

**Annual Meeting; January 27, 2019**  
**1 Samuel 17: 1a, 4-11, 19-23, 32-49 (David & Goliath)**  
**The Rev. Devon Anderson**

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Sometimes – *sometimes* – if the conditions are right, if the vision is there, if the stars align – *sometimes* the Davids of this world – win. In this morning’s story about David and Goliath, read so artistically by Ajit, the lesson is simply this: that sometimes the little guy triumphs, sometimes what is right, and true, and good, and holy – despite impossible odds and all evidence to the contrary – is able to overcome the big and the loud and the looming. This well-worn story provides the foundation for this Annual Meeting sermon – a road map that charts where I believe Trinity is in this moment, and where God might be calling us in both the near and distant future.

In our story from 1 Samuel, “Philistine” is a dirty word. The story goes to great lengths to describe what a big, bad, uncouth, drooling ton of steel Goliath is. He’s a boastful, rude, blasphemous Philistine. He bloviates and rants - arrogant challenges to Saul and the people Israel in the midst of the battlefield – “Come and get me you weak and cowering band of nobodies, you ‘ranks of Israel’ who think you’re God’s chosen people. Come and get me. I’ll crush every last one of you.”

Enter David: the eighth and youngest son of Jesse, a sweet and beautiful boy who tends sheep while his 7 brothers serve as soldiers, fighting off the Philistines. Jesse sends David to bring lunch to his brothers in camp, and while there, David hears the Philistine Goliath gloating and taunting the people Israel from the other side of the battlefield. And here’s the detail I want to raise up for our purposes here: David’s decision is sure and quick – “This man is an insult to the living God. I’m going to go. I’m going to do it. I’ll fight the giant.” David doesn’t know *how* he’s going to fight Goliath, he just knows he *must* fight Goliath. He starts with the *why*, with the “yes,” and leaves the *how* for later.

David is courageous. But it takes more than courage to defeat Goliath. David wins the battle because he approaches the challenge in a new way. At first, he accepts the shield, sword, and helmet that Saul’s conventional wisdom deems necessary. He then realizes, that he cannot use these weapons effectively against a master of these weapons. Instead, David conceives a plan of battle – a strategy – based on the five stones he notices in a creek bed, his skill with a slingshot, and the giant’s underestimation of him. David is more strategically resourceful than everyone else on the battlefield *because he is more motivated*. Angered that no one will respond to Goliath’s insults, David feels called to act and commits to the outcome *before* he knows *how* he will achieve it. Unlike his brothers and the other frightened soldiers, his commitment to act doesn’t depend on his knowledge of a feasible strategy. Rather he devises a feasible strategy based on his commitment to act. His decision to fight moves him to figure out how he can do so successfully.

The point is that people of faith do not tell and retell the story of David and Goliath because we want to know how to vanquish giants. Rather, we tell it to remind ourselves that sometimes the *why* – the reason or the vision for acting, for responding, for raising our hands and putting ourselves out there – the *why* is powerful enough, urgent enough, important enough to overcome the seemingly insurmountable challenge before us. We must be propelled – first - by an inspiring vision, or an intolerable problem, or any situation that presents itself as a clear and resounding call. And that vision, or problem, or call is

what motivates us, what enables us to successfully overcome, what moves us from inertia to urgency, from apathy to anger, from fear to hope, from denial to action, from isolation to solidarity.

Using this morning's story as a framework for Trinity Church, I'll say that as a faith community in 2019, we have – and are – facing plenty of Goliaths. And we are in no way unique in that, or alone. Ten years ago Phyllis Tickle published her groundbreaking work entitled, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why*. Her basic premise is a historical hypothesis that Christianity goes in 500-year cycles. And about every 500 years the Church has – or is forced into - a giant rummage sale – when empowered structures of institutionalized Christianity become irrelevant or intolerable or problematic to the needs and sensibilities of the culture around it. Old practices, outmoded doctrine, abuses and exploitations are, over time, forfeited for new growth and renewal, for a comprehensive re-imagining of the church. While historically most of the change takes place by prying the old ways out of the cold, dead hands of the institution, according to Tickle, the rummage sale, while causing angst and heartache, anxiety, and fear – has historically been proven to be a very good thing. Indeed at each 500-year juncture, she writes, a new, more vital form of Christianity has emerged, reconstituted into a more pure and less ossified expression of its former self. Brand-new expressions of faith and praxis have taken root each time, and as “overly established Christianity has broken open [and become something new entirely], the faith [has spread as a result, and]...dramatically...” Why is Tickle's theory relevant for Annual Meeting Sunday? Because, she asserts, we're experiencing one of those massive rummage sales right now. We are living in an era of the next great emergence in Christianity – where everything is coming apart and changing – making room, God willing, for renewal and imaginative ways to once again deepen our relationship with each other and with God.

