

“David and Goliath”

1 Samuel 17:32-50

July 5, 2020

When we were expecting our son Samuel, we were blessed with many wonderful gifts from friends, family, and our extended family in the church I served. We were particularly overwhelmed by the number of wonderful children’s books that were given to us, each with a story about how the book had been meaningful and significant to the giver as a child or parent or grandparent. I especially remember the set of books we received from Martha Rosselot, a distinguished Christian educator in our denomination whose long and successful career centered on teaching children the faith. Martha gave to us a set of “Read Aloud Bible Stories” that we have used often and all three of us have come to love. In volume four, we find the story of “David and The Biggest Man.”ⁱ

The story of David’s life is perhaps the most extensive example in the Bible. It is far too long to fit into one sermon. David is remembered as Israel’s greatest king. He was a savvy politician and a brilliant military strategist. He was brave, inspiring, and attractive. He was vain, over-confident, and proud. He was deeply human in both his virtues and his vices. And, like many of God’s chosen leaders, David started out as a nobody.

He was chosen to be Israel’s king by God through the prophet Samuel, but he was not even the prophet’s first choice. Samuel’s instinct was to choose the biggest, strongest candidate. God redirects the prophet with this memorable command: “Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.”

And so, Samuel anoints young David to be king, a role he will live into further into the story. But Israel

is in serious trouble now, engaged in an ongoing war with the neighboring Philistines. The two armies are eyeing each other from hilltop encampments with the Elah Valley between them.

The story is filled with dynamic tension, nonstop action, and more than a little violence. So, you might wonder, why do we teach this story to children, and why do they love it so much? I’ve been contemplating that question this week. I think it has something to do with the world in which children live. A world where the big, powerful giants are very real and always present. I think children relate best to the truth of this story because they can best put themselves in David’s shoes.

David is a boy. His older brothers are in the army and his job is to bring them lunch every day. One day, a single soldier appears from the Philistine camp. He’s big—the biggest man—by some estimates over nine feet tall. He wears a heavy armor. He has a spear and a powerful sword. His name is Goliath, and at the sight of him, King Saul and his whole army are overwhelmed with fear. Goliath issues a challenge: “Choose a man and let him come down to me,” he shouts, standing in the middle of the valley. “If he is able to defeat me, then we will be your servants; but if I prevail against him, then you will be our servants.”

Imagine the scene. For forty days, Goliath walks the valley shouting challenges and insults. For forty days the soldiers of Israel quake in fear, wringing their hands, talking among themselves about how terrible and hopeless this all is, amplifying their fear with every glance across the valley. Goliath keeps growing in their minds.

The lunch delivery boy can hear and see what’s going on day after day, and he is distressed by the response of God’s people. So, David volunteers. “I’ll

go fight him,” he says. His brothers mock him. The king dismisses him: “You are not able to go against this Philistine; for you are just a boy.”

They are right, of course. But David persists. What he offers is ludicrous, irrational, fearless faith; faith that God will protect him, as God protected him against bears and lions when he was watching his father’s sheep in the wilderness. Faith—that’s all he brings into the battle with the giant.

It’s a ridiculous idea, but King Saul is out of options. No one else is stepping up, so he agrees to let David try. He insists that David wear his own armor. But it’s too big and too heavy. When David puts it on, he can’t even walk, let alone fight. The picture is laughable. Down into the valley, he goes with only his trusty slingshot and five smooth stones and his confidence in God’s protection.

Of course, we know the rest of the story. The fight is over before it even gets started—David moves quickly, runs, slings, stone flies, Goliath falls, the Philistines flee.

It’s a wonderful and reassuring story; we teach it to our children, encouraging them to trust God and not be afraid. It’s a wonderful story, but it is also a story that we tend to abandon after childhood—it is so dramatic and vivid and iconic that it can become cartoonish. Does the story of David’s defeat of Goliath have anything to teach those of us with a few more years behind us?

I think it does. I think this ancient story is true, in the deepest sense of that word. I think the story contains the truth about the nature of reality and the nature of God. A story retold and reenacted in countless, astounding ways throughout history.

