

SERMON  
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Saul and the Israelites faced the Philistines in the Valley of Elah. Twice a day for 40 days, morning and evening, Goliath, the champion of the Philistines, came out between the lines and challenged the Israelites to send out a champion of their own to decide the outcome in single combat, but Saul was afraid. Young David, bringing food for his elder brothers, heard that Goliath had **defied** the armies of God and of **the reward from Saul** to the one that defeats him, and **accepted the challenge**. Saul reluctantly agreed and offered David his armor, which David declined, taking only his staff, his sling (which he used to protect his sheep —remember he was a shepherd) and five stones from a brook. David and Goliath confront each other—Goliath with his armor and javelin, David with his staff and sling. "The Philistine cursed David by his gods", but David replied: "This day the Lord will deliver you into my hand, and I will strike you down; ...for the battle is God's, and he will give you into our hand." David hurled a stone from his sling and hit Goliath in the center of his forehead. Goliath fell on his face to the ground. And the Philistines fled.

What a story! It's epic! What is it all about?!

Post Classical Jewish traditions stress Goliath as the representation of paganism, in contrast with David, the champion of God. Christian tradition sees in this story **the hope and the assurance of its own victory** over the enemies of God's people—a final victory for the poor and the marginalized and those who struggle against injustice. It prefigures Jesus victory over sin and death and the Church's final over persecution. In popular culture, the story of David and Goliath is a pitch for the underdog—a contest where the smaller, weaker opponent faces a much bigger, stronger adversary and wins! It's a story about victory in spite of the odds. As a popular and well-known Judeo-Christian story (it also appears in the Quran) we all know who the good guy is —and it ain't the brute. From yet another perspective, a spiritual perspective, this iconic story can be seen as a depiction of the personal battle between our own **better selves that God calls forth** and our own **worse human instincts**. Goliath is who we all are when left to our own

sinful and selfish devices. Goliath. The big brute within each of us. And David, the young vulnerable but faithful servant of God within each of us. Who will be our hero? Who will we chose to follow? Who will we become?

I remember preparing a young couple for marriage a few years back. They were both unchurched, so I felt the need to share with them two stories, which might sum up our religious heritage. The first is the story of the Exodus. It's a story that not only belongs to us but is embedded in our culture. It's about the great escape from oppression and dangerous journey to freedom. It's about the people of God escaping the perils of slavery and injustice. It's about courage and leadership and tenacity. It is nothing less than God's dream for humankind. The second story I told them was the story of the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. It's the ordinary shepherd who runs away when the wolf comes. Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd—and I know each of the sheep by name." I asked the groom if he saw himself anywhere in these stories. He answered quickly and proudly, "Oh yes. I'm like the Pharaoh." "The Pharaoh?" "Oh, yes. I want to be rich and powerful. I want to be the Pharaoh in the story!" I was stunned. Did I forget to tell him about the people of God and how they were treated by the Pharaoh? Did I forget to tell him that Moses is the hero of the story? Did I assume too much? I guess he never got the church or synagogue memo about who the good guys are — and who the bad guys are. I thought everyone knew.

Now that I think about it, perhaps the basic stories of our faith tradition have been lost to the average guy. Perhaps this culture of ours really does not regard or reflect the morality and ethics the Judeo-Christian tradition. Perhaps we have have not been shaped by the this tradition as much as I assumed. The battle is not one that has already been won. It is still being fought. David and Goliath are still at it. In our culture. In our politics. In our own lives. The battle wages on.

Jon Meacham, Pulitzer Prize-winning author and biographer and historian, has just published a new book, "The Soul of America: The Battle for our Better Angels." Diane Rehm opened her speech on June 3 by quoting from its pages. I can only say that I have read it once and that I plan to read it again and again. I know that I need to grasp and understand the complexities, the broad

sweep of our history better. Meachem is such an accomplished historian and biographer. Meachen helps to establish a broader context in which to grapple with so much of what we have witnessed this past week—the images of children being taken from their families seeking asylum at our southern borders, of fear-mongering and racist slurs that have been going on for over a year, and longer. It seems unbearable, but the roots of all this go much farther back. Only when we can see it as part of an ongoing culture war, a battle for our better angels, might we be able to recognize what is going on for what it is, and what it has been, and what it will continue to be.

W.E.B. DuBois saw what was happening during his lifetime. He wrote, “In 1918, order to win the war, we had to make Germans into Huns. In order to win, the South had to make Negroes into thieves, monsters and idiots. Tomorrow we must make Latins, Southeastern Europeans, Turks and other Asiatics into actual “lesser breeds without the law.”” That’s a quote. “Lesser breeds without the law.” DuBois continued, “Some seem to see today anti-Christ in Catholicism, and in Jews, international plotters of the Protocol; and in ‘the rising tide of color,’ a threat to all civilization and human culture.” “The rising tide of color”—this is a reference to a 1920 book with a subtitle, “The Threat Against White World-Supremacy” by Lathrop Stoddard. There is plenty more to say about this—

Meanwhile, we each have a choice to make. The cries of children have awakened us to the fact that there is more going on than we were fully aware; more going on than just this week’s crisis; more going on than the institution of a zero-tolerance policy; more going on than questions about how best to handle immigration and asylum requests. There is much more going on and much more at stake. “The Soul of America — The Battle for our Better Angels.”

Here are two poems to consider. The first is called “The Unguarded Gates.” I won’t surprise you with its allegiance. It was a favorite of the Second Ku Klux Klan movement. I was surprised to learn that in the mid-1920s Klan membership was at 2 million. Some historians fix it between 3-6 million.

“The Unguarded Gates”

Wide open and unguarded stand our gates,

And through them presses a wild motley throng—  
Men from the Volga and the Tartar steppes,  
Featureless figures of the Hoang-Ho,  
Malayan, Scythian, Teuton, Kelt, and Slav,  
Flying the Old World's poverty and scorn;  
These bringing with them unknown gods and rites,—  
Those, tiger passions, here to stretch their claws.  
In street and alley what strange tongues are loud,  
Accents of menace alien to our air,  
Voices that once the Tower of Babel knew!  
O Liberty, white Goddess! it is well  
To leave the gates unguarded? On thy breast  
Fold Sorrow's children, soothe the hurts of fate,  
Lift the down-trodden, but with hand of steel  
Stay those who to thy sacred portals come  
To waste the gifts of freedom. Have a care  
Lest from thy brow the clustered stars be torn  
And trampled in the dust. For so of old  
The thronging Goth and Vandal trampled Rome,  
And where the temples of the Caesars stood  
The lean wolf unmolested made her lair.

On a radically different note sounds this sonnet. Perhaps you won't recognize its beginning, but the ending I am sure you will know:

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,  
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;  
Are at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand  
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame  
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name  
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand

Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command  
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.  
“Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!” cries she  
With silent lips. “Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-toss to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!

The battle for allegiance and identity continues. A culture battle. A battle for our souls. What will each of us decide? What poem, what story belongs to you? Who are the heroes? The battle is not one that has already been won—it is still being fought. David and Goliath are still at it. They are still at it, in our culture. In our politics. In our own lives. History happens now. The battle wages on.

Amen.