

**Altavista Presbyterian Church
Rev. Eduardo Soto, Jr.**

**“An Unnerving Foe”
Romans 8:31-39
I Samuel 17:1-11, 32-37**

**Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
August 5, 2018**

Romans 8:31-39

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, “For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

I Samuel 17:1-11, 32-37

Now the Philistines gathered their armies for battle. And they were gathered at Socoh, which belongs to Judah, and encamped between Socoh and Azekah, in Ephes-dammim. And Saul and the men of Israel were gathered, and encamped in the Valley of Elah, and drew up in line of battle against the Philistines. And the Philistines stood on the mountain on the one side, and Israel stood on the mountain on the other side, with a valley between them. And there came out from the camp of the Philistines a champion named Goliath of Gath, whose height was six cubits and a span. He had a helmet of bronze on his head, and he was armed with a coat of mail, and the weight of the coat was five thousand shekels of bronze. And he had bronze armor on his legs, and a javelin of bronze slung between his shoulders. The shaft of his spear was like a weaver's beam, and his spear's head weighed six hundred shekels of iron. And his shield-bearer went before him. He stood and shouted to the ranks of Israel, “Why have you come out to draw up for battle? Am I not a Philistine, and are you not servants of Saul? Choose a man for yourselves, and let him come down to me. If he is able to fight with me and kill me, then we will be your servants. But if I prevail against him and kill him, then you shall be our servants and serve us.” And the Philistine said, “I defy the ranks of Israel this day. Give me a man, that we may fight together.” When Saul and all Israel heard these words of the Philistine, they were dismayed and greatly afraid.

And David said to Saul, “Let no man's heart fail because of him [meaning Goliath]. Your servant will go and fight with this Philistine.” And Saul said to David, “You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him, for you are but a youth, and he has been a man of war from his youth.” But David said to Saul, “Your servant used to keep sheep for his father. And when there came a lion, or a bear, and took a lamb from the flock, I went after him and struck him and delivered it out of his mouth. And if he arose against me, I caught him by his beard and struck him and killed him. Your servant has struck down both lions and bears, and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them, for he has defied the armies of the living God.” And David said, “The Lord who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine.” And Saul said to David, “Go, and the Lord be with you!”

“An Unnerving Foe”

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of the Lord remains forever. Friends, this is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Have you ever had one of those weeks, no, one of those days where everything just felt so insurmountable? Life has a way of overwhelming us, doesn't it? The daily grind of chores, work, school wear away at the body, mind, and soul. Sometimes the day starts out great. You have your favorite cup of coffee, the sun is shining through the trees, and the birds are twittering merrily. Then you go outside to leave for work and notice your car has a flat tire! You have to change the tire or take another car to work. And the day spirals downhill from there. Or perhaps you're a student. You enter class and find out last night's homework had a second page, but somehow that page got stuck. And of course your teacher is having a bad morning so she isn't very charitable and feels especially attached to her policy of "incomplete homework means no homework." All these unfortunate events and terrible circumstances can turn a person to despair.

King Saul had a series of unfortunate events. He's being plagued by haunting dreams, his country is being assaulted by enemies, and, worst of all, God's presence is no longer with him. In life, when things go awry, it's nice to have someone with you. I find solace in a companion who either commiserates with me or comforts me. Betsy and I try to be that for one another, and depending on the situation, we either commiserate or we comfort. In Saul's case, he had a comforter in the person of David. Remember, God was with David, and he was God's true, anointed king of Israel. But Saul remained king in name. And one of Israel's fiercest and tenacious enemies was standing at its doorstep.

The Philistines were a seafaring people, meaning they mostly lived along the coasts and came to Palestine over the Mediterranean. Some historians suggest their origins are from the island of Crete, which means they were relatives of the ancient Greeks. This time period is a tumultuous one for Western culture. This was a period of many military conflicts with borders changing all the time. Great nations and city-states were constantly battling and vying for more power. The Athenians, the Spartans, the Assyrians, the Egyptians, the Persians. These are but a handful of the famous nationalities at play. And Israel is right in the middle of it all. Quite literally, too. Israel finds itself along the path of important trade routes, which means Israel is choice meat, so to speak, for many of these neighboring countries.

