

## ***“Facing God, Not Goliath”***

1 Samuel 17:1-50 (*The Message*)

When is the last time you read the *full* story of David and Goliath? It’s a doozy! We hear it very differently as adults than we do as children, don’t we?

As children the story is shortened and really boiled down to a simple, yet powerful point: *“God uses ordinary people and unlikely means to accomplish improbable feats.”*<sup>1</sup>

But is David really that *ordinary*...and is his means that *unlikely*...and is his feat that *improbable*?

Well, for one, he’s not that ordinary because David *willingly* volunteers to go up against Goliath – who was supposedly the “warrior of all warriors” in the Philistine army – which was the enemy that Israel had been trying to defeat for a long, long time. In fact, the reason the Israelites demanded a King in the first place was so that someone could help them defeat the Philistines. That’s why Saul became King. And guess what?

Saul hadn’t defeated the Philistines. He was too scared. He didn’t put himself before Goliath. And yet here was young David willing to go before this giant of a threat. He could have just stayed with his sheep and been safe and fine and no one would have ever thought twice about it because he wasn’t supposed to be a hero. At least not yet.

David’s also not that ordinary because he had just been picked out by Samuel in a line up against all of his other older, stronger, and more “adept at fighting” brothers to be the next King after Saul. At this point all we know about David is that he’s a shepherd and a songwriter and he could sooth Saul with his music. Not exactly military credentials. Surprisingly, the gentle David of 1 Samuel chapter 16 really turns barbaric at the end of chapter 17. We didn’t read it, but verse 51 has David cutting off Goliath’s head and taking it back with him to Jerusalem as a sort of trophy prize...bragging rights, if you will.

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel B. Clendenin, “After He Killed Him, He Cut Off His Head: David, Goliath, and Sacred Violence,” *Journey with*

*Jesus* (21 June 2009), accessed on June 24, 2018 at <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20090615JJ.shtml>.

Like the image on the cover of your Order of Worship, we have this image of David being this small boy with a sling-shot, very innocent and naïve almost. But shepherds were not weak, nor were they naïve. As David himself said in the text, he knew what it was to go head to head with lions and bears.

So, he was not that ordinary, and his means – the sling – was not that unlikely. Because that’s what he used to kill lions and bears and protect his sheep! As one scholar explains: “In ancient warfare, there are three kinds of warriors. There's *cavalry*, men on horseback and with chariots. There's *heavy infantry*, which are armed foot soldiers with swords and shields and some kind of armor. And there's *artillery*, and artillery are archers, but, more importantly, slingers. And a slinger is someone who has a leather pouch with two long cords attached to it, and they put a projectile, either a rock or a lead ball, inside the pouch, and they whirl it around (6-7 revolutions a second) and the rock goes flying. That means that when the rock is released, it's going forward really fast, probably 35 meters per second. (That's substantially faster than a baseball

thrown by even the finest of baseball pitchers!)<sup>2</sup>

More than that, the stones in the Valley of Elah were not normal rocks. They were barium sulphate, which are rocks twice the density of normal stones. If you do the calculations on the ballistics, on the stopping power of the rock fired from David's sling, it's roughly equal to the stopping power of a [.45 caliber] handgun. This is no toy sling shot! We're talking about an incredibly devastating weapon.<sup>3</sup>

And, we know from historical records that experienced slingers could hit and maim or even kill a target at distances of up to 200 yards. From medieval tapestries, we know that slingers were capable of hitting birds in flight. They were incredibly accurate. When David stands before Goliath, he has every intention and every expectation of being able to hit Goliath at his most vulnerable spot between his eyes. If you go back over the history of ancient warfare, you will find time and time again that slingers were often the decisive factor against infantry in one kind of battle or another.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Malcolm Gladwell, “The Unheard Story of David and Goliath,” *TEDTalks* (Sept. 2013), accessed on 24 June 2018 at

[https://www.ted.com/talks/malcolm\\_gladwell\\_the\\_unheard\\_story\\_of\\_david\\_and\\_goliath/transcript](https://www.ted.com/talks/malcolm_gladwell_the_unheard_story_of_david_and_goliath/transcript).

<sup>3</sup> Gladwell, *ibid.*  
<sup>4</sup> Gladwell, *ibid.*

So, not only was David not ordinary, and his means not unlikely...his feat wasn't that improbable once you consider a few things about Goliath.

You see, Goliath wasn't as mighty as he might have seemed to be at first. He was not *artillery*, he was *heavy infantry*, decked out in all of his armor. He thought he would be engaging in hand to hand combat, which is why he kept saying to David, "come to me;" he thought they'd be fighting up close. King Saul clearly thought the same thing, which is why he tried to outfit David in his armor, which of course, David doesn't go for because he can barely move in it and he knows he needs freedom of movement to have the right kind of agility for his mode of battle.

