

Exploring the Story: DAVID AND GOLIATH
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Reading: I Samuel 17

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I Samuel 17 (selected verses)

Now the Philistines gathered their armies for battle; and there came out from the camp of the Philistines a champion named Goliath, of Gath, whose height was six cubits and a span. He had a helmet of bronze on his head, and he was armed with a coat of mail; the weight of the coat was five thousand shekels of bronze. He had greaves of bronze on his legs and a javelin of bronze slung between his shoulders. The shaft of his spear was like a weaver's beam, and his spear's head weighed six hundred shekels of iron; and his shield-bearer went before him. He stood and shouted to the ranks of Israel, "Why have you come out to draw up for battle? Am I not a Philistine, and are you not servants of Saul? Choose a man for yourselves, and let him come down to me. If he is able to fight with me and kill me, then we will be your servants; but if I prevail against him and kill him, then you shall be our servants and serve us." And the Philistine said, "Today I defy the ranks of Israel! Give me a man, that we may fight together." When Saul and all Israel heard these words of the Philistine, they were dismayed and greatly afraid.

Now Saul, and they, and all the men of Israel, were in the valley of Elah, fighting with the Philistines. David rose early in the morning, left the sheep with a keeper, took the provisions, and went as Jesse had commanded him. He came to the encampment as the army was going forth to the battle line, shouting the war cry. Israel and the Philistines drew up for battle, army against army. David left the things in charge of the keeper of the baggage, ran to the ranks, and went and greeted his brothers. As he talked with them, the champion, the Philistine of Gath, Goliath by name, came up out of the ranks of the Philistines, and spoke the same words as before. And David heard him.

David said to Saul, "Let no one's heart fail because of him; your servant will go and fight with this Philistine." Saul said to David, "You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him; for you are just a boy, and he has been a warrior from his youth." But David said to Saul, "Your servant used to keep sheep for his father; and whenever a lion or a bear came, and took a lamb from the

flock, I went after it and struck it down, rescuing the lamb from its mouth; and if it turned against me, I would catch it by the jaw, strike it down, and kill it. Your servant has killed both lions and bears; and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them, since he has defied the armies of the living God." David said, "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." So Saul said to David, "Go, and may the LORD be with you!"

Saul clothed David with his armor; he put a bronze helmet on his head and clothed him with a coat of mail. David strapped Saul's sword over the armor, and he tried in vain to walk, for he was not used to them. Then David said to Saul, "I cannot walk with these; for I am not used to them." So David removed them. Then he took his staff in his hand, and chose five smooth stones from the wadi, and put them in his shepherd's bag, in the pouch; his sling was in his hand, and he drew near to the Philistine.

The Philistine came on and drew near to David, with his shield-bearer in front of him. When the Philistine looked and saw David, he disdained him, for he was only a youth, ruddy and handsome in appearance. The Philistine said to David, "Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks?" And the Philistine cursed David by his gods. The Philistine said to David, "Come to me, and I will give your flesh to the birds of the air and to the wild animals of the field." But David said to the Philistine, "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. This very day the LORD will deliver you into my hand so that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, and that all this assembly may know that the LORD does not save by sword and spear; for the battle is the LORD'S and he will give you into our hand."

When the Philistine drew nearer to meet David, David ran quickly toward the battle line to meet the Philistine. David 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. 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. Then David ran and stood over the Philistine; he grasped his sword, drew it out of its sheath, and killed him; then he cut off his head with it.

I suppose there is no greater story told in the Old Testament than the story of David and Goliath. The story appeals to our sense of adventure and the fantasies of childhood. Think about it: A little boy takes out the most powerful man on earth with a singular shot from his sling. What a story! And O how we love David and Goliath stories! Whether it be an Indiana small town basketball team going for the state championship (*Hoosiers*), or young patriots in a faraway galaxy resisting an evil empire (*Star Wars*), or an eight year old at *home alone* against would-be burglars, or the miracle of a win claimed by a grossly overmatched amateur American hockey team against a seemingly unbeatable Russian team. Or an undersized and under-rated racehorse who manages to make it in the big time (*Seabiscuit*). Or a teenage bespectacled wizard in training taking on master wicked wizards (*Harry Potter*) Or a twelve year old boy with a slingshot up against a menacing giant in the *original* "David and Goliath" story.

But as well as we KNOW the story of David and Goliath, and as many times as we have heard and TOLD the story, how often have we reflected on *what the story is all about?* REALLY about? Is it merely a "fun" story included in the Bible to beef up the reputation of Israel's greatest king? Or is there something to THIS STORY which illumines our lives and faith?

Our congregation-wide theme for 2011 is *Exploring the Story*. The theme builds on last year's theme of *Telling the Story*. This coming year we will be encouraged to not just *tell* the story, but to dig deeper into our personal faith stories, our church's story, and the Biblical story. To *explore the story*. And what better place to begin then with our story for today.

Within the OT witness, the David and Goliath story certainly contributes to the **exaltation of David**, Israel's greatest and most beloved king. It is part of a cycle of stories intended to show that God was at work in David's life even as a young boy, preparing him for military, political, and spiritual leadership.

The story of David's triumph over Goliath fits into a larger genre of Biblical stories which remind God's people that the **real source of our strength is God, not ourselves**. This is the same theme we find in the story of Joshua and the walls of Jericho, Samson and Delilah, and Daniel in the lion's den. In each of these stories we hear the truth **a person's strength is not so much a human virtue as it is a divine gift**. So, on the one hand, the David and Goliath story reminds us that the source of our strength is GOD, not ourselves. And on the other hand, the story suggests that GOD does indeed **call us to do great things**. In fact, God calls US to do battle with Goliath.

