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“With Cover”

A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth

12th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B)
June 21, 2015

1 Samuel 17:1–49 (selected verses); Psalm 9:9–20; 2 Corinthians 6:1–13

One of the most moving songs in the Broadway musical, *Rent*,

is “I’ll Cover You,” sung by the characters Collins and Angel
as they profess their mutual love.

Angel had rescued Collins from a mugging on the New York streets,

and as their relationship grows, they both confess to be living with HIV/AIDS.

The song comes up twice in the musical: once in Act I as Collins and Angel

find common ground in their dreams of escaping their disease

and in their fear of dying alone, and finally as a reprise in Act II

at Angel’s funeral, as Collins bends in grief to sing it to her one last time.

I think it’s my favorite song in the musical; at least it is the one that brings me

to tears every time: I’ll Cover You.

Rent is a complex story of one year in the life of friends

living the artsy bohemian lifestyle in New York’s East Village

with all its consequences.

Drugs, addiction, poverty, homelessness, HIV/AIDS, promiscuity, violence,

betrayal, sickness, death: all things one would wish to avoid

in living the good life.

But in some way, these negatives are covered and redeemed by the power

of friendship, community, relationship, solidarity, and love: I’ll Cover You.

Cover—whether it is human cover, human protection, human claiming,
human friendship and love—is an attribute which points
towards its source in God, whether one realizes it or not.

The Apostle Paul calls it God’s “favor,” and it is what pulls him and his co-workers
through many sleepless nights, beatings, imprisonments, sorrows
and hardship: I’ll Cover You.

The story of David and Goliath is a story of God’s covering and protecting love.
It’s a story as old as ancient Israel, and a story as recent as Charleston.

The Valley of Elah in Judah looks like a half-pipe snowboard run
extending east to west from the Mediterranean Sea
to valuable inland cities of Hebron, Bethlehem and Jerusalem,
with rising mountain ridges flanking
both the north and south sides of the valley.

The Philistines were seafaring people from Crete who had migrated to Palestine,
and who wished to continue migrating deep into the heart of Israel
in hopes of dividing Saul’s kingdom in half: divide and conquer.

Did I mention that the Philistines were sworn enemies of the Israelites?

The Philistine army had set up camp on the ridge south of Elah;
the Israelite army has set up camp just across the valley
on the opposing north ridge.

They were gridlocked at this point because for either to attack would require
descending the hill, crossing the open valley fully exposed,
and then ascending the enemy’s ridge for uphill, hand-to-hand combat.

To be the aggressor puts one’s army at a disadvantage,
at high risk for heavy bloodshed, and a possible total rout.

But to wait and do nothing also puts both camps at risk of reinforcements arriving
for the opposing side.

And so they did what ancient armies often did as an economy of war:

they called their "greatest" warriors down into the valley
for a single combat dual to determine the outcome of the battle.

Greatest warriors... I say that reluctantly.

The Yahwist who authored 1 and 2 Samuel gives the first greatest warrior a name,
Goliath, which in ancient Hebrew happens to mean "without cover."

The irony, of course, is that this giant of a man, whose name means "without cover,"
steps forth *fully covered* with body armor, sporting a bronze helmet,
toting spear, javelin and sword,
and accompanied by an attendant preceding him with a shield.

Goliath's armor is so heavy, weighing as much as 100 pounds,
that it takes an attendant to maneuver him into position.

His armor and weaponry is impressive; the man behind the armor, not so much.

From the beginning, there is a chink in this giant's armor,
for we know that he is "without cover."

Furthermore, once David, whose name means "beloved," is introduced into the
narrative

as the opposing greatest warrior, the giant's name is no longer even used.

He is referred to simply as "this Philistine" or "the uncircumcised,"
which is a pretty low verbal blow.

In the previous chapter of 1 Samuel, when David was anointed king and
successor to Saul, even Samuel, the priest, is fooled by his eyes

when he spots Jesse's eldest, tallest, and most handsome son, Eliab.

"Surely, the Lord's anointed stands here before the Lord," Samuel says.

But the Lord stage whispers to Samuel, "You old fool!

Do not consider his appearance or his height.

The Lord does not look at the things human beings look at.

Humanity looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."

(1 Samuel 16:6–7)

Outward appearances do not reflect or convey God's cover.

God's cover is internal, an under-armor, a strength of heart.
Cover is not determined by height, weight, age, stature, gender,
sexual preference, birth order, or ethnicity.
God's cover, in this case, is in the form of the Spirit of the Lord, which comes upon
David in power, in internalized power, in heart-power, at his anointing.
"I am weak, but he is strong," David perhaps is singing to himself
as he clutches his pouch of five smooth stones and edges over the half-pipe
to slide into the path of the giant who stands armored up,
but without cover, like an emperor without clothes.
Do we wonder at who wins the duel? Who is the greatest?

