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DAVID
A MAN FOR OUR TIME

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A MAN FOR OUR TIME

A SERMON

Preached at the First Presbyterian Church, San Rafael,
California, Sunday, August 26th, 1917, on the Occasion
of the Departure of Young Men of the Congregation
for the United States' Army

BY
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“FOR THE TIME WOULD FAIL ME TO TELL OF DAVID.”

Hebrews 11:32

I suppose that it is contrary to all the laws of sound preaching to take a text which you do not intend to expound, yet that is confessedly what I am doing this morning. There is no single text which quite covers the many human interests of the character and career of David. And when you have vainly searched for such a text for a long time you come to feel as the writer of the eleventh chapter of Hebrews felt when he exclaimed, “For the time would fail me to tell of David,” in a way that is at all adequate. That is the right spirit in which to approach this greatest of the great kings of Judah, who lived in one of the most trying periods of the history of his nation. His task was similar to that of the outstanding figure of present-day Russia, Kerensky, for with one hand he had to organize his own people into a well ordered society, while, with the other, he fought off their foreign enemies. Kerensky’s practical idealism is also Davidic and leads one to wonder whether the youth of the two men may not be counted as a determining factor in this. David was thirty when he came to the throne. Kerensky is thirty-three; and he gives promise of accomplishing, as David did, his chief tasks of constructive statesmanship in the usually doubtful years of the thirties. I can well be-

lieve that Isaiah might have been thinking of David when he wrote his now familiar description of a truly great man in troubled times; he is "as an hiding place from the wind, and a covert from the tempest; as rivers of water in a dry place, as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land." Isaiah knew what a tower of strength a good and great man is. The picture is so vivid that he must have drawn it from life, if not that of a contemporary, then of some such man as David.

I ask you to look at two aspects of David's character this morning which have particular interest for us in our present national crisis.

I. DAVID AND HIS HARP.

Will it appear to you a waste of valuable time, an unpardonable trifling with a rare opportunity, if I ask you to think a good deal this morning about a period of David's life when much of his time was devoted to the tedious business of mastering the harp? These are militant days and we are likely to be impatient with whatever seems to make no direct contribution to the task of winning this war. "What's playing a harp got to do with fighting the greatest military autocracy of history?" do you ask? "Why not plunge right into David's fight with Goliath and give us something 'practical'?"

Well, we shall come to that memorable contest shortly, but we shall not be ready to until we have taken pains to get a good look at David hard at work "practicing" on his

harp. Probably shepherd boys of coarser fibre than he made fun of him for wanting to know how to make music. But he practiced on. Curiously enough, he did not consider it an effeminate thing to be able to play a harp. So he practiced on, out on the lonely hills of Judea.

And upon a time, messengers of the king went through the land in desperate search of harmonies that would replace the discords in their royal master's soul. What a pathetic spectacle they were—searching up and down the land for a companion for the King who, in spite of his prominence and his court, was, nevertheless, singularly and pitifully alone! People who had heard the sweet strains of David's harp by night out on the hills above Bethlehem told the King's men that he might prove to be the one to quiet the troubled spirit of Saul. So David was called from his lonely duties to the house of the King.

Why did Saul in his distraught condition turn to David? Because of a personal quality which the biographer of David has chosen to depict in words of mingled poetry and prose. It was a quality which his mastery of the harp suggests rather than describes. His soul had developed in quietness and confidence out under the lonely stars and among homely scenes in fellowship with God. If it had not been for that, David's music would have been anything but refreshing to the King. Music alone was not equal to the task of dispelling the intermittent panic of Saul's spirit and subduing it to quietness and self-possession. Saul "loved David greatly" because the love of God had been allowed to work out the

normal attractiveness of this young man whose every gift was needed for his country at a critical time. Surely, the gift which enabled him to save his country from the disastrous excesses of a mad King, even for a time, is as deserving of consideration as the accomplishment by which he laid a foreign enemy low.

For if Judah needed just sanctified quietness and undiscourageable confidence then, America needs them now. Everyone cannot bear the brunt of the battle with a foreign foe, but we who must stay at home can give ourselves unreservedly to the equally important business of keeping the nation free from every evil passion and discordant spirit. We shall soon have 1,000,000 men under arms, if we haven't them already. That means that there are 10,000,000 persons who are anxious, and are wondering what the next twelve months have in store for them. America needs calm, brave souls who have fellowship with the Eternal and can speak out of that fellowship strong, reassuring words of comfort and courage. We are facing unprecedented problems of finance which can be solved only by a patriotic retrenchment of unnecessary expense. We must meet and master new difficulties of food conservation. These can be overcome only as we hold ourselves loyal to a code of honor that calls for intelligent sacrifice at times and in places where we cannot easily be called to account by any external authority. The seas we are sailing are in a measure uncharted. Mistakes have been made and more are going to be made. Disasters will come in spite of the best laid plans of our ablest men. Our situation is fraught with possibilities

of distressing friction and discord; fraught also with numberless opportunities for harmonious co-operation for the common welfare. Now, if ever, America needs men and women who have lived enough in the silent places to keep silent when criticism could do nothing but lacerate, and fault-finding could serve only to dishearten some brave soul who is hoping against hope for good news. In a word, America needs men and women who have resolved, with the Psalmist, "I will open my dark saying upon the harp"; that is, they will hold tenaciously to the faith that the most painful enigmas of life are capable of a bright solution. Neither the cause of patriotism nor that of religion can be served by a shallow optimism, but both will profit by a quiet determination to think and speak of the dark facts of our national crisis with such confidence in the God who commandeth the armies of heaven as well as of earth as shall be to anxious hearts like sweet strains of music in a discordant world.

