

That Sounds Familiar: David and Goliath

1 Samuel 17 (various)

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Remember with me the details of this familiar story:

The people of Israel have left Egypt. They walked in the wilderness for 40 years. They have entered the Promised Land.

Now, God's people are at war with the Philistines. One of those Philistines is named Goliath. Goliath throws down the gauntlet. If any of the Israelites can defeat him in battle, the Philistines will serve the Israelites. If not, the Israelites must serve the Philistines.

Of course, Goliath is six cubits (or nine feet) tall. He is heavily armed with shields and spears and javelins. He stands before the Israelites for 40 days, daring them to send someone to fight.

The person that eventually takes Goliath up on his offer is the eighth and youngest son of Jesse, a boy named David who works as a shepherd.

Saul offered to give David armor and weapons – but David was so small that the armor didn't fit. Instead, in preparation for his fight with Goliath, David takes his shepherd's staff and kneels down in the brook to take five smooth stones for his sling. Then, the story continues...

41 The Philistine came on and drew near to David, with his shield-bearer in front of him. 42When the Philistine looked and saw David, he disdained him, for he was only a youth, ruddy and handsome in appearance. 43The Philistine said to David, 'Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks?'

48 When the Philistine drew nearer to meet David, David ran quickly towards the battle line to meet the Philistine. 49David put his hand in his bag, took out a stone, slung it, and struck the Philistine on his forehead; the stone sank into his forehead, and he fell face down on the ground.

50 So David prevailed over the Philistine with a sling and a stone, striking down the Philistine and killing him; there was no sword in David's hand.

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It is March madness in 1998.

Down by 2 points with 90 feet of hardwood and 2.5 seconds left in the game.

The inbound pass sails to mid-court and is immediately relayed to Bryce Drew who is standing at right elbow in three-point territory.

Drew takes one dribble and releases the shot as the clock runs out and the buzzer sounds.

The ball swishes through the net giving Valparaiso, a tiny school in the middle of Indiana, their first NCAA victory over the #3 seed Ole Miss.

Or how about this one...

It is 1980.

A Cold War has been brewing for 35 years between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Three days before the Winter Olympics, Herb Brooks – the US ice hockey coach – scheduled an exhibition against the USSR in which we were crushed 10-3.

The Soviets had a team weighted down by stars; full of international experience; and had won 6 of the last 7 gold medals.

The US was a team full of no-name college players with little international experience who were doing well enough just to be in the Olympics.

Somehow – the US managed to make it to medal round where they met the USSR. Down by 1 goal after two periods, the US scored two goals in the third to claim the victory – with the announcer asking those watching – “Do you believe in miracles?!” The US went on to beat Finland and clinch the gold medal.

Or how about this one...

It is the winter of 1777.

General George Washington’s troops were encamped in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania – just outside of Philadelphia.

The American revolution against the mighty British army was not going well - no notable victories for the Continental army and moral was getting low. Of Washington’s 12,000 troops in Valley Forge, only about a third had shoes. Provisions were scarce and hard to come by. Many – including George Washington – feared that large numbers of the Continental army would desert their post and retreat to the comforts of home – even if it meant living at home under British rule.

Instead, that winter hardened the resolve of the Continentals. They spent those bitterly cold months training. When spring came, they took back Philadelphia and chased the British redcoats to Monmouth, New York.

Four years after that terrible winter, following a string of Continental victories in the southern states, the United States of America won our independence when General Cornwallis surrendered to General Washington in Yorktown.

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Everybody loves a good David and Goliath story.
But even the best imitation doesn’t live up to the original.

Standing at six cubits tall and decked out in enough bronze to bankroll a small country – Goliath oozed the kind of intimidation that would make a professional wrestler proud.

Face to face with this monstrosity – with all of Goliath’s weapons and armor and testosterone – stands David. David was the youngest of eight. He was soft – a shepherd boy. His job was to run sandwiches to his big brothers before they went into battle, but when he heard Goliath mock his people he put in for the job of warrior and king Saul signed him up.

In the shadow of Goliath stands David. He tried to wear all the accouterments for battle – but he looked like the eight year old who tries on his daddy’s suit. In the end, he takes with him into battle only that which he knows: the tools of his trade.

You know what happens next. People who don’t read the Bible know what happens next. But this is so much more than a story of overcoming the odds; of the little guy sticking it to the man.

What we read this morning is not Aesop’s Fables, it is scripture.
And when we read scripture faithfully we understand that it is more than just a story but that scripture makes a theological statement.

