

## David and Goliath

1 Samuel 17

Stephen Prothero, in his book on religious literacy, says that “religious literacy also includes knowing the key characters, images, and stories in the scriptures, rites, and history of the church. And so, in addition to doctrine, this book’s definition of religious literacy includes narrative. . . . To be religiously literate today is to be familiar with the creation story in Genesis and the apocalyptic horrors of Revelation. It is to know that David triumphed over Goliath, even though David was small and Goliath was big, perhaps to know as well that David felled the giant with a stone. Religious literacy, in short, is both doctrinal and narrative...”

Even as we’ve moved into a post-Christian culture, stories and ideas from the Bible continue to be important in our society. We have Good Samaritan laws, to protect those who stop and help their neighbor, which take their name from Jesus’ parable. People know about the sibling rivalry between Cain and Abel. And we know the story of David and Goliath.

But even if we’re familiar with it, sometimes familiarity breeds contempt. Or at least, familiarity keeps us from seeing what’s really going on in the story, because we’re trapped by our preconceptions of what happens. Goliath the Philistine is big, beefy and belligerent. David the shepherd boy from Bethlehem steps out of obscurity, refuses the bulky unfamiliar armor offered him by Saul, the king of Israel, and, taking five smooth stones and a slingshot, leaves Goliath lying in the dust.

And that’s how we often see this story, and how we see it used today. The story of David and Goliath is a story of the little guy triumphing over the big guy. It’s Iowa State beating Texas in football, or Kansas in basketball. It’s a group

of ragtag amateur hockey players for the US beating professionally trained players from the USSR in the Miracle on Ice. It’s a group of working class rowers from Washington state winning Olympic gold against professional rowers in the 1936 Berlin Olympics. It’s a ragtag volunteer army in need of a shower defeating a global superpower during the American Revolution. The story of David and Goliath is about the little guy beating the big guy, and whoever we are identifying with is the little guy, who we think deserves to win.

Our problem is that we misunderstand what’s going on when David meets Goliath. We miss who has the advantage. And we miss that David and Goliath isn’t about David, but about God.

There were three types of military units in the ancient world. Goliath is a good example of the infantry, those used to fighting in close quarters. Some groups had cavalry, which are speedy units that can go on raids, attack from the flank or the rear, but have trouble when forced into close fighting with infantry. Then there are the ranged weapons. Before artillery, riflemen, or even archers, slingers provided a powerful ranged attack.

In the movie Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark, there’s a point where Indiana Jones is supposed to do an elaborate sword fight with an enemy, but instead just shoots him. The scene was changed due to actors being sick the day the scene was to be filmed, but it turned into one of the iconic scenes of the film, and proves a good reminder of the weaknesses of infantry. Don’t bring a knife to a gun fight.

Goliath expects to be fought on his own terms. He expects someone else to get all armored up,

come closer to him, and fight in a way where he as the advantage. That's what Saul and the Israelite army expects to happen, as well.

That's why they're all afraid, and that's why Saul tries to give David his armor before he goes to fight Goliath.

But David isn't fighting on Goliath's terms. He changes things up. His sling means he can hit Goliath before getting into range of Goliath's giant sword or spear. His lack of armor gives him speed, allowing him to close before Goliath is ready. But most of all, David knows God is on his side.

When David marched to meet Goliath, he wore no armor, but he was certainly armed—armed with his sling, a weapon he'd used to defend his flock from bears and lions. More importantly, though Goliath came with sword, spear, and javelin, David came armed with “the name of the LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel,” whom Goliath had defied.

And that's what is really at stake. Goliath isn't just looking for a brawl but challenging Israel to engage in what the Greeks would later call *monomachia* (“single combat”). Rather than two entire armies battling it out, each side pitted their #1 fighter against the other. The last man standing determined which army stood victorious. And in a time when each nation had their own god, those one on one battles took on a divine meaning, as well. Whoever won had the strongest god.

David knew that. And he knew the God of angel armies wasn't only the god of a small piece of land, or a small group of people. He knew the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, was the God over the whole world. And he knew that God would fight for him, as God had fought for his people as they'd entered the Promised Land, and as the judges had defeated the Philistines and other enemies in

times past. He also knew that God had been with him when he was out protecting his flock from hungry animals, and that God would be with him here, as well.

That also points us to God's greatest work. One of the ways we can look at Jesus, the son of David, and what he did, is that he personified the people of Israel. As David represented Israel and Goliath represented the Philistines, so Jesus would represent, would embody a whole people. And Jesus sure looked like David against the Goliath of sin, death, and the devil, against the Pharisees and the Romans. But just like David, God was on Jesus' side, and through his seeming defeat would come the greatest victory of all.

So what does the story of David and Goliath mean for us? Sometimes sermons will try to go into an allegorical interpretation, talking about how the five smooth stones David picked up and brought with him into battle represent five qualities we should possess, or five things we should have with us to defeat the Goliaths in our lives. But God wouldn't hide the key to our happiness in some sort of riddle like that.

No, if we're going to move in that direction, we move more in why this is a great Sunday School lesson. David defeats Goliath because God fights with him. It reminds us of the purpose of fairy tales, to remind us not that giants or dragons exist, but that they can be defeated. It's not about us finding the American Dream.

David, though, can be a warning story to us, as well. He doesn't just stay a shepherd boy who trusts in God to protect him from giants. He becomes a king who is content to stay in his palace while others go off to fight battles for him, which is why he's still in Jerusalem to watch Bathsheba bathe on her roof. He forgets the lessons he learned as the youngest son, and

deals with family turmoil and conflict that ends with one of his sons dead after leading a rebellion against him.

Ultimately, the story of David and Goliath reminds us that we have a God who fights for us and with us. We have a God who has defeated the enemies of sin, death, and the devil. Though we may outwardly look weak, if God is on our side, we will be victorious. The battle belongs to our God.

Pastor David Beagley  
Memorial Lutheran Church and Student Center,  
Ames, IA  
June 23, 2024