II. DAVID AND GOLIATH.

It has well been said that Goliath was the last word in preparedness. Nothing, supposedly, could touch him. He had nearly everybody across the valley of "No Man's Land" badly scared. If you will read the list of his equipment, remembering how big he was, you will be helped to realize how forbidding a sight he must have been. His might was his god and a part of his war policy was to create fear in the heart of his enemies by a display of his armor. He was

probably a son of the race of the Anakim, a tribe of giants whom the twelve scouts of Israel discovered when Moses sent them to spy out the land. You will recall that ten of the twelve scouts "were in their own sight as grasshoppers" when they saw the probable ancestors of Goliath. Caleb and Joshua alone refused to yield to the grasshopper spirit because they were not half so afraid of facing giants as they were of distrusting God's purpose that righteousness shall prevail on the earth.

David's spirit was akin to Joshua's and Caleb's. He was their son. None of the grasshopper business for him! And this, mind you, was the David who could play a harp! If Goliath had known that, he undoubtedly would have added it to his contemptuous remarks as David made his way "over the top" and across "No Man's Land." David answered the contemptuous challenge of Goliath, but in his answer there was no hint of boasted personal prowess. For the purpose of winning the King's approval of his plan of attack, he had reported to him his successful encounters with a lion and a bear, but he doesn't mention lions and bears now. He brandishes no weapons, although there was not a more intelligently armed man in either army than David. He was doing nothing foolhardy. He was equipped with the best weapon he could get, regardless of its display value. Over against the sword, the javelin and the spear of the Philistine, David lifted up his simple weapon and—Something besides. That Something besides is what I want to hold up before the young men of our congregation who are

departing for the training cantonments. Your government has equipped you with your weapons, but it cannot give you the Something besides. As David went "over the top," he lifted up a Name. "Thou comest to me with a sword, and with a spear, and with a shield, but I come to thee in the name of the Lord of Hosts—whom thou has defied."

What did David mean by so wording his declaration of war?¹ He meant that he was fighting for the things that make life worth living; for the defense of a shepherd's home where the sanctity of woman's virtue and the helplessness of childhood incited men to chivalry, not to lust and brutality.² He meant that he was fighting for the right of a people to work out its own salvation *without* fear and trembling because of the standing menace of a powerful neighbor greedy of power. He meant that he felt that if ever God's blessing rested upon a cause of war it rested upon his.

That is why Goliath "looked so small to David that the question was whether the shepherd could see the giant well enough to hit him"! That is why David went to war singing:

¹ When I read President Wilson's memorable message to Congress calling for war on Germany, I wonder if, before writing it, he did not read the seventeenth chapter of I Samuel! It breathes the exalted spirit of David's declaration of war, as it closes with the equally exalted words of Martin Luther to Kaiser Charles V at the Diet of Worms.

² The Rev. Frederick W. Clampett, D. D., Rector of Trinity Church, San Francisco, tells me that he saw Belgian children whose arms had been cut off by German soldiers. This will be considered unimpeachable evidence by all who know Dr. Clampett.

“I know of a land that’s sunk in shame,
And hearts that faint and tire,
And I know of a name, a name, a name
Can set the land on fire.
Its sound is a brand, its letters flame;
I know of a name, a name, a name
Will set the land on fire.”

That name for us is the name of the blessed Christ of God and that land is Germany and the territory of her Allies!

A young man, or an army of young men, who go to war in that spirit and in such a cause will fight like Christians, which means that they will fight like gentlemen. Remember, young men, that for a Christian, fighting is never merely permissible. It is either dead wrong or it is dead right. And if it is right for you to fight for our country’s cause, it is right for you and us to pray for victory; and we are going to do it. Be sure of that. Furthermore, if it is right to fight and pray for a cause, it is right to pay for it. Be sure, too, that we are going to do that. We have just begun to do it. Germany’s war debt is estimated at from 24% to 27% of her taxable wealth. Great Britain’s is 22½%; France’s is 24%; Russia’s is 24%. The war debt of the United States, including the \$7,000,000,000 recently voted by Congress, is only 2½% of her taxable wealth. You, young men, who have put your all upon the altar of your country’s cause may go to war knowing that if you need the other 97½% of the nation’s wealth to win this war, you may have it. It’s yours! We are slowly awaking to the fact that we shall have to pay for this war on a scale hitherto unheard of. When General

Sherman started on his march to the sea he was given three months' ammunition. That ammunition would have lasted the same number of guns just ten minutes at the Battle of the Somme. The ammunition used in the three days' Battle of Gettysburg would have lasted the same number of guns just seven minutes at the Battle of the Somme. These figures stagger the imagination, but the heart of the nation receives them calmly. The bills will be paid, our prayers will mingle with yours for victory, and you, boys, will give a good account of yourselves in the hour of battle.

