

UNIT 4
1 SAMUEL 16–23

I/ Of Kings and Giants (16:1–17:58)

The moment we permit evil to control our imaginations, dictate the way we think, and shape our responses, we at the same time become incapable of seeing the good and the true and the beautiful. But David entered the Valley of Elah with a God-dominated, not a Goliath-dominated, imagination. He was incredulous that everyone was cowering before this infidel giant. Weren't these men enlisted in the army of the living God? God was the reality with which David had to do; giants didn't figure largely in David's understanding of the world, the real world.

In the Bethlehem hills and meadows, tending his father's sheep, David was immersed in the largeness and immediacy of God. He had experienced God's strength in protecting the sheep in his fights with lions and bears. He had practiced the presence of God so thoroughly that God's word, which he couldn't literally hear, was far more real to him than the lion's roar, which he could hear. He had worshiped the majesty of God so continuously that God's love, which he couldn't see, was far more real to him than the bear's ferocity, which he could see. His praying and singing, his meditation and adoration had shaped an imagination in him that set each sheep and lamb, bear and lion into something large and vast and robust: God.

His imagination was so thoroughly God-dominated that he couldn't believe what he was seeing and hearing when he walked into Ephes-dammim – Goliath terror, Goliath phobia. It was an epidemic worse than cholera, everyone down with Goliath-sickness, a terrible disease of spirit that had Saul and his entire army incapacitated...

While David knelt at the brook, the world was bounded on one side by the arrogant and bullying people of Philistia and on the other by the demoralized and anxious people of Israel. To the north of the brook the powerful but stupid giant; to the south of the brook the anointed but deeply flawed king. No one could have guessed that the young man picking stones out of the brook was doing the most significant work of the day.

Until David walked into the Valley of Elah and knelt at that brook, the only options seemed to be a bullying Might or a fearful Right. Take your choice: brutal Goliath or anxious Saul. David kneeling, unhurried and calm, opened up another option: God, God's ways, God's salvation. How do we so easily lose sight of this, lose awareness of God? Why would any of us in our right minds exchange a God-blessed imagination capable of "seeing the invisible" for a mess of statistics? But however it happens, David kneeling at the brook leads our recovery... The only person fully in touch with reality that day was David. The only fully human person in the Valley of Elah that day was David. Reality is made up mostly of what we can't see. Humanness is mostly a matter of what never gets reported in the newspapers... –Eugene Peterson, *Leap Over A Wall*

II/ Friend or Foe? (18:1–20:42)

The greatest thing any person can do for another is to confirm the deepest thing in him, in her—to take the time and have the discernment to see what's most deeply there, most fully that person, and then confirm it by recognizing and encouraging it.

Each of us has contact with hundreds of people who never look beyond our surface appearance. We have dealings with hundreds of people who the moment they set eyes on us begin calculating what use we can be to them, what they can get out of us. We meet hundreds of people who take one look at us, make a snap judgment, and then slot us into a category so that they won't have to deal with us as persons. They treat us as something less than we are; and if we're in constant association with them, we become less.

And then someone enters our life who isn't looking for someone to use, is leisurely enough to find out what's really going on in us, is secure enough not to exploit our weaknesses or attack our strengths, recognizes our inner life and understands the difficulty of living out our inner convictions, confirms what's deepest within us. A friend.

It's a great thing to be a Jonathan. Without Jonathan, David was at risk of either abandoning his vocation and returning to the simple life of tending sheep or developing a murderous spirit of retaliation to get even with the man who was despising the best that was within him. He did neither. He accepted Jonathan's friendship and in receiving it received confirmation of Samuel's earlier anointing to kingwork and the God-dominated imagination that made it possible to live in and by God's Spirit in song and story.

Lacking confirmation by the word of a friend, our most promising beginnings fizzle. Lacking confirmation in the presence of a friend, our bravest ventures unravel. It's not unusual for any of us to begin something wonderful, and it's not unusual for any of us to do things that are quite good. But it is unusual to continue and to persevere... —Eugene Peterson, *Leap Over A Wall*

III/ On the Run (21:1–23:29)

Wonderful things happen in sanctuaries. On the run we stop at a holy place and find that there's more to life than our circumstances and feelings indicate at that moment. We perceive God in and around and beneath us. New life surges up within us. We discover a piece of our lives we had thought long gone restored to us, remember an early call of God, a place of prayer, a piece of evidence that God saves. And now, there it is again: "There is none like that; give it to me." We leave restored, revived, redeemed.

But terrible things also happen in sanctuaries. We can use a religious ritual to insulate ourselves from people we have come to despise. We can stop by a holy place to cultivate a sense of superiority, look for a way to acquire an advantage over the competition, or legitimize our hate and meanness with the authority of religion. And then we leave callous, cold, and conniving.

Every time we enter a holy place and become aware of the presence of a holy God, we leave either better or worse. If we come to separate ourselves from common people and things, we will almost certainly leave worse. We will leave, as Doeg did, ready to impose our notion of right on someone else, forcing our idea of God on another, full of indignation, crusading in a holy war. But if we enter hungry and needy, letting ourselves be vulnerable before God, bluntly, even belligerently, asking for what we need, we will almost certainly leave better. We will leave, as David did, grateful to be simply alive, amazed to know that God is with us, that the most holy sacrament is food for our most everyday needs. —Eugene Peterson, *Leap Over A Wall*