Our passage this morning gives to us an apt description of the Philistine host. These are Bronze Age cousins of the Athenians and Spartans, so you can be sure they are well armed and well trained. While our text does a good job of describing the Philistines, a real peoples with real armies, Samuel is also describing for us the tactics of another, equally real, enemy. There are those Christians who believe there are two forces in the world: good and evil. Good is represented by God and evil by the devil. This worldview is known as dualism. Now, historical Reformed Christianity does not hold that view. There is only one force in the world, and that is God, and all other forces are actions in obedience to God or in disobedience. In this understanding there is the great Disobeyer, who is the devil. But he is not equal to God in power and wisdom. But that does

not mean he is not an enemy to be ignored. For the devil likes to dampen our spirits and place before us on our path with God vicious and varied stumbling blocks.

This morning, the Prophet Samuel describes for us three tactics of this enemy. Now these are by no means exhaustive, just what I saw in this particular passage. The first tactic is intimidation by size. Samuel describes the positioning of both the armies of Israel and of the Philistines. They formed ranks on the tops of neighboring mountains, with a valley in between. Imagine the hosts of Israel along the ridge where the Combined School is and the Philistine hosts along the ridge where the Hurt shopping center is. That's roughly the scale of this battle. Samuel does not say how many numbered in the Philistine army, but I imagine it was several thousand. What Samuel does describe is the immense stature of the Philistine champion, Goliath of Gath. If Samuel's measurement is accurate, Goliath towered over ten-feet tall! Truly gigantic proportions.

That's one of the most obvious tactics of the devil. He tries to scare us by showing us how much bigger he is. He places before us unscalable mountains. Last week Betsy and I were in Colorado, and we got to go up to the Rockies. Beautiful area. Some of the mountains we saw were unsurmountable without climbing gear, and some, even with climbing gear, were still nearly impossible. The enemy of the people of God wants to slow us down by dropping us at the foot of immeasurable mountains. But what is it that Jesus said? If you have the faith of a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, "move" and it will be cast into the sea.

Samuel goes on to describe another of the devil's tactics. This time he intimidates by image. The Prophet describes Goliath's arms and armor with great detail. The measurements he gives reflect their colossal proportions. Not only that, but their materials are of the highest quality. Coat of mail, bronze greaves, and a bronze javelin. The sight of such armor on an average warrior was impressive enough, but on Goliath the amount of fearsome flash and barbaric bling would've truly shaken a person to the core.

This is another favorite tactic of the enemy. He displays the very best, the most attractive, in order to throw us off our guard. Surely someone who has all that money, all that power, and all that prestige can never be moved by me. Or worse, the devil uses the flashy to distract us and plants thoughts of greed and jealousy. "If I had that job, that car, that bank account, then surely I can be that powerful and well-loved." In the Indiana Jones movie *The Last Crusade*, Dr. Jones is forced by the Nazis to seek out and discover the holy grail. If you're offended by spoilers, stop your ears right now. The final task set before Indiana is to pick out the Grail from amongst a variety of chalices. The main antagonist chooses a beautiful, gold-plated and gemstone-encrusted cup fit for a king. Indiana Jones, on the other hand, finds the true Grail, a simple, unadorned, wooden chalice made by a carpenter. The devil places before us gilded desires and extravagant dressings. A godly faith draws from wisdom and humility.

Samuel describes one final tactic. With an almost equally lengthy description, the Prophet enumerates Goliath's taunting. This huge and well armed soldier demands a battle by champion. First of all, I don't know about you, but I wouldn't want to single-handedly fight a 10-foot giant with chain-link armor that could cover a Volkswagen Beetle. That threat alone would've been enough for Goliath to win. But he doesn't stop there. He goes on to taunt and deride the Israelites.

