



*Courage Against the Odds*  
6/20/21 - Holy Eucharist Rite II for the Fourth Sunday after Pentecost and  
Father's Day  
The Reverend Nick Morris-Kliment  
Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA

*May the Words of my Mouth, and the Meditations of All our Hearts, be always acceptable in thy Sight, oh Lord, our Rock and Our Redeemer.*

Courage is my theme this morning, on the heels of the first official Federal celebration of Juneteenth. More on that in a minute.

This morning, we have the cherished story of David and Goliath in a time of chronic war between the Israelites and the Philistines.

This story points in the direction of courage in a time of trial. Poet and activist Maya Angelou once offered the opinion that, "Courage is the most important of the virtues, because without it, no other virtue can be practiced consistently. You can be kind and true and fair and generous and just, and even merciful, occasionally... But to be that thing time after time, you have to really have courage." (Cornell News 5.24 2008 online accessed 2021.6.19)

David shows remarkable courage in going up against Goliath, the behemoth warrior for the Philistines. The warrior Goliath issues a challenge to the Israelites: send him a lone soldier with whom to engage in single, hand-to-hand combat. The army of the loser submits to the army of the winner. The contrast between the young, handsome, shepherd boy and the hulking heavily armored veteran is beautifully sketched in Scripture.

What is not so clear are the advantages David had over Goliath. Goliath was weighed down with armor and was slow. David refused armor to wear cumbersome, unfamiliar armor. He was nimble and possessed an awesome weapon: a slingshot.

This was not your simple "Wham-o" slingshot, but rather, a cord with a leather patch in the middle to hold the stone or lead ball. One held the two ends of the cord together and spun the stone around and around, as rapidly as 6 or 7 times a second. Letting go of one end of the cord at the correct moment could deliver a devastating blow. According to one source I found, properly swung, the projectile coming out of that sling could reach speeds similar to the muzzle velocity of a 45mm handgun. ("The Unheard Story of David and Goliath." TED talk, Malcolm Gladwell 2013.9.30, accessed 2021.6.19)

David knew his strengths, and especially, that ultimately, his courage came from his confidence in the power of the Living God.

So, courage also comes from knowing who you are and to whom you belong.

As a people in our country, no group likely has better understood this truth—that knowing oneself and clinging to the power of the living God will ultimately prevail against overwhelming odds— than our siblings in the Black Church.



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I mention this because as I reminded us at the beginning of the sermon, yesterday was Juneteenth, short for June 19<sup>th</sup>. On that date in 1865, the enslaved people of Galveston, Texas were informed by the Union Army, in town to enforce the surrender of the Confederacy earlier that year, that they were free. Consequently, the day has marked the end of American chattel slavery, our original sin as a nation. It has come to be celebrated by Black Americans, as well as many friends and neighbors ever since, in ways as varied as the communities and contexts where Black people have found themselves.

For me, it's an opportunity to reflect for a moment on courage. I've been learning some more Black history and have marveled at the different forms courage took *before* Juneteenth.

I think of Elizabeth Freeman, an enslaved person who lived in Sheffield Massachusetts, who sued for, and won, her freedom in 1781 in Berkshire County MA. Her lawyer was Theodore Sedgwick, who went on to become Speaker of the US House of Representatives.

<https://www.npr.org/2020/02/27/809723362/in-the-1700s-an-enslaved-massachusetts-woman-sued-for-her-freedom-and-won>

I think of the 1840s in Ohio, where free blacks and their white allies organized meetings and petition drives, gave speeches and eventually forced the legislature in Ohio to change laws that kept Black children out of schools, kept black men from voting, and prevented Blacks from testifying against white people in a court of law.

I think of New York and Massachusetts, where black sailors who had been unjustly incarcerated while their ships were in Southern ports told their stories to sympathetic whites, who in turn pushed the legislatures of Massachusetts and New York to provide funding for rescuing Black Northerners from Southern prisons.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/18/opinion/juneteenth-civil-rights.html?action=click&module=Opinion&pgtype=Homepage>

These stories also remind me how important courage is for white people who want to support our black neighbors, and others of color, in the quest to live lives free of prejudice and injustice. Sometimes we risk making people angry or resentful. I know I'm scared of that.

Now, all this may seem like a stretch connection to our readings. And I don't know anything about the faith lives of these particular, Black historical actors that I've just mentioned. But if you saw the PBS series on the Black Church in February, you know that the Black Christianity in America has been the bedrock for African American survival and grace, organizing and resilience, thriving and testifying, autonomy and freedom, solidarity and speaking truth to power.

<http://www.pbs.org/godinamerica/black-church/>

And what could be a more fitting metaphor for beating odds that seem insurmountable than David and Goliath?



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Courage comes from knowing who is on our side, even if things are looking bleak. Courage comes from knowing that we are loved by God beyond all measure. Courage comes from knowing that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. **Amen.**