mean that we simply have no response to anything that happens around us.

One of the most impressive things about David's whole life is that he takes responsibility for himself, for his mistakes as well as his successes, and brings all of it to God in humility. You will remember – and we will discuss – that he doesn't always do this right away or before causing harm to others. But he does do it. That's why David continues to be beloved of God and, to this day, one of the most revered leaders of the Hebrew people. David looked at himself honestly, asked for and followed God's guidance, and trusted in God's care.

If you haven't seen John Stewart's response to the shootings in Charleston on Thursday night, I encourage you to look for it on youtube. The truth we all need to face is that the hatred that is racism is killing Americans at a much greater rate than foreign terrorists. We send armies and weapons to try to stop those who kill Americans abroad. And yet the real Goliath stands among us, hurling curses and bragging about his exploits, as thousands of people die in fairly small numbers at each episode. Over and over again we throw up our hands and say, "Oh no! It's terrible!" And then, like the soldiers of Israel, we head back off the field of battle into our safe strongholds and wait for someone to come to save us.

Our trust, our confidence, in this fight against hatred cannot be in ourselves and our human wisdom, strength, or courage. We don't have enough. This battle is clearly one of powers and principalities, of God and the ruler of this world. Are we going to sit on the hill looking for a hero; or will we be like David, trusting that this battle *belongs* to the Lord, and stepping forward to use what God has given *us* to be God's agents of healing in this beautiful but tormented world?

May God help us all to remember *who* we are and *whose* we are – along with all our fellow citizens of this blue planet.

Amen.

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