And worst of all, he is mocking God. For forty days the Philistine of Gath chided and ridiculed the armies of the Lord.

This is the third tactic of the devil: intimidation by aggression. The enemy wants us to crumble under the weight of his oppression. He wears away at us, day and night, by outward calls of insult and inward calls of despair. We call each other names. We demean each other's worth. We insult and condemn. All of that is sin's handiwork. And the devil loves it when we let our anger flare. He doesn't like healthy debate. He revels in *ad hominem* attacks. He uses aggression to instill fear and distrust, which leads to ruin. The Christian must guard herself by grounding her faith in God alone and in the assurances he gives in Scripture.

Thankfully, Samuel doesn't just present three tactics the devil utilizes, but also shows us what an unwavering faith looks like before an unnerving foe. Young David, whom the Lord is with, witnesses Goliath, but he is not moved to fear or trembling. Rather, he is impassioned by his faith to stand firm in the Lord and stand up for God's people. We, too, can have a faith like David because God is with us. The devil may have his tactics, and they work surprisingly well, but God, too, has ways of enabling his people to stand firm in the midst of adversity.

One way to counter the devil is to remember that God empowers you. In verse twenty-six, upon hearing the words of Goliath, David asks the men of Israel, "Who is this uncircumcised Philistine, that he should defy the armies of the *living* God?" David knew beyond any doubt that he worshiped and served a God who is alive. The gods of the Philistines and Israel's other neighbors are but images and idols made out of wood, stone, and metal, carved by the hands of men. But not the God of the Kingdom of Israel. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is a living God, whose power and might stretch beyond what the eyes of mortals can see. Our God is alive. If we can place our trust in him, then we can stand firm knowing that the God of life is on our side. Even death has no victory over God's people. Because of the Cross of Christ and by the Stream of Living Waters, the Church can endure and persevere when she is empowered by her bridegroom.

Another way to counter the devil is to remember that God equips you. David knew that God's provisions were always there and were always appropriate. God equips those whom he calls. David uses the example of how he protected his father's sheep from being devoured by the lion or the bear. God allowed him to encounter those beasts so that his faith might be strong enough in God's providential care so that he can stand before the mighty enemy of Israel. As we'll see later, David did not need the equipment of men, the arms and armor that humans need. Rather, his faith in God lead him to be equipped with a simple, yet effective slingshot. For us, Christ reminds us that we are equipped by the Holy Spirit. The Counselor and Advocate, whom Jesus sent to us, guides us and equips us for our encounters in daily life.

A final way to counter the devil is to remember that God enlightens you. David knew that God would deliver. Just as God delivered the lion and the bear, God would deliver Goliath into David's hands. The main difference between Saul and David is that David was enlightened by the Spirit to know that God is ultimately in charge. Saul might be the king who sits on the throne, but it is God who is Israel's true and only King. Enlightened with that knowledge, God was pleased to use his servant David to bring glory and honor first to God's name, then to David's, and ultimately to Israel. A faith in God's sovereignty is a faith that points to God's deliverance. This Holy God,

Almighty Father, Maker of heaven and earth, He is on our side and has adopted us as his children. There is no need to fear any tactic of the devil when the knowledge of God's presence enlightens our minds and hearts. With this faith, David is able to say confidently, "The Lord who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine." I ask that you take the time to consider your faith. Remember, God empowers, God equips, and God enlightens. Therefore, "Go, and the Lord be with you!"

Let us pray. Omnipotent God, Commander of heaven's hosts, we turn to you as our Chief and Guide. Far too often we rely and trust in our earthly leaders. And when they fail, we turn to anger and cynicism. Fuel for the devil's fires. Help us to see you as our true and only King. Our allegiance is to you alone and our faith in you should direct our steps. Be with us, Almighty Father, as we face the adversities of life and the assaults of the devil. Empower us by your grace, equip us with your love, and enlighten us in your wisdom. May we be faithful servants and disciples of our Savior and Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.