The "Goliaths" of our day may be less physical and more symbolic than the flesh and blood Goliath David faced. But they are no less frightening and no less formidable an opponent. In fact, they may be MORE intimidating. The Goliaths of our day cannot be neutralized with one well placed slingshot. For we battle the Goliath of social oppression, of whole generations of American society lost in the welfare web; the Goliath of ethnic cleansing and tribal genocide; the seductive Goliath of drugs and the brutal Goliath of violent crime. We face the timeless ravages of the four horsemen of conquest, slaughter, famine and death. And no less than David of old, God calls us to battle with such Goliaths.

God calls us to battle. The question is, "What will we DO with the Goliaths of our time and place?" It's clear what DAVID did: he **seized the day** when the opportunity presented itself. The impact of David's defeat of Goliath would not have been the same if he had stalled or tried to negotiate or even resorted to trickery to kill Goliath. David literally conquered the enemy and rallied his people with one fell swoop.

In the sports movie classic *Hoosiers* an unorthodox coach takes the boys from a tiny Indiana high school to the state championship. When they arrive in Indianapolis for the big game, he takes them to the huge arena. The boys are clearly intimidated at the thought of playing basketball against the Goliaths of a slick big-city team before a crowd ten times bigger than their whole town. The coach gets out a tape measure and has the boys measure the length of the court and the height of the basket - to reassure them that it was going to be a game just like all other games. The only thing different was those eight boys had the unique opportunity to do something no small town team had ever done before – if only they could seize the day!

A young man met a beautiful French girl in college and immediately fell in love. He wanted to ask her out, but decided that before he did, he would totally prepare himself. So he enrolled in a French history class and a French language class. At the end of the semester, he felt he was finally prepared to ask her out. So he called her up on the phone - only to learn that she had become engaged to a football player who barely spoke proper English – much less French.

Preparation is good, but it cannot substitute for decisive action. This theme of the David and Goliath story could be summarized with that famous phrase of the poet Horace: *Carpe diem*: "**Seize the day; put no trust in the morrow!**" Act, and act decisively when an occasion for good work presents itself. Act, and act decisively when an opportunity for growth or enrichment or advancement becomes available. *Seize the day.*

David sizes up the moment and seizes the day. **David is also a model of prudent courage.** David was confident that he could slay Goliath even as he had killed lions and bears. But note one interesting detail of the story: he took FIVE smooth stones. Can you imagine the care with which he chose those stones - stones on which his life and his nation's future depended? Talk about understated and prudent courage! David took aim and succeeded in killing Goliath with ONE stone fired at his one vulnerable point. But with those four other stones in his bag David had a *PLAN B* ready if he missed with that first shot! David is a model of decisive, but PRUDENT courage.

The real point of the story of course, is the **battle is not really ours, but the Lord's.** When the two combatants meet, Goliath taunts the young boy. David replies, "I come in the name of the Lord...and this day the Lord will deliver you into my hand...so that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, and that all this assembly may know that the Lord does not save by sword and spear; for the battle is the Lord's".
(17:45-47)

The battle was not David's, not even Israel's. The battle was *GOD'S*. As God had delivered the Hebrews from the Egyptians at the Red Sea, as God had caused the walls of Jericho to come tumbling down, as God had empowered the strong man Samson to beat his enemies, so also, God guides David's hand and delivers a mighty blow for Israel's national pride. And the victory, like the battle, is not David's, but the Lord's.

All of these profound themes are there in our story, and are quite transparent. God is the source of our strength. We are called to do battle with the Goliath of evil who would thwart God's plan. Seize those opportunities for success when they are presented to you. Be courageous *and* prudent. Remember: the battle is not ours, but the Lord's. These themes are all there. But what really draws us into the story is the way the story of David and Goliath connects *us* and *OUR* stories with *God* and *God's* story. The way David and Goliath connect us with the greatest story ever told. Connects us to the story of God loving the world so much that God entered human life in the man Jesus, the story of how God has transformed forever human life and creation's possibilities. And that's the story we need to explore over and over again throughout our lives.

When the Jewish mystic rabbi Ben Shem-Tov felt that his people were threatened, he would go to a secret part of the forest to meditate. There he would light a special fire, say a special prayer, and the disaster would be averted.

When his successor faced similar circumstances, he would go to the same place in the forest and pray: "**Great Master of the Universe, I do not know how to light the**

special fire, but I am able to say the special prayer, and this must be sufficient." It was, and the disaster was averted.

When *his* successor faced difficult times, he would go to the special place in the forest and pray: "**Great master of the universe, I do not know how to light the fire, I do not know how to say the prayer, but I know the place, and this must be sufficient.**" It was sufficient, and the disaster was once again averted.

When it fell to *his successor* to deal with the misfortune of his people, he sat in his armchair with palms uplifted. "**Great master of the universe,"** he prayed, "**I am unable to light the special fire, I do not know the prayer, I cannot even find the place in the forest, but I can tell the story, and this must be sufficient.**" And it was. (*Speaking in Stories*, p 30)

David and Goliath, a great story which connects us to the greatest story ever told. The story of how WE might live with courage, act decisively, and find wholeness and peace and fulfillment. If only we let that story, God's story, shape OUR stories.

Friends: "We may be unable to light the special fire, we may not know the prayer, we may not even be able to find the place in the forest, but we can tell the story, and this must be sufficient." It was. And it IS. AMEN.