

Spring Training for the Christian Team

Lent 2: Playing the Giants

(I Samuel 17: 1-11, 41-49; I Timothy 4: 6-12; Psalm 121; Mark 5: 1-21)

Last week, we marked the beginning of the season of Lent and we made a commitment (or at least, I made one on your behalf) to do something a little unusual, maybe unorthodox and certainly un-traditional with our observance of Lent. Whatever you or I may have done with Lent in the past, this year we're going to take our cue from what the baseball players do in Spring Training, and we're going to use the entire season to build strength, speed and endurance for Christian discipleship, and to do that we're going to do a lot of exercises, drills and practice games. And if we accomplish nothing else by using the baseball model in our worship, we will at the very least disprove that all-too-popular theory that Christian worship is a spectator sport. There are *no* spectators at worship, because if there *were* then worship would be nothing more than entertainment. Other Christian groups may have gone that way, but we do not need to follow. Worship is *teamwork*, which involves both a *team* and *work*. The team is only as strong as our weakest player, and the work must never stop even for a moment because there are opponents out there who are just waiting for the chance to stomp all over our faith and beat the Church into oblivion.

Last week we started off our Spring Training with some brisk spiritual walking. We sharpened our skills at recognizing, in the faces and stories of strangers, the voice and call of Jesus Christ. This week, as promised, we have our first exhibition game, and curiously we start off with the biggest and toughest team there is. Now, I'll be the first to admit that could be a real bad move and bad news for the rest of the season. Or, on the other hand, if we can beat *these* guys, then this will provide enough confidence to carry us through the whole season and any other team that dares to meet us on the field.

Today we meet the "Giants". I don't think these Giants necessarily hail from San Francisco. In fact, our Old Testament text claims the franchise was located once in *Philistia*, ancient soil on which the modern Gaza Strip is located, but I'm convinced the Giants, as a team, have been around a lot longer than that, and have been located in many other cities through history. In any event, the favourite old story we read this morning about Little David when he squared off against the Giant's captain, a mean that big brute named Goliath—I'm going to suggest we think of that story as a "game tape". You know how all the professional sport teams video-tape their games and their opponents' games, and you probably know what they do with those game tapes—watch them as a group, analyze them in detail, both before

and after games. Well, our watching of the David and Goliath tape before our own game today is for one purpose: to demonstrate and illustrate that this Giants team *can* be *beaten*. Big and ugly as they are, they can be laid out flat—if you have the right *strategy* and *skills*. And then, just for good measure, we ran another game tape. This time it was Jesus and twelve mates who faced another Giant team on the Sea of Galilee, and even though the disciples all played quite badly and nearly blew the game, Jesus made a clutch save in the dying moments, and he snatched a quiet victory from a noisy, ugly battle. Again, the lesson from that game tape, and our purpose in watching it, is to set firmly in our minds and hearts the simple reality that the Giants can be beaten, which is not only good psychology and good pre-game coaching strategy, but it's essential to the task of keeping Christian faith healthy and active.

Back to the task at hand, and today's game. As the Giants take the field, let's observe them very closely and see what they're made of. And let's agree right at the outset that there's nothing fictitious or *unbelievable* about these Giants. There's an old story told at Knox College in Toronto, that's probably apocryphal but I'll retell it anyway. A certain professor of Old Testament, a few generations ago, happened to be lecturing on the story of David and Goliath when a student raised his hand and voiced the age-old complaint that he was having a little trouble believing the story with its "fairy-tale" giants and "magic" slingshots. To which the professor replied, "Don't tell me there aren't any giants in the world—we just dress them up in football uniforms and send them out to beat up each other, or if they happen to be a little better coordinated, we teach them to dribble a basketball and shoot it through a hoop. As for magic slingshots, just ask any *kid*—if he can hit a small window at 200 paces without even aiming, which happens all the time, there's no way he could miss a football player at close range!"

