

“David and Goliath”
Delivered Sunday, June 28, 2009
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1 Sam.17:3-11, 19-23, 32-50
Summer series on King David, Part 3

This David and Goliath story is so familiar that if you merely mention their names you have entered the realm of common cliché. Any small person taking on a big thing brings David and Goliath to mind – the isolated employee suing the big company for discrimination and winning the case; tiny little Davidson College taking its basketball team to the Elite Eight last year, or as the new President of Davidson describes it “into the Final Five.” This week I heard the comparison used by a reporter in Iran to describe the power differential between Iran’s protesters marching in the street up against the entrenched government and its military might. And just last month The New Yorker magazine featured a long article entitled, “How David Beats Goliath.” The article says quite plainly, “David’s victory over Goliath, in the Biblical account, is held to be an anomaly. It was not. Davids win all the time.” And then it discusses stories from basketball, football, economics, computer technology, and a study of two hundred years’ of warfare as arenas of lopsided conflicts -- in which the underdogs, who presumably had the wisdom to fight like David, often won. (1)

For ancient Israel the story contained mythic power by the way it recalled the childhood of its greatest leader, kind of like George Washington and the cherry tree. And so, in our time, David’s unexpected win comes to the fore of our imaginations in all kinds of contexts from business to sports to modern day warfare. Just say the names, David and Goliath, and what you conjure up is how a little weakling can defeat any sort of overmatched giant, or how a quick small guard is better than a big slow center, or even – how it helps to have God on your side. And yet, the story is has so much more texture and nuance and meaning than any cliché could summon. Let’s consider some of the details for a moment in this longest narrative in the whole saga about David, and see if we can find where the real power lies in the heart this ancient text.

For forty days Israel’s troops and the Philistines held out against one another across the Valley of Elah. Militarily it was something of a draw. In the ancient world when a standoff took place, a single warrior from each side might be sent forth as a champion to do battle against another, with the high stakes of winner-take-all. The Philistines had just the right soldier to send. Depending on the biblical scholars you consult, and how they calculate the Hebrew equation in the text, Goliath stood somewhere between 6 feet nine inches and 9 feet tall. Earlier we were already told that Israel’s King Saul stood head and shoulders above the rest, but he was not that tall. You add the Bible’s description of Goliath’s armor and weapons, and what you have is a formidable presence, and not one soldier on the other side willing to take him on.

That’s when the boy David arrived in the camp. He had been sent by his father, Jesse, to take bread and cheese to his brothers serving in Saul’s army. With youthful curiosity David was eager to see what was happening on the battlefield. He heard the threats and taunts of the giant Goliath just as everyone else had heard them. He saw how huge and strong Goliath appeared in the valley between the two camps of soldiers. But unlike everyone else, David remembered something no one else remembered, and David said something that no one else had thought to say.

David shifts the focus of the whole power play to God. Goliath may be huge, but he is no bigger than the living God. Goliath may be the scariest threat we have ever faced, but he is no more powerful than the living God. David simply testified to how God had acted in his own life on the fields outside of Bethlehem tending the sheep: “The Lord, who saved me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, will surely save me from the hand of this Philistine.” King Saul responds by saying to David, “Go, and may the Lord be with you,” but Saul doesn’t really get it. In a scene that serves as a moment of comic relief, Saul gives David his king’s armor to wear. David is asked to play dress up, if you will, as a big bronze helmet wobbles on his head and the coat of mail drops below the length of his skinny pre-adolescent arms and droops past his knees. “I cannot even walk in these,” he says as he takes them off and sticks to his resources already in hand -- a slingshot, and countless hours of target practice from his boring job of tending to Dad’s sheep.

