

1 Samuel 17: 1a1 4-11m 19-23; 32-49
 Things Fall Apart
 Delivered June 21, 2009

I ran across a great quote this week, that I want to use as the basis of my sermon for today. The quote is by Chinua Achebe a Nairobi author best known for his African trilogy, **Things Fall apart**. Maybe you've read it. I haven't—yet, but my feeling is that this novel is required reading in high schools now. Anyway, Chinua Achebe says this about storytelling:

“People create stories create people; or rather stories create people create stories.” Again, the quote is, “People create stories create people; or rather stories create people create stories.” Isn't that great? And the quote says everything about why we read scripture. Believers inspired by God created scripture and scripture creates believers. I want to return to this quote later on today. For now, though, just keep that quote in the back of your head. Now on to the sermon:

Once upon a time there is a group of people who, because of circumstances in their own country, are forced to migrate to foreign lands. These people are not welcome in the lands to which they migrate. Their language is different, their religion is different. THEY are different. Fights erupt between the new comers and the established landowners. The fights turn into wars. Many people on both sides die. The immigrants though, eventually lose out, and those who do not die fighting, are resettled by the victors. They are resettled to a small strip of land in the Middle East that they would eventually call their own. They become a community. They raise families, Their numbers grow. Then of course, they need more land, and so, they begin to encroach upon the land of their neighbors. Those neighbors fight back. Again, war ensues.

Now, this is a non-fiction story. If you had trouble putting a name to the people I described, that's because the story follows the general course of nations—and of peoples within nations. Maybe you thought I was talking about the Israel of the 20th and 21st centuries, AD? If so, you are wrong. In fact, I was talking about the Philistines of the 12th and 11th centuries BC.

We don't know a whole lot about the Philistines from the Bible, since the Bible focuses on the Hebrews, God's chosen people. But from mostly non-Biblical sources we know that the Philistines were Sea People from the Aegean area. In the 12th century BC, they were unable to live productively in their own lands, so they moved East across the waters. They were capable sailors and capable warriors, too. When they landed on the other side of the Mediterranean Sea, they defeated the Ugarits and the Hittites, and they even gave Egypt a run for its money. Finally, though, the Philistines were defeated by the Egyptian Pharaoh Ramesses III, who gathered up the survivors and plopped them down on the southern strip of Canaan. These displaced people named their new land, Philistia. The Greeks must have had a hearing problem, because they couldn't seem to get the right pronunciation of the two words, “Philistines” and “Philistia.” The Greeks called the people who settled in Canaan Palestinians, and the land they occupied, the Greeks called Palestine.

It's a sobering thought, isn't it, to think that the history of the Philistines, forebearers of today's Palestinians, is also in some major ways, also the history of the Israelis? Both the Palestinians and the Israelis were once immigrants in foreign lands; both were devastated in war; both relocated; and eventually both outgrew their borders, or were just hungry for more land—depending on your point of view--and both eventually engaged in war with their neighbors. Knowing what we do now about the Philistines, you might go so far as to say that yesterday's Philistines or Palestinians, are today's Israelis. As Mark Twain once quipped, "History may not repeat itself, but it rhymes a lot." There is definite rhyming going on here—poetry of a sort, or poetic justice at least--two enemies sharing the same, painful history. Or if not poetic justice, maybe we can attribute these ironic circumstances to God's perverse sense of humor. I say perverse because when you get up every morning and read the latest in the long war between Israel and Palestine, or worse, if you're actually living in the Middle East and experiencing the violence first hand, it doesn't seem very humorous, does it?

Scripture is like a many faceted gem. You hold it in the light and certain faces gleam; but if you turn that gem, just a percent of one degree you have an entirely different visual image. Just so, there are at least two different faces to the gem of a story we have before us, the story of David and Goliath. Turn it one way and we recognize it as simply a great piece of literature. It presents one of the greatest of all themes in storytelling; That of an underdog prevailing against all odds. Note, David a Jew, has no armor. Note, David wields only sticks and stones for weapons. He is also young, probably small of stature and he's a shepherd boy—he has no social rank to speak of. Yes, David is definitely an underdog. Then there's his opponent—Goliath, a Philistine. Goliath is fully armed; a giant of a man toting spear and sword and javelin. Goliath is also trained in warfare. He's a warrior. There should be no contest here. If we were betting people, we would certainly put all of our money on Goliath.

But no, David wins the battle and kills Goliath proving that might does not always win and also, since David has God's blessing and Goliath doesn't, David proves that might is not always right.

Who knows how many people have been inspired by this story—to persevere despite the odds—to keep the faith? David and Goliath is the real life story of slaves gaining their freedom in this country. It's the real life story of India gaining its independence from the British Empire and it's the real life story of the South Africans winning the war against Apartheid. It's also the story of people who band together to fight big corporations—the residents of Love Canal fighting back against the Hooker Chemical Company and the School Board; Erin Brockovich's fight against Pacific Gas and Electric. And you could also say it's the story of us—a small church taking on big projects—like helping to start a school in Guatemala; like providing a preschool to our neighbors in Albemarle and Nelson Counties.

Remember the quote I gave you before I began this sermon? "People create stories create people, or perhaps, stories create people create stories." One thing is certain, stories have great power over us, to frame what is happening to us, inspire us, give us

direction. “If David slew Goliath, then perhaps, though I be small, I too can accomplish great things.”

But, there is another side to this story. Remember, turn the gem, a percent of one degree and get an entirely different visual image.

The story of David and Goliath is also a story of violence which should make us, as Christians, very uneasy. Maybe you squirmed in your pew when the little drama was going on up here just a little while ago. If you did it’s probably because you know that Christ was against the use of violence. Christ says love your enemy. That’s certainly not what this story is about. This story from the Old Testament says that it’s ok to hate your neighbor. This story says that violence, not turn the other cheek, is the correct response to violence. This story tells us that God is on the side of the winner. And finally, this story from the Old Testament says that there are only two sides to an argument or to war—the right side and the wrong side. It does not honor complexity or ambiguity. For these reasons we have to be wary of the story of David and Goliath and very careful in our interpretation of it. As a story of hope, it’s great. As a story of how to get along with our neighbors—not so good.

Of course, if we don’t like the message this story sends, it’s always possible to rewrite it. That’s what I did this week—just for fun. Wouldn’t it have been a hoot, for example, if David comes to the battle line, and pulls out of his knapsack, not a sling shot and five smooth stones, but a crystal ball? He and his brothers and a few of the Philistines, including Goliath, are seized with curiosity. They call off the fighting—just for a moment—so that they can have a look into that sparkling sphere. David holds the crystal ball while those grizzled warriors look down, watching, watching, as the crystal’s haziness clears. Then they see for themselves what will come to pass. How the Philistines will become the Palestinians and the Israelis and the Philistines will swap roles and the fighting will still be on—three thousand years into the future. They will watch with horror the explosion of roadside bombs and the slaughter of civilians. What then? Well, maybe Goliath and David and the soldiers on both sides of the battle line hang their heads, then turn, pack up their swords and their javelins and their armor and go their separate ways. Ok. It’s a stretch, I admit, but it’s the story I prefer!

Chinua Achebe says, “People create stories create people; or rather stories create people create stories.” Whichever way it is, we can **imagine** different endings to those stories certainly, and thereby help in our own becoming of a better people. Then too, the interpretation of those stories, is always up to us. In the case of the story of David and Goliath, if we have to choose between an interpretation of hope versus an interpretation of violence, I choose hope.

Let all the people say, Amen