

“NO WAY, Yahweh!”
1 Samuel 17:1a, 4-11, 19-23, 32-49
Fourth Sunday after Pentecost; June 20, 2021

Rebranding is the process of changing the corporate image of an organization. It's a market strategy of giving a new name, symbol, or change in design for an already-established brand. The idea behind rebranding is to create a different identity for a brand, from its competitors, in the market.

Well you probably know that organizational rebranding was first mentioned in the Bible. It's one of the themes in the early chapters of 1 Samuel. After generations of being led by judges and repeatedly being delivered from the hands of their enemies in their new homeland by the special “chosen” relationship they had with Yahweh, the Israelites decided that they wanted to “rebrand” themselves. Like every middle school-age kid ever, the Israelites didn't want to be “special” or “different” anymore. They longed to be just like everyone else. And “everyone else” was ruled by an anointed human leader, a king.

The Israelites came before Samuel the prophet and declared, “Appoint for us a king to govern us, like other nations” (1 Samuel 8:5). Samuel really tried to dissuade the people from taking this course of action. He pointed out that the Lord God Almighty had stood by them and rescued them from their many enemies. All this despite the many moral meltdowns they had done over the years. No matter. The want to be like “everyone else” grew stronger among the Israelites. They refused to listen to Samuel: “No! We are determined to have a king over us, so that we may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles” (1 Samuel 8:19-20).

Fast forward now to the situation the Israelites find themselves in. They are once again contending against the Philistines. Their respective armies are encamped on opposite sides of the wide-open valley of Elah.

We talk about the Israelite “army” — but let's get serious. Israel's army wasn't a professional army, rather a unit of farmers and shepherds mustered into duty at different times for various challenges. You might imagine the Continental soldiers of early America who went up against the well-regimented and equipped British army.

Each side is waiting for the other to make the first move. It's surprisingly the Philistines who offer a less brutal form of bloodshed to end this standoff. But it's a “solution” that masks a suicide mission.

The Philistine army sends out their “champion.” The Hebrew word for “champion” literally translates as “the man of the between.” This is the one who stands between the two armies facing off against each other. This champion is overwhelmingly impressive in every way. His height in “cubits” and “a span” would equal about 9 1/2 feet in today's reckoning. Not only is his sheer size daunting, but his physical body is covered and protected by the best armor available in that time. His helmet and coat of mail are made of the finest bronze. His legs are sheathed in bronze. A monstrous protective shield is carried in front of him by his personal shield-bearer. He's armed with a javelin and a spear.

His name is... who? Goliath! Yes, Goliath! He's the ultimate warrior, a true “champion” of the Philistine army. This warrior barks a challenge to the shaking Israelite army. He slams down the gauntlet in the following taunt: “Am I not a Philistine, and are you not servants of

Saul? Choose a man for yourselves and let him come down to me... Today I defy the ranks of Israel! Give me a man that we may fight together.”

Remember those words, “...so that...our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles”? Instead of Saul, the acting king of Israel, springing into action on behalf of his people, this is what happened: “When Saul and all Israel heard these words of the Philistines, they were dismayed and greatly afraid.” So much for the protection and leadership offered by the one crowned to be king of Israel.

There are otherwise intriguing details behind all this. David, the youngest son of a man named Jesse from Bethlehem, had been secretly anointed the new king by Samuel. The details of this back-story really get interesting since David’s first job in Saul’s rag-tag army was to practice music therapy. David used his musical skills to calm Saul’s tormented mind which was being attacked by an evil spirit. The Lord presumably dumped this evil spirit on Saul. Weird, right? But anyway, David won over Saul’s appreciation and became his armor-bearer. This kid began his military career as an army musician and soon became a captain. His poetry and song lyrics garnered him plenty of admirers. The Bible says that “he was accepted in the sight of all the people.”

So when David shows up at this stand-off with the Philistines, he’s immediately chastised by his older brothers for leaving the flocks he was supposed to be overseeing. Their father Jesse had sent him to take them provisions. David proclaims his innocence. Really? Would he rather be roaming the hills with sheep or checking out the battlefield action?

David quickly establishes himself as much more than a gawker. Hearing the taunting challenge of that goon Goliath, David immediately speaks his willingness to pick-up the challenge. The bravado of the shepherd-boy reaches King Saul: “Let no one’s heart fail because of him; your servant will go and fight this Philistine.” In similar words for you to get the idea: “Don’t worry, Coach Harbaugh,” so says the walk-on kid who never played the game. “I’ll go in there and single-handedly whip the Buckeyes.”

A British journalist named Malcolm Gladwell once wrote a whole business “re-branding” book using the story of David and Goliath as his template. Gladwell’s basic thesis is that David wasn’t an “underdog” in any way. His slingshot was a formidable weapon, likened to a .45 caliber handgun in the 21st century. Gladwell surmised that as a hulking genetic “giant,” Goliath probably suffered from significant mental and physical disabilities, most significantly vision problems. This Philistine mammoth man did seem to have difficulty identifying the small solitary figure of David as David moved out to encounter him.

And yet Gladwell got it wrong. The confrontation between David and Goliath isn’t a confrontation between small and large, weak and strong, exposed and fortified. There is, as the Bible tells the story, no real “confrontation” between David and his Philistine opponent. David never identifies Goliath by name. The only relationship that is operative in David’s mind, in David’s actions, in David’s spirit, is his relationship with the Lord God of Israel.