As David knelt in the brook to pick up five smooth stones, theologian and popular writer Eugene Peterson has noted, “This is a critical moment not only for David, but also for his unbelieving brothers, for Saul, for all of Israel, and for the entire people of God, which now includes us. Here’s why. At that moment the religious traditions of Israel were in shambles and its spirituality in tatters. The patriarchal, exodus, and wilderness traditions had all been developed in a nomadic culture. Now God’s people were settled in a world that was agrarian and urban. The recent past, in which charismatic judges had shown flashes of brilliance, had disintegrated into anarchy. The attempt, out of that chaos, to establish order again through a monarchy under Saul was already on its way to failure. Here, while David is at the brook picking out stones, Israel is at the brink of losing its identity to the Philistines. To the north of the brook are the powerful giant and the arrogant, bullying people of Philistia; to the south of the brook are the anxious and demoralized people of Israel. David kneeling, unhurried and calm, opened up another option: God, God’s ways, God’s way to salvation.” When up against great odds, how easily we lose sight of our awareness of God. Peterson says, “David kneeling at the brook leads our recovery.” God saved me from the bear, he remembered, God saved me from the lion. Surely God will save me now.

Last week’s Christian Century told the story of a woman in Africa named Maggie. She was a Tutsi who had adopted seven Hutu and Tutsi children. Hutus came to her village and killed most of Maggie’s extended family and many of her friends. She and her children escaped and found refuge in a Catholic compound. Only there, a group of Tutsis came to kill Hutus and she was forced to watch as they massacred seventy-two people. Later, she found all seven of her children alive, hiding in the church’s sacristy. Maggie decided to rebuild her village as a place of peace. She founded a place she calls Maison Shalom, House of Peace, and has adopted another 25 children. She built huts for the children, developed a health clinic and a school, set up microfinance initiatives, and established business training in hair dressing, auto mechanics, and other fields. She taught sustainable agriculture and even built a pool and a movie theater. When rebel soldiers demanded payment in exchange for not destroying the theater, Maggie invited them to watch movies instead. The rebels came to the movies. Now there is also a hospital and nursing school there. Maggie says, “Love made me an inventor.” She is convinced that God’s love is more powerful than hatred and violence. Once a man came to Maison Shalom to kill Maggie. She talked him out of it, telling him he couldn’t be happy being defined by hatred and violence. She invited him to come and live in her community, to be her driver and to help care for the children. And he did. (2)

Old Testament scholar Bruce Birch says this biblical faith of people like Maggie, of people like us when we're up against the giants we face, requires: "faithful and truthful speech, courageous confrontation, and the trust that by God's grace – a well-placed stone might prove superior to the armor of a Goliath or even a Saul."

All our simple clichés to the contrary, this ancient story of David and Goliath is not ultimately about the small, young underdog defeating the much more powerful and well-equipped giant. It is about remembering, and having the courage to say out loud, that God is bigger than any Goliath we will ever face. This does not mean that we ourselves do not have a role to play in the conflicts that come our way. After all, David called upon his wit and cleverness, his good luck and sharp eye, his courage and plenty of target practice from the idle hours of shepherding his father's flocks. All of that added to the momentum of the rock he swung round and round over his head. But more than any of that, David alone was the one who remembered, and called upon the living God.

So today, David calls to us from the front lines of any battle we may be facing, or any giant we may be trying to stand down: the diagnosis that came back as the fierce opponent named cancer; the task that is before us that seems so much larger than we can possibly manage; the loneliness is so big it seems to swallow us whole, the despair we feel over the ways of the world, the anxiety we shoulder about an uncertain future as we journey forward; in any battle we must fight, against any fearsome odds we face, this story reminds us that we are not alone. You remember....God was with you when you faced the bear. God already saved you from the mouth of the lion. So God will also be with you when you walk into the valley to meet Goliath. Sure, Goliath is big. But God...God is ever bigger. AMEN.

NOTES

- 1) The New Yorker, May 2009.
- 2) The Christian Century, "Maison Shalom" by L. Gregory Jones, June 16, 2009, p. 29.
- 3) I am grateful to sermons of friends, Kim Clayton's "Goliath is Big (But God is Bigger)", 6/21/09, and Jon Walton's "One Well Placed Stone," 6/22/03, whose biblical insight influenced this sermon.