And comparatively, Goliath was, in essence, a lumbering giant weighed down by a hundred pounds of armor and these incredibly heavy weapons that are useful only in short-range combat. As popular author, Malcolm Gladwell says, "Goliath is a sitting duck. He doesn't have a chance."<sup>5</sup>

Gladwell also points out that Goliath probably had a medical condition called acromegaly, which causes a benign tumor to

grow on your pituitary gland and causes people to keep growing – which would explain Goliath's size, and it would also explain why he has an attendant with him to guide him on the battle field and why he keeps asking David to come to him and why he thinks David is carrying multiple sticks when he really is only carrying one stick...because loss of eyesight is another side effect of acromegaly. Do you remember the wrestler André the Giant? Famous. He had acromegaly.<sup>6</sup>

The point in all of this being: When the Israelites are up on the mountain ridge looking down on Goliath they thought he was this extraordinarily powerful enemy. What they didn't understand was that the very thing that was the source of Goliath's apparent strength was also the source of his greatest weakness.<sup>7</sup>

Now, did David know all of this about Goliath before he faced him? No, of course not. But he did know that he was really good with a sling. So he's not really as weak and as vulnerable as we all imagine him to be from our childhood story Bibles. But, even more than his skill, he also had courage – and his courage came quite directly, the text says, from

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<sup>5</sup> Gladwell, *ibid.*  
<sup>6</sup> Gladwell, *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Gladwell, *ibid.*

the Lord. *The Lord, who saved me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, will save me from the hand of this Philistine.*” (v37) And later David says to Goliath, *“You come to me with sword and spear and javelin; but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied...”* (v45).

This idea of invoking God’s name and “God being on our side” is the context of the biblical authors, and especially of those writing the history of Israel in books like 1 and 2 Samuel. But theologically speaking, committing violence in the name of God and saying that God is on “my side” is troublesome today, isn’t it? This is because 1) it implies that God is not on the “side” of whoever you are against – like those football teams that pray for God to be on their side in their locker room before a game while across the field in a different locker room their opponent is saying the same prayer! It’s also troublesome because it implies that 2) God actually divides people up into “sides” to begin with...which is the exact theology that the Apostle Paul tried so hard to break down: *“There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and*

*female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus,*” (Galatians 3:28).

The Old Testament contains violence that is divinely sanctioned, at least according to its writers. But in the New Testament there are really only two examples when the followers of Jesus wanted to use violent means for their cause — when James and John wanted to call down fire upon the Samaritans because of their unbelief (Luke 9:51–55), and in the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus’ disciples tried to prevent his arrest (Mark 14:47). In both instances Jesus rebukes those who try to show their allegiance to him through violent means. Instead, he insists that his Father in heaven causes his sun to shine on both the wicked and the righteous. He tells us to love our enemies and to do good to those who persecute us, because in the end the ultimate measure of our love for God is our love for our neighbor.”<sup>8</sup>...and yes, even our enemy. *That’s in the Bible!*

I feel like that is important to say because I don’t want us to take the story of David and Goliath and use it as a means for violence or war against our enemy in the “name of God.” We commit acts of war and violence everyday, but putting

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<sup>8</sup> Clendenin, *ibid.*

God's name on those acts isn't fair to God, especially now that we know the revelation of God that God gave us in Jesus. We know a side of God – an embodiment of God – that David and the Israelites didn't know. And that makes a difference; it keeps us from naming violence or war – even if we think it's just – as something that God condones. Jesus speaks for God, not us, and Jesus is clear: "love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you."

German pastor Martin Niemoeller (1892–1984), who protested Hitler's anti-semitic measures in person to Hitler in person, was eventually arrested, and then imprisoned for eight years at Sachsenhausen and Dachau (1937–1945). He once confessed, *"It took me a long time to learn that God is not the enemy of my enemies. He is not even the enemy of his enemies."* By his nature God is Creator and Redeemer, not Enemy. Another theologian, Anne Lamott, says the same thing a different way, *"When God hates all the same people that you hate, you can be absolutely certain that you have created him in your own image."*<sup>9</sup>

We may not agree with the use of God's name to condone violence.

But the truth is, we live in a world where we often think of God as on "our" side, or at least, partial to our way of thinking and behaving. The basic human instincts reflected in the story of David and Goliath are still within us and we struggle with them every day even if we aren't slinging stones or going to battle. We want to believe that we are right. We want to believe that "bad guys" will be defeated and "good guys" will win.

What is beautiful about David's strength in this story, is that it comes not from might, but from the courage God puts within him...the courage of faith. When he takes off the armor of Saul, David refuses to be someone he is not, and he enters this difficult situation with confidence in who God has created him to be and how God has uniquely gifted him. Trying to be someone else, trying to wear someone else's clothing (even protective armor) was a hindrance, not a help. When David sticks with what he knows, when he sticks with what God has given him, then he is successful. We don't know what would have happened should he have kept the armor on, but he knew it wasn't himself, and he knew God and trusted that God had equipped him differently.

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<sup>9</sup> Clendenin, *ibid.*

When we face something we fear, we often try to take the advice of others, when I wonder if, we might just be needing to listen to the advice of God. Meaning...to listen to how God is speaking to us and equipping us for whatever we are facing. To sit before God in prayer before we ever place ourselves before our fears. Facing God sometimes takes way more courage than facing our Goliaths.