Historians and theologians have challenged and split hairs over Tickle's premise for a decade. Still -- statistics, social trends, commentary from spiritual leaders throughout the world, and our experience here at Trinity support her hypothesis. I spent the better part of a day this week reading survey summaries on the Pew Research Center's website. Pew substantiates what we already know: everything about church is changing, at least in the US, marked by Goliath-sized shifts across all religions in attendance, investment, engagement, financial giving, priorities, values, tastes, expectations. I will resist spewing a bunch of statistics, but I want to raise up one Pew report that tells us something important about these shifts. The report, from August 2018, set out to determine the reasons for why Americans go (and don't go) to church. While the report confirmed that the percentage of US adults who say they regularly attend religious services has been steadily declining for years, and the share of Americans who attend only a few times a year or never has been growing, it found that of those people who attend only occasionally or never, a large percentage reported that it's *not* that they don't believe in God or have no faith – it's that they “practice their faith in other ways.” Meaning, they have faith, they put their trust in God, but they are unwilling, to use biblical language, “to put new wine into old wineskins.” They do not see, or do not seek, what they need to fill their spiritual hunger in the religious communities and houses of worship of today.

At Trinity these past few years, we have been experiencing some of the pain and anxiety that any Great Emergence historically brings with it. Many of you have been commenting, and some agonizing, over dips and drops in Sunday morning attendance. While some parishioners are engaged at Trinity more than ever before, there are others who are in the process of drifting further away, who will ultimately leave for another faith community, or relocate for work or retirement or family, or get sick, or die, or just stop showing up for no discernable reason. The Trinity staff and leadership have attempted to

realign programming to meet spiritual and temporal needs of parishioners – young and old, with some success and some failures. Many of you have offered new initiatives or projects or opportunities – and some of you have felt deflated over minimal response or lack of interest.

This past year, the challenges of engagement at Trinity presented itself financially. Ironically – as you will hear at the Annual Meeting today from our Treasurer or read in my Stewardship report – we had a truly impressive stewardship year. We had an unprecedented number of parishioners raise their pledges 10% over last year’s level *or more*. Together with increased pledges, newcomer pledges, and first-time pledgers, we went *beyond* our goal of raising \$46,000 in new pledge income. But at the same time, 16 households that pledged in 2018 did not renew their pledge – for reasons all over the map previously mentioned, and the financial hit to the budget was harsh, glaring, and significant. While two one-time gifts dropped down from the sky like manna from heaven over the holidays, helping us to restore some of the scary budget cuts we thought we had to make, we will need to address comprehensively that shortfall before 2020.

In the face of all these Goliaths, we become vulnerable to discouragement and denial. BUT – my dear ones, I say to you: resist the urge. It is imperative we remember God’s scriptural promise that sometimes the little guy endures and adapts and comes out ahead. While it is not in our power to prevent the 500-year Christian rummage sale, if that is indeed what is happening, never forget – never forget – that despite what is happening in our religious institutions in any given time, God is alive and well and thriving. In fact, God exists and creates and grows and heals and restores and transforms whether we believe in God or not – whether the church exists or not! Our call is the same as it has ever been: to pay attention - to open our eyes and our hearts, and to watch for where God is acting and moving and healing and proclaiming in this world and to *get on board*. It’s like old Rick Warren, author of *The Purpose Driven Church* once said: Christians are like surfers. God creates the waves, not us. It’s our job to watch for the waves, pick our moment, get in position, and ride the wave to the beach, for every, last inch.

Also remember that the Great Emergence is the time when everything breaks apart, and all the rules change, so that something new and beautiful can spring up in its place. Major changes and shifts can make us feel bereft and insecure, can lead us to lament over the way things used to be, make us feel afraid so that we turn and blame each other. But I believe that the pain that we sometimes feel at Trinity, the anxiety, the uncertainty, the concern are what the Gospeler calls the “birth pangs” - the darkness and confusion and shifting sands that always come before new birth and awakening. Also remember the Good News that we’re part of the renewing of the faith, if we resist the urge to deny and cling, and go down with the ship. Trinity can be part of the evolving, renewing, re-traditioning of our faith. All we need is trust in God, the desire to be part of God’s ministry, some hard work, vision, and focus.