Think about that. David’s first reaction to Goliath’s challenge is an incredulous question: “[W]ho is the uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?” (17:26). David then declares to Saul, “[Y]our servant will go and fight with this Philistine” (v. 32). But most importantly, David proclaims before Saul and all Israel with total confidence: “The LORD who saved me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, will save me from the hand of this Philistine” (v. 37)

Saul tries to “outfit” David with his own kingly armor, an experiment of utter failure. David “tried in vain” to walk in all that protective gear before discarding those human “safe-

guards.” He goes instead to confront Goliath as himself — in the strength and power of who he is — a shepherd with a staff and a slingshot. David simply “loads-up” as he had when he was protecting his flocks in the field. He chooses five smooth stones from the nearby river bed.

David moves quickly out into the field, beating Goliath to the line of battle. His swiftness isn’t because he’s lightly geared and nimble footed. Like I said, Malcolm Gladwell got it wrong. David is driven forward by his faith in God’s presence and providence. When Gladwell claimed that “size did not matter,” he was advocating that the small and swift could out-run and out-gun the large and fortified strongholds of power.

David, too, knew that size didn’t matter. Not small size, not large size, not in-between size. Size didn’t matter. Agile, awkward, fortified or apparently foolhardy — those weren’t the parameters that propelled David to the front lines and into the “between space” of battle against the adversary. Malcolm Gladwell is a professed Christian and his books have provided me with plenty of good sermon illustrations. But for this story, Gladwell missed the point. David took his stance of trust in God. The name, David, means “chosen of God” or “beloved.” And in that chosenness, in the belovedness, David puts his trust. He moves forward into direct showdown against someone who defies God only because of his faith in God’s promised relationship with Israel. David believes God to be true to God’s word.

It has been sadly ironic when seeing the recent images coming out of the Middle East, where Palestinian youths — many of them no doubt paid by Hamas — hurl stones and rocks at the giant tanks and disciplined military divisions of Israeli army across border lines between Gaza and the West Bank. The once gallant little David has now become the materialistic Goliath. It’s a cyclical-cynical game in which the Palestinians have strangely become the Jews, and the Jews the Philistines. I pray for the Palestinians as I pray for the Israelis —for every man, woman, and child to live in peace. Psalm 122 tells us to “Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: ‘May they prosper who love you...’ For the sake of my relatives and friends I will say, ‘Peace be within you.’ For the sake of the house of the LORD our God, I will seek your good.” There won’t be peace anywhere in this world until there’s peace in Jerusalem.

Some of you are facing “Goliaths” in your life. I’m facing “Goliaths” as well in my own life and ministry. These giants of problems and perils seem to have no way around them or through them. I refer to them as “no way” situations. Quite often even God gets in on the act and summons us to the front of the line for “no way” missions. Not “doubtful.” Not “unlikely.” Not “where there’s a will there’s a way.” But “no way” possible, situations and missions because there’s Goliath to contend with. “NO WAY, Yahweh!” But from David’s faith in God to make a way and Jesus’s promise to be the Way — we find a way when there’s no way. Think about the stories in the Bible.

Moses against Egypt: Poor Moses. Moses and God against Egypt: Poor Egypt.

David against Goliath: “Too big to hit.” David and God against Goliath: “Too big to miss.”

In the Bible some teenagers even faced “No ways” — Mary, a teenager, was told by an angel that she would conceive a son who would save the world. “Virgins don’t get pregnant. What about my reputation?” No way, Mary. No way. But God...made a Way.

Joseph, a teenager, was sold into Egyptian slavery by his own brothers. He was then betrayed by his boss’ wife and put into prison for life. No way, Joseph. No way. But God...made a Way.

Daniel, a teenager, was torn from his family and kidnapped to Babylon. Daniel opened his window toward Jerusalem and displayed his faith in defiance of King Nebuchadnezzar.

That's what got him thrown into a lion's den. No way, Daniel, no way. But God . . . made a Way.

Gideon, a young man whose name means "hewer," was told to lead his tribe of Manasseh in slaying the Midianites, a horde of desert raiders, with only 300 men. Gideon had only 300 against 10,000 men or more? No way, Gideon, no way. But God . . . made a Way.

Twelve of the most famous Israelites were chosen to go out from the wilderness of Paran and spy on the land of Canaan. For 40 days Shammua, Shaphat, Igal, Hoshea, Palti, Gaddiel, Gaddi, Ammiel, Sethur, Geuel — all impressive men — collected samples of the "milk and honey" flowing from this land of "milk and honey." But they also came back and said, "No way. Those people are so big they make us look like grasshoppers."

But two of the twelve, Caleb and Joshua, also came back saying instead, "No way, Israel? No way? Really? But God...will make a Way."

I don't know what all your no-way situations are. But we go from here this morning to face those no-ways. Face your no-ways. Stand firm. Like David, trust in Lord God who makes a way. Trust in Jesus the Messiah — our deliverer from sin, death, and the devil. He's the Way, the Truth, and the Life through every no-way. God will make a Way. Whatever these Goliaths may be — God will make a Way. Never underestimate someone who is driven forward by his or her faith in God's presence and providence. God will make a Way.

Amen.