In terms of its believability, there's nothing wrong with the old story. If there's a problem, it lies with people who cannot see or will not admit that we do indeed live in a land populated with giants, and not just the ones we dress up in professional sport uniforms. There are multitudes of people in our world and in our communities who use the very same tactics and techniques that the giants have always used. And that's the very first thing we need to notice about the Giants as they take the field today and go through their warm-ups. These guys are all *noise* and *threats*. They *intimidate*, and they'll do anything that makes their intimidation *more effective*. *Physical* size really has nothing to do with it; in fact, their *size* can just as easily work *against* them, as old Goliath could testify *if* he had a head to speak through. The characters in our world who come at us like giants are the ones who, in the great School of Interpersonal Relations, either failed out or got expelled. These are the folks who, if the logic of

their argument gets a little thin, they just turn up the volume. If they see even a speck of fear in your eyes, they'll push their faces even closer to yours. They are, all of them, graduates of the Donald J. Trump School of Diplomacy and Social Grace.

For most of us, it's not too hard at all to put some familiar faces on the Giants we're playing against today, and to put some real flesh and blood experience into our game. But I want to widen the scope just a little farther this morning because, in addition to the *human* characters who bully and intimidate us, there are some even bigger Giants out there, and we need to be aware of them, too. Beyond the people who intimidate, there are *things* that come looking for us, events or situations with names like "Terror" or "Loneliness", "Grief", "Jealously", "Depression", "Pain", "Cancer", "Death". Hundreds of them, in fact, and on the average day you're going to meet a few of them face to face. What these things have in common is *change* for your life, but not the kinds of changes that you would *choose* to make. These are the changes that *force* themselves on you, they push their way into your comfort zone and they love to deliver their unpleasant news with as much noise as possible. They will hurl every threat and curse they can find, and by their skilful intimidation they will try to reduce your faith to fear, and your whole outlook on life to the most dismal self-pitying pessimism. No, folks, there's nothing unbelievable about Goliath, nor about his many friends and team mates who still walk the earth, who still come to visit at the most inopportune times, who still deliver the worst news in the loudest voices, who love to frighten us into doing nothing.

I love the old character of Goliath, in a perverse kind of way. I love him for his wonderful transparency and for the magnificent psychological profile he provides. Goliath always reminds me of the *blind javelin-thrower*. Did you hear about him? Well, they say he never set any records, but he sure kept the crowd awake! Goliath kept a whole *army* awake, for forty days and nights. The big brute paraded across the slopes of a valley, hurling threats, insults and curses at King Saul, his army *and* his God. With a voice like twenty tubas, coming from an ugly head perched nine feet above the ground, atop a body that wore more armour than three people could carry, Goliath was more than a little successful at the art of intimidation. And all the while Goliath was making his ungodly noise, the only noise coming from the Israeli camp was the knocking of knees and the chattering of teeth. King Saul's efforts to enlist, with handsome bribes and rich rewards, a similarly proportioned brute to fight for him, failed miserably. And there's the *first lesson* for our game today: you don't defeat the Giants by using *their* techniques. You don't do it with sheer force. You can't out-*muscle* a Giant. But you sure can out-*smart* them. You can use strategies that will play against their size, and you can use

weapons against which even well-armoured Giants cannot *defend* themselves. That's where a kid named David came in, with a slingshot in his belt and the power of a living faith in his heart. You see, David had two huge advantages that more than made up for his size. First of all, he wouldn't think of using the giant's tactics. There's no way David could swing a bigger club than Goliath, no way he could wear enough armour to protect himself against the giant's kind of battle. All David could do was fight his *own* kind of battle, using the skills, discipline and weapons he already had. That's lesson Number One.

The second advantage David had, and the second lesson for us, is even bigger. You see, David knew this really was the *Lord's* battle. He knew that when you come face to face with a giant, you have to *give* the problem to *God*—He's the one who handles giants, and He's the one who gives us the faith to stand up to them and take the battle *to them*. To express that another way, what David had was an active faith—a faith that wants to see God's will done, to the extent that he offers *himself* to that end. And that stands in stark contrast to the rest of the army that cowers under Goliath's noise. If they had any faith, it was only passive. They were mere spectators in the story, they didn't *do* anything and they probably didn't learn anything either. But David's faith was active, and there's our Lesson Number Two: if you're looking for God's help, you need to *open* the problem to Him. But the moment you do deliver your giant into *God's* hand, the victory is certain. To be sure, David still had to stand up to the big loud-mouth, and he still had to sling that rock. Just like we have to play the Giants today, and we don't have the option to forfeit the game. But take a lesson from David: the rock he threw was *pure faith* in crystallized form, and the hand that *threw* it was *guided*, and the boy who stood there was *guarded*. He was given strength to throw and the confidence to know that God can lick any giant—and with the same faith, so can we.