Which brings me back full circle to where I began. The truth is that we don’t have to have it all worked out. We don’t have to know *how* we’ll participate in the renewal of Christianity. Not right now, at least. All that is needed, in this moment, in this year, is the *why*. *Why* Trinity? *Why* is Trinity worth taking on the proverbial Goliaths? *Why* would we roll up our sleeves and dig in? *Why* would any of us make room amongst competing demands to deepen our relationships with God, each other, and the surrounding community? *Why* is Trinity worth our time, our money, our intention, our resources, our best efforts? I can’t answer this question for you, but I can for myself. I can offer why I think Trinity is

worth my best efforts, and my money, and my intention, and my gifts. The Good News is that there are countless “whys” from which to choose.

Why Trinity? Because we promise in our Baptismal Covenant that we will respect the dignity of every human being. The civic and political environment in which we live is largely toxic, contentious, and polarizing. But Trinity is a “purple parish” – made up of every possible political ideology and affiliation. And we’ve worked on learning ways to be in respectful, loving relationship with people across the political divides that separate us. And we’ve joined with community partners to register voters and meet candidates. (And by the way, in the last mid-term election, our 3<sup>rd</sup> Congressional district had the highest voter turn-out *in the country*). Because of who we are and what we profess, Trinity is uniquely qualified to be a leader and peacemaker in our immediate community around issues that would otherwise tear us apart.

Why Trinity? Because in 2006 this parish was devastated by three young adult deaths by suicide. And those families scraped themselves up and found the wherewithal to establish a Mental Health Initiative – an idea way ahead of its time, to minister to people and families suffering from mental illness, to be a community voice for mental health, to offer resources and support and services through community partnerships, programs, and events. This past fall the Mental Health Initiative funded Trinity adolescents to be trained in Peer Ministry, and this spring will offer suicide prevention training to west metro faith leaders. Jesus focused most of his ministry on the sick and the suffering – stigmatized people cast out from their communities. We are disciples of Jesus Christ and following his example we do not forsake anyone suffering mental illness. We stand for wellness and healing and wholeness.

Why Trinity? Because Jesus fed 5000 people with two fish and a loaf of bread to make this point: there is enough food – enough spiritual food, enough God, enough physical food – for everyone. Trinity has an impressive and long-standing investment in food security for our community both in Minneapolis and the west metro. Loaves and Fishes, First Nations’ Kitchen, the ICA Food Shelf, and our emerging partnership with the Excelsior Common Bond community all contribute and express our passion for food justice, that there is enough for everyone if we’re willing to share.

Why Trinity? Because we take the worship of God very seriously – and we put enormous resources and time into deep, thoughtful, intentional, beautiful, thematic worship through singing and preaching, praying and serving. Every Sunday we dig deep, and listen, and profess as we both root ourselves in tradition and explore new depths with innovation.

Why Trinity? Because we accept the responsibility for our own spiritual development and discipleship. At Trinity we are both deep thinkers and hungry travelers – and we are served by clergy and parishioners who lead us down paths of theological inquiry, and of silence, and of connection as we grow our faith alongside one another.

Why Trinity? Because we are ever learning how to better care for each other, to carry each other’s burdens, to share the love of God when we suffer. The Trinity Care Ministry, Lay Eucharistic Visitors, Men’s and Women’s Bible Studies, the monthly Seniors group, Newcomers’ Ministry, Prayer Buddies, Emmaus Dinners – the list goes on and on. It’s not about programs – it’s about heart. It’s about connection. It’s about compassion. It’s about our baptismal promise to seek and serve Christ in all persons.

I am proclaiming 2019 as the year of the WHY as our first bold step out into the open, as our brave proclamation that we are Trinity – afraid, maybe, a bit tentative, but confident that like David the fear of the unknown, the uncertainty of the *how* is no match for the power of the love of God, pales in comparison to the sure and certain *why* that is abundantly ours. This year the Vestry has agreed to build on work it began over a year ago in helping Trinity identify and articulate its “whys” – as a way to claim a vital and dynamic vision and direction for our future. Stay tuned.

In the end, I want you to know that I’m with you. And God is with you. And Chip and Anne are with you. And your Vestry is with you. And the wider parish leadership is with you. We do this holy work together – this work in that liminal place between the now and the not yet, where we, together, risk something big, for something good. What could possibly be more important? Amen.

Sources:

Marshall Ganz, *Why David Sometimes Wins: Leadership, Organization, and Strategy in the California Farm Worker Movement*, pp. 10-18 (specifically p.12).

Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why*, pp. 16-17, 19-20, 26-28.

Thich Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, pp. 88-89.

Pew Studies cites:

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