Our scripture lesson is a story of crisis: the contest between David and Goliath. It is a text that can teach us about the resources that faith offers us times of crisis. When David arrives at Israel’s camp, the Philistine army is spread out across the battlefield, ready for action. At the vanguard stands Goliath, their champion, his two mighty legs rooted to the ground like powerful tree trunks. Goliath is the “shock and awe” of the Philistine army. Intimidated, the soldiers of Judah find no champion brave enough to take the field against him. The only one willing to step forward is a young boy, David, a shepherd with no military experience.

King Saul tries to loan David his armor; but when David sees how it hangs down awkwardly from his much-smaller body, he casts it aside. As he takes the field, David is wearing only the homespun tunic of a shepherd. His only weapon is a simple leather sling: a strap with a pouch at one end, designed to hold a single stone.

Goliath laughs as this small boy approaches. He does not think David a serious threat. Goliath’s previous combat challenges ended with immediate surrender, but not this time. We all know what happens. After some trash-talking by the Philistine colossus, David reaches into his shoulder-bag, pulls out one of five smooth stones chosen from a dry stream bed, and places it in his sling. As Goliath lumbers slowly towards him, all rage and bluster, David twirls the sling around his head. Before his opponent can even figure out what is happening, David sends the stone hurtling into his enemy’s forehead, killing him instantly.

As it turns out, this young shepherd boy often killed wild beasts with that sling. He may look like a comic figure, a boy dressed in a man’s armor; but put a sling in David’s hand with a smooth stone in it, and he is master of the field. A sling can kill before any other weapon is in range. In his moment of crisis, David focuses his mind and his energy and his gaze on the giant problem in front of him. He knows exactly what to do, and he does it.

What about the giants and storms that beset our own lives? How do we discover that place of inner peace and tap into its power? There are several pointers in the story of David and Goliath. First is the matter of **humility**. Say what you want about the mature King David, the narcissist who shamefully seduced Bathsheba and all but murdered her husband, but *young* David is different. He does not put on airs. Even though the prophet Samuel anointed him as the next king, David speaks to King Saul with the utmost politeness and deference. In no way does David put himself forward as the savior of his people, nor does he try to match Goliath in the trash-talking department. When Saul expresses skepticism that young David has what it takes to contend with the giant, David matter-of-factly relates his experience protecting the sheep and killing wild beasts with his sling. There is an easy confidence there, but no sense of trying to lord it over others.

The second thing we can say about David is that he is **confident**. He knows himself and the skills he has, but he does not aspire to be an expert in everything. When Saul offers to loan him his armor and weapons, David admits they are not for him. David is going to do this thing his own way, following methods he knows to be tried and true.

The third point is David’s ability to **focus**, aiming single-mindedly at the thing he needs to do. When faced with a daunting task, it is helpful to break the problem down into smaller, more manageable steps. David knows what sort of stone he needs and exactly what sort of warm-up swing will get his arm and shoulder muscles limbered up. He knows he has the eye-hand coordination. He knows he can assess the direction and speed. As Goliath comes at him, David sees him no differently than the wild beasts he killed in the past. He is focused on the task at hand. He lets everything else go.

Finally, David clearly **trusts God**. David knows that God anointed him as Israel’s next king. David also knows, and says several times to King Saul, that he is all about God’s glory, not his own. David recognizes that he is merely one player in a much greater drama. David is not the director of that play. God is calling the shots.

 Facing chaotic times, one of the most fruitful things we can do is seek a *still point* amid the storm and dwell there for a few moments. In the case of David, we can imagine him strolling down to the dry creek-bed to find the smoothest stones. Picture him softly humming as he goes about the familiar business of loading up his pouch. Imagine David unwinding his sling, giving it a few test twirls before he loads the stone. Visualize David taking a deep breath as he turns and faces Goliath, probably saying a quick prayer asking God to guide his aim.

Prayer is not some useless activity. Regular prayer is a sort of spiritual agility training. Cultivating a regular prayer life is a way of developing a spiritual tool that is adaptable to all sorts of crisis situations. We are well-advised to not wait for the spiritual crisis to come crashing down upon us. If we get in the habit now, when times are good, of engaging in regular conversation with the Lord, we will find the channel is more readily available in the hour of our greatest need. In the still point of the crisis, it is our humility, confidence, focus, and trust in God that will see us through.

Prayer: Lord, we come before you today thankful that you are our Rock and our Redeemer. Your character is unchanging, your words are true, and your promises good. It is easy to feel overwhelmed by the pressures, demands, circumstances, and news that shake our world. But you are an anchor for us, keeping us steady. We ask today for you to give us clarity. When our world feels noisy and confusing, bring us your peace. When chaos surrounds us, be our center. When our mind is consumed with every worry, lead us to your still waters. Restore our soul. When we do not know how to navigate unchartered waters, give us your strength. When we are at a crossroads, guide us with your wisdom. Be our still point in an ever-changing world. Amen.

**Sources:**

* T. S. Eliot. “Burnt Norton.” Quotation found on <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/582790-at-the-still-point-of-the-turning-world-neither-flesh>. Retrieved June 14, 2021.
* Susan Jones. “At the still point: T.S. Eliot, Dance and Modernism.” April 2, 2012. Cambridge.org/core/journals/dance-research-journal/article/abs/at-the-still-point-t-s-eliot-dance-and-modernism/2523982B46DA1D320DB11DFE73372A9E Retrieved June 14, 2021.

**The Still Point**

Sunday, June 20, 2021  1 Samuel 17:1a, 4-11, 19-23, 32-49

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

# “At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless; Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is, But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity, Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards, Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point, There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.”

So, wrote T.S. Eliot in his poem “Burnt Norton,” describing Eliot’s “sustained exploration of time and transcendence.” Eliot alludes to *dance* as representative of the human experience of timelessness. Eliot's definition of dance seems paradoxical, claiming that it is neither still nor in motion, yet both. Its spatial and temporal locations are indefinable and unfixed; the place to which Eliot refers cannot be named. The still point is simply *there,* but the speaker cannot say where.

There are moments in life – still points – when time seems to slow down or stop; times when the world takes on new clarity. Some are wonderful moments, like when the nurse handed me my daughter or my son for the first time. Some are spiritual moments, like when a pastor in Guatemala prayed over me and I felt God’s Spirit within me. Some are frightening moments, like when I watched in slow motion as I nicked my finger with the table saw. Such moments, these still points, are forever etched in our consciousness.

“Still points” are the life experiences that change us. There can be moments of joy, but just as often they are experiences of pain and struggle that mark us for life and influence the course of all our days to come. *Crises*, we call them. The word “crisis” comes from Latin (and before that, Greek) and its original meaning is “decision” or we might say, “point of decision.” In a crisis, events tumble in, fast and furious. A crisis forces a decision. Inaction is not an option. Even not choosing a course of action is, itself, a choice.