What happens in this scripture is not that David finds the courage to believe in himself against all odds, but that David remembers something that everyone else has forgotten: he remembers to whom he belongs and he remembers how to talk about God.¹

¹ With thanks to the Rev. Tom Are, Jr. and his sermon on this text from 2006.

Goliath stands up in the face of the Israelites and their king and **defies** their nation: “Today I defy the ranks of Israel! Give me a man, that we may fight together,” Goliath growls.

David objection to this goes beyond the personal – he recognizes that Goliath has profaned much more than a nation, but indeed the “armies of the living God.”

You see, David remembered what the rest of his people had forgotten – or at least pushed to the back of their minds. They had forgotten that Israel was formed with a promise “that you shall be my people and I will be your God.”

David remembered that Israel was not the possession of a king or a people or a way of life – but that Israel belonged to God, and God had promised to Israel more than slavery at the hands of the Philistines, especially some oaf name Goliath.

And so David found courage that others had neglected: the courage to believe past the place of fear and intimidation. And he took five smooth stones, and he struck down this gargantuan threat – and there was no sword in David’s hand.

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Everybody loves a good David and Goliath story.

There are 300 million people in our country. 99% of us – when we read stories like these – or when we watch them play out in our current day – tend to identify with David. We root for the underdog – we cheer for the plucky upstart – we boo the heavily favored. We don’t want LeBron! Give us more Steph Curry!

But Sam Wells – former Dean of the Duke Chapel – asks a good question:

Why do we still say we like the little guy? We want our movies to be about David; but we spend our lives trying desperately hard to be Goliath. We think it’s quaint and clever that David got by with five smooth stones and a sling, but we spend our own energies stockpiling swords and spears and javelins. We admire the fact that David foreswore [king] Saul’s shield and gadgetry, but just look at our car, just look at our house, just look at our country: we’ve beefed them up to look like Goliath, with so many safety and security features we can hardly move around in them.

I am challenged by these words. It brings a new perspective to this familiar story, doesn’t it? Consider what many of us (including yours truly) work so hard to achieve: All the respect. All the tools. All the acclaim. All the power.

All the things Goliath had.

All the things David didn’t have.²

In our Scripture, the scene ends with David standing over Goliath, triumphant. David trusted in God. He leaned forward into God’s promises. He acted out of faith and displayed courage in the face of fear.

And if you happen to know anything else about David, in the coming chapters of the Bible you almost wish we could stop time just after his stone felled that big Philistine. Because what happens next is that – slowly, tragically, David becomes Goliath.

He rises to power – claiming Saul’s throne as Israel’s king. He amasses wealth. He wins victory after victory in battle. His legend grows. He is now the one who intimidates his enemies. David learns that

² Wells, Sam – “Five Smooth Stones” – a sermon delivered at Duke Chapel on May 14, 2010.

he can take what he wants (and who he wants). He manipulates and uses his own people to serve his selfish ends. David becomes Goliath.

How do we avoid this story happening to us?

As a people who reach for success – how do we know when we have crossed the line? When do our achievements move from fulfilling our God-given potential to simply becoming focused on accumulating more? What can we do so that we won't look back on our lives and wonder when the David we used to be became Goliath?

We all face these questions: individuals, organizations, companies...nations. Will time and success cause us to lose ourselves? Our identities? Our souls?

And it is not as simple as who is big and who is small.

What differentiated David and Goliath was less about size and their choice of weaponry and more about what they understood to be the source of their power.

Presbyterian pastor and author Eugene Peterson notes that the pivotal point in the story of David and Goliath comes not in battle, but in the choice that David makes to trust. Rather than suit up with armor, David knelt in the brook to pick up five smooth stones. Peterson writes, "This is a critical moment not only for David, but also for his unbelieving brothers, for Saul, for Israel, and for the entire people of God, which now includes us."

David knelt in the brook and picked up stones in the face of a giant because he remembered the promises of God. David teaches us that power comes in the form of remembered promises – not in threat and intimidation...not in the strength that we amass for ourselves.

Sometimes it is a difficult thing: to remember. I think it is especially difficult when we grow accustomed to being successful and strong – because memory is a funny thing.

We start with an understanding that everything we have comes from the God who created us, who redeems us, who sustains us. We start by believing that who we are and what we do is but a reflection of God's grace and promise.

And then it becomes about us: our success, our achievement, our possessions, our legacy.

But we are not fated to be Goliath. There is always a brook where we might reach down and claim the promises of faith; the true source of power. It's called the church. And when we do it well – the church is a place where we can remember: whose we are; who God truly calls us to be; and how much more wonderful God's promises about the future are than all the others we may have believed in from time to time.

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