The Bible, just like our own lives and families and neighbourhoods, has a lot more to say about giants. Jesus faced more than *his* share of them, and he stood up to some giants a lot bigger than Goliath. You might say that Jesus climbed *up a Cross* so that he could look the *biggest* of the giants right in the eye. Paul was another one who faced giants most days of his life. In fact, in Paul's line of work—building the Church and personally delivering the news about Jesus Christ—that's where you're going to meet the most giants, and the meanest of the lot. Paul's giants were pretty hard on him. They beat him up in every city he visited, they shipwrecked him more than once, often got him in chains, and finally they hurled at him that *worst* of *all* threats—the "*Death Sentence*". But they never defeated him, never silenced him, never broke his faith. Paul had learned David's lesson that *size* doesn't matter, but *faith* does. With

that faith alone, Paul started a fire that the giants have never been able to put out, though many have died trying.

Back to our game today, there's something we need to be aware of. Although this may be an "exhibition" game, it is by no means merely a "*simulation*". The Giants are quite real, and so is our encounter with them. Here's the question that makes our game-encounter real this morning: Do you find *yourself* facing a giant or two today? You're mighty unusual if you don't. You're the exception to the rule if you haven't seen one or heard one today. And if you don't think you have seen one lately, you can be sure that there are some giants *looking for you*. And do you know, those big brutes have no respect—they'll come right into *Church*. In fact, they love to come in here and they don't even need to be invited. They love to come to Church meetings and direct the issues and business away from matters of faith. They love to stand up when you're singing and tell you not to. They love to get noisy when you're praying, so that you won't. They have a million ways to keep you from hearing anything that *might* be used as a *weapon against* them. They have no respect for age: they'll come after you even when you think you're *too old* to fight. They'll come right into your house and sit down at the supper table. And they can't wait until you get tired out and go to bed, because they can do some of their *best work* in your *dreams*. And even if you can't get to sleep and give them the dream-zone opportunity, that's perfectly fine with them because the Giants' all-time favourite playing field is a long *sleepless night*.

Do you find yourself facing a giant or two? Or perhaps running from one? Trying to keep eyes and ears closed to the threats and the noise? What you *have* to know, and what faith *gives* you to know, is that giants can be beaten. Do you know the old adage, "The bigger they are, the harder they fall"? Well, our advantage is even better than that. You see, the bigger they are, the *slower they move*. And the bigger they are, the *easier they are to hit*. And even the smallest pebble of faith can lay them out flat. What a terrible shame it is for us, and what a needless tragedy for the Church, when we let these loud-mouthed, hulking brutes walk about *unchallenged*; when Jesus Christ, who is the rock of our faith, is hidden behind layers of excuses and kept from the battle he could win for you. With the strength of Christ and his power to change when we need most to change, there is no giant, no fear, no threat, no unwelcome possibility that we cannot meet and defeat, once and for all.

The truth about the Giants, the big, ugly, noisy team we're meeting on the field today, is not centred around whether or not they *exist*. The truth about giants, according to David, according to Paul, according to Jesus Christ, is the fact that giants *can be beaten*. Their noisy

threats *can* be silenced. In spite of their awesome size and great skill at intimidation, they can be laid low. That possibility and promise *for you*, can make all the difference in your life. That's the promise that will see you through the changes, the trials and battles that you do not *choose* to go through, but which you *must* nonetheless *face*. The truth about giants just may be the most important truth you will ever hear. Tell that to your giants the next time they come around, and that may be enough to send them packing. And if it does come to a showdown, just tell them *who* is on *your* side!

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