And by Goliaths, I don't mean giant Philistine military guys. There are times in our lives when we face "Goliaths" – and those "Goliaths" are often not people...but "issues" or "decisions" or "fears" or "obstacles" that seem too big for us to face. You may even have a "Goliath" you are facing in your life right now. Something so big and scary that it feels like you can't even bring yourself to face it.

Your "Goliath" may be something personal: like an illness...or a grief...or a career decision...or an addiction.

Your "Goliath" may be something interpersonal: like a relationship struggle...or "the elephant in the room" at family dinners...or a resentment with a colleague at work...or a conflict with a neighbor where you live.

And, of course, we have our collective "Goliaths" don't we? Especially as Christians. Our collective "Goliath" may be something social or political: like how to raise your voice in the face of injustice. This week, we've all been wondering – politicians and religious leaders and everyday citizens alike...how to help our country honor human dignity and welcome the immigrant and refugee while also forming immigration policies that provide safety and resources for those who are here already and those who have yet to come. It seems so huge, doesn't it? Insurmountable?

The thing is, we can get consumed by worry and anxiety about facing the "Goliaths" in our life – so that we freeze or retreat or give up...basically do what the Israelites were doing before David stepped up. But I wonder if things might change if we focused not on facing our Goliaths head on, but rather on facing God head on first before turning to our Goliaths? Looking at God, looking at Christ, and using the life and love of Jesus as the inspiration and courage to face whatever we need to face? The strength is not in David's sling shot...it's in his spirit...in his faith.

To face Goliath is to hear the threats that come at us every day...that we must protect ourselves and protect our land and protect our reputations and protect our possessions and protect our faith.

To face God is to hear the truths of the scripture as louder than the taunts and threats of our perceived enemies and as louder than the fears in our hearts:

*“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”* (Matt. 5:4)

*“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.”* (Matt. 5:5)

*“Blessed are those who are poor, (and the persecuted) for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”* (Lk 6:20, Matt. 5:10)

*“Blessed are those who are hungry, for they will be filled.”* (Lk 6:21)

*“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”* (Matt. 5:9)

*“The Lord your God...loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. So You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”* (Deut. 10:18-19)

*“The aliens shall be to you as citizens, and shall also be allotted an inheritance.”* (Ezek. 47:21-22)

*“...Bring good news to the poor...release to the captives...sight to the blind...let the oppressed go free.”* (Lk 4:16-21)

*“...Let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.”* (I Jn 3:18)

*“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”* (Heb. 11:1)

*“Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.”* (Lk 18:16)

*“God is our refuge and strength; an ever-present help in times of trouble.”* (Ps. 46:1)

*“Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.”* (Isa. 40:31)

*“Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.”* (Josh. 1:9)

*“Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.” (Philip. 4:6)*

You can add in your favorite Bible verse here...for God’s word speaks to us and empowers us in many ways.

But we have to put our face (literally) in the Scriptures and come to know the God of love and the life of Jesus to actually know what it means to face God. That is, to see the face of Christ in the face of all people...even in our “Goliaths.”

You see, David, wasn’t always just practicing his sling shot out in the fields with the sheep. He was also playing his lyre and praying to his God...writing the psalms...voicing his praises and his laments. He had a depth to his faith that seemed to be beyond his peers. It doesn’t mean he wasn’t susceptible to temptation...you heard him ask his brothers twice what the reward was for slaying Goliath (riches, a daughter of Saul’s, and freedom for his family). David’s motives weren’t all pure. But lucky for us, God doesn’t have to have perfection to use us or speak through us. God doesn’t need perfection, nor does God ask for it. God just asks for persistence in our

faith, for passion in our justice, for prayerfulness in our actions, and as David exemplifies, for practice and preparation in the gifts that God has given us, so that at the right time, we are ready.

I suppose a key question from this story of David and Goliath for us as adults is this: Like David, do we face God first before we turn to face our Goliath? Said a different way, do we seek to honor God in all we do, and to honor all of God’s children, or do we just seek to take down our Goliaths?

Chances are, if we glance at God first, we’ll see our Goliaths in a whole new light. Either – not as an enemy to be defeated...or yes, as something that needs to be faced, but not to just take it down, but rather to transform it. God is in the business of redemption, not retaliation. And redemption is way messier and way harder than retaliation.

And redemption also means recognizing when *we are* the Goliath in the story. When we are the one that other people see as an obstacle, or as the enemy. We aren’t always David, sometimes we are Goliath. And in that case, what we must ask ourselves, is what does it mean for us to turn to God so that we can see the people standing before us as ones in need

of hope and not hate? How do we  
turn to God...and not to our  
Goliath selves and our Goliath  
power and our Goliath strength  
and our Goliath privilege?

Whether we see ourselves as  
David facing up at Goliath OR as  
Goliath facing down David – I  
wonder what would happen if we  
first faced God? Would we then  
realize that the face before us – the  
one that we fear – is the face of  
Christ? And that the face others  
see on us is what they will know as  
the face of Christ?

I wonder if facing God first would  
help us all learn that wielding love  
and faith will launch us far greater  
distances than wielding hate or  
fear ever will.

Amen.