Young men, you are right. Never did men go to war with higher and holier sanctions than those which rest upon you. But let me in this quiet hour and this sacred place urge you to add to your faith in the righteousness of your cause a resolution before Almighty God that no stress shall provoke you to tolerate in your warfare the things that have stained the flag of Germany. Germany stands damned before the conscience of the world for the unspeakable atrocities she has perpetrated in her mad determination to rule the world. "Rather than not have her own way she has scuttled the ship of the world." You carry to war a flag of which you need not be ashamed. It is a flag that would never stand for the rape of Belgium, a country so small that you could put fourteen of them into California and then have some land left. What a commentary on Kultur are the words of the German Chancellor uttered in the Reichstag on August 10, 1914: "When we have accomplished our military purposes, we will right the wrong—I speak frankly—we have done to Belgium." That wrong

cannot be righted! No thinking man will believe that the Stars and Stripes would stand for the sinking of the Lusitania, for the sinking of hospital ships with Red Crosses fifteen feet long painted on their sides, or for the massacre of the Armenians. Germany cannot escape responsibility for the systematic attempt to exterminate the Armenian people. A word from her would have prevented it before it began or stopped it at any point of its progress. A missionary who witnessed the sack of an Armenian town by Turkish soldiers under German officers says that the old men and women and the little children were slaughtered. The able-bodied men were sent into the mountains to starve. The remaining women were turned over to the soldiers as their share of the loot. He says that he saw a young married woman delivered to a Turkish soldier as his prize. Threatening her with his bayonet he ordered her to disrobe where she stood in the street. She had no choice but to obey, and when he discovered that she was about to become a mother, he was so enraged at being cheated out of what he considered to be his proper share of the booty, that he felled her with his gun, dug her unborn babe out of her writhing body and tossed it across the street with the point of his bayonet. A German officer stood nearby paring his finger nails. The missionary appealed to him to stop the slaughter, reminding him that he was the representative of a Christian nation. The officer's indifferent reply was, "To stop this would interfere with our military purposes." I charge you, young men, not to come home until the German's "military purposes" are seriously interfered with and his



power for harm utterly destroyed. You are heirs of splendid fighting traditions. Honor and further ennoble them. When the unarmed Lusitania carried down her precious cargo of men, women and little children, medals in honor of the event were struck in Germany. Compare with this the words of Admiral Sampson at the battle of Santiago. When the Spanish Admiral's flagship was seen to be sinking, a cheer went up from the deck of the American Admiral's flagship. "Don't cheer, boys!" was his quick rebuke. "Those poor fellows are dying. Lower the boats!" The boats were off immediately and our men succeeded in saving many of their enemies. Such are the traditions of American fighting men.

I have heard that a young man who had been drafted for the army remarked that he would have to leave his New Testament at home when he went to war. Never was he worse mistaken. In the parable of the Wolf and the Shepherd (St. John 10:1-18) our Lord portrays three kinds of spirit which control the conduct of men. The first named is the wolf spirit, which kills and steals and destroys for its own selfish purposes. The second is the hireling spirit, which flees to safety at the first sight of danger and refuses every call to sacrifice. The third is the spirit of the Good Shepherd who does not scruple to use violence against the wolf. He will even lay down his life, if need be, for the sheep, for the security of the fold in which a lamb may dwell as safely as the strongest sheep of the flock. The parable of our Lord harks back to the 23rd Psalm, especially to the line, "thy rod and thy staff they comfort me." The shepherd's "rod" is a club, designed as a

weapon of defense against jackals, wolves and panthers. The staff is for the sheep. A shepherd so armed can protect the fold and all that the fold stands for in a world where wolves still prowl. David was a good shepherd and he could play a harp and throw a stone with such consummate skill that with the one he strengthened the weakest point within the nation and with the other destroyed the strongest foe outside the nation. Those of us who stay at home and those who go abroad will do well to emulate the splendid qualities of this man, who, as he went to war against the Philistine, rejoiced to see the day of that Good Shepherd who was ever ready to resist the wolf even to the point of making the supreme sacrifice for those sanctities which are destined to make of this world a Fold of the Blessed Christ.

May God richly bless you, young men, in your sacrificial labor for a better world.

Soldiers of Christ, arise,
And put your armor on,
Strong in the strength which God supplies
Through His eternal Son.

Leave no unguarded place,
No weakness of the soul,
Take every virtue, every grace,
And fortify the whole.
From strength to strength go on,
Wrestle and fight and pray,
Tread all the powers of darkness down,
And win the well-fought day.





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