When our family lived in Decatur, GA, during our seminary years there,
our youngest son, Stuart, was in pre-school at Decatur Presbyterian Church.
He was a chatty little boy back then, who processed his thoughts verbally, non-stop.
And every day, as our carpool crossed the railroad tracks and proceeded up
Church Street on the way to pre-school,
we would pass a metal salvage shop on our right.
Standing beside the salvage shop sign was a complete suit of medieval armor,
perhaps 10 feet tall, painted bright shiny red, with its hand raised,
either as a wave or as a threat—it was hard to tell.
But every time we passed that knight in shiny red armor,
Stuart would chirp from the backseat three times,
"The scary man, the scary man, the scary man!"
And I would remind him, "Don't worry, Stuart. He's not real.
He's hollow on the inside, like a giant chocolate Easter bunny. He can't hurt us."
And so it was with Goliath, who was heavy on the exoskeleton
but lacking the inner cover and strength written upon his heart
as a sign of God-claiming, God-presence and God-power.

A young medical resident, on call overnight, relates a story about

an incident which occurred while he was "covering" the Emergency Department. He was summoned there in the wee hours of the morning at 2 a.m.

because a family had brought in a five year old with a "high fever."
When the resident opened the door to the examining room,
he came face to face with three generations of Greek Americans:
"a grandfather with his arms crossed, his severe gaze, and his scary white walrus
mustache; a father, with his arms crossed, a hostile gaze and his scary
black mustache; and a grandmother and mother who were quietly weeping.
And then there was the patient, the precious child, the 5-year-old first son
of a first son.

While his family glared and wept, the boy tore around the examining room,
opening drawers, pulling out gowns, and scattering stuff all over the place."

The resident tried to get a medical history, but the family was non-cooperative.

He tried to examine the child, but the boy kicked and resisted,
and no one in the family stepped forth to offer help.

After an hour, he threw up his hands and left the room frustrated.

"I've had enough of this nonsense," he said to himself. "I've had it."

When he stalked over to the nursing station and looked at the cover sheet to
see who the child's pediatrician was, he noted that it happened to be one of his
mentors: someone who had trained him,
and someone he admired tremendously.

So he called this pediatrician at 3 a.m., hoping he would step in for him,
and he found the older doctor to be extremely
accommodating at such an ungodly hour.

The resident explained the situation to his mentor, complained about the hostility
of the adults, suggested that the boy did not seem sick at all,
bemoaned the lateness of their arrival and the complete waste
of his precious time as a doctor.

And the mentor just listened... and continues to listen. And after a long pause he said,

"You're right. Anyone can take care of easy families." And he hung up.
(Michael Radetsky. MD. "The Hero in Medicine." *JAMA*, May 5, 2015, Vol 313, #17)

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God's cover is an internal quality, a heart quality.

Cover is not determined by height, weight, age, stature, gender,
sexual preference, birth order, ethnicity, or hour of the day.

God's cover, in the form of the Spirit of the Lord, is an internalized power,
a heart-power which sees beneath appearances and bends to love
the unlovable, the uneasy to love, the unlovely.

"I'll Cover You," the Spirit of the Lord speaks to our hearts,

"I'll favor you, I'll listen to you, and I'll help you,
and then you will be able to cover them, too!"

"He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High,

will rest in the shadow of the Almighty," the Psalmist says in Psalm 91.

"He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge;
his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart.

You will not fear the terror of night,

nor the arrow that flies by day,

nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness,

nor the plague that destroys at midday...

For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways...

Because he loves me," says the Lord, "I will rescue him;

I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name." (Psalm 91)

There seem to be many Goliaths that strike fear into our hearts,

that call out and appeal to our baser notions of scarcity and security.
And our tendency is to recoil, to shout “the scary man, the scary man, the scary man”
whenever they step into our valley.
But like Goliath, they may be big and armored up, but internally,
they are hollow and without cover:
those who would continue to deny the civil rights of our LGBTQ community,
the Collins and Angels in our midst, are *without cover* and not to be feared
because, as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said,
“The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”
Those who would continue to deny health care and insurance to the poorest
in our state are *without cover* because one of the most primary
kingdom values proclaimed by Jesus is the value of
shalom, healing, and well-being for all.
Those who would chip away at affordable pre-school for our children
and high quality public education for all are *without cover*
because Jesus is the champion of the little child,
whom he shelters under his wing and covers with his embrace and blessing.
Those who would wrap voter suppression in a new package of election laws,
claiming them as a preventive to voter fraud,
are *without cover* because racial justice will not stand for
another throwback to that old scary man Jim Crow.
Those who would have enough hatred in their hearts
to infiltrate a church bible study and murder good people
as a vendetta against all black people are *without cover*
because God’s rainbow spans the sky as a sign of God’s everlasting covenant
against destruction and chaos in affirmation of God’s favor and cover
in reverence for ALL LIFE in any way, shape and form
because God’s everlasting covenant affirms this reverence for all life
through God’s ultimate cover, Jesus Christ, Mother Emanuel, God-with-us.
Ours are the five small stones of advocacy, which we carry in our shepherd’s bag:

one little well placed word has the power to fell the life-threatening giants.
Use it, Presbyterians. Use your bag of well placed words. It is one of your best gifts.
And trust that God will listen to you, will help you, will cover you, will favor you,
if you will use your compassionate heart, your speech and pen,
your courageous deeds of love and solidarity, your imaginative presence
to cover others who are on the side of a God-story
that bends towards reverence for all life, justice, righteousness, peace and love. Amen.