When we first moved to Indianapolis, one of our first family outings was, of course, to the Children’s Museum. All four of us were blown away by the size, the creative and interactive exhibits, the sights and sounds of happy kids in every direction. In time, we made our way to a permanent exhibit called,

The Power of Children: Making A Difference. One morning, Samuel and I spent over an hour there. Sam was about to start kindergarten, and he wanted to hear about another six-year-old. In the exhibit, Ruby Bridges remembers the day she walked alone, six years old, into an all-white school. In her own words, Bridges writes, “The morning of November 14, 1960, federal marshals drove my mother and me the five blocks to William Frantz (Elementary School). One of the men explained that when we arrived at the school two marshals would walk in front of us and two behind. . . . It reminded me of what Mama had taught us about God, that he is surrounding us, always there to protect us. ‘Ruby Nell,’ she said as we pulled up to my new school, ‘don’t you be afraid. There might be some people upset outside, but I’ll be with you.’ Sure enough, people shouted and shook their fists when we got out of the car. . . . I held my mother’s hand and followed the marshals through the crowd, up the steps into the school.

The next morning my mother told me she couldn’t go to school with me. She had to work and look after my brother and sister. ‘The marshals will take good care of you, Ruby Nell,’ Mama assured me. ‘Remember, if you get afraid, say your prayers. You can pray to God anytime, anywhere. He will always hear you.’ That was how I started praying on the way to school. The things people yelled at me didn’t seem to touch me. Prayer was my protection.”ⁱⁱ

I imagine David walking into the Elah Valley like Ruby Bridges walking into school that day—small, vulnerable, walking out to confront Goliath, absolutely sure of the rightness of the cause, absolutely sure that they were not alone.

The truth of this children’s Bible story is that these things happen. Six-year-old girls confront centuries of racism and the laws of the state, walk through crowds of hate-filled adults with nothing but pure faith and the power of prayers.

Leif Enger’s luminous novel, *Peace Like A River*, begins in a small town in Minnesota in 1962 when two teenage troublemakers attempt to kidnap the

narrator's nine-year-old sister, Swede. After describing the events, the narrator offers these powerful words, "A nine-year-old shouldn't be dragged from her house by someone who hates her. Nor be forced to hear the language of the unloved...A nine-year-old shouldn't be told, 'We'll take you home now, but we'll be back. We're right outside your window.' And now, because a story is told for all, an admonition to the mindsick: Be careful whom you choose to hate. The small and the vulnerable own a protection great enough, if you could but see it, to melt you into jelly. Beware those who reside beneath the shadow of the Wings."ⁱⁱⁱ

This is the very sturdy, if sometimes unseen, truth of this memorable story. God is always on the side of the underdog, the oppressed, the powerless, the persecuted. God is the protector of the weak. God can be counted on in the struggle against all that seeks to undo us.

So, to discover the meaning of this ancient story, let Goliath be a symbol for all that is fierce, intimidating, and scary. Be as specific as you can. Name the giant that you must face—James Baldwin taught us a half-century ago, "Not everything that is faced can be changed. But nothing can be changed until it is faced."^{iv} So, face what must be changed and call it Goliath. Let Goliath be whatever threatens you, whatever makes you feel small and weak and helpless. Let Goliath be any of those giants that are waiting for you when you wake up in the morning and won't let you rest easy at night.

Let Goliath be whatever immobilizes you—your fear of an uncertain future, fear of failure, fear of risk, fear of intimacy, fear of loneliness, fear of lost relationships, fear of finding meaningful work, fear of aging, fear of vulnerability, fear of meaninglessness. Let Goliath be the fear of speaking up for what is right lest you be labeled, pushed down, silenced, shamed.

Let Goliath be the very real giants looming above you—the diagnosis you didn't expect, the news you can't fully process, the demands that have become too heavy for you to carry, the never-ending responsibilities, the unrelenting challenges of daily life.

Let Goliath be the powers and the principalities that oppose the way of God in this world—the systems that divide and oppress, the engrained structures, the ghosts of our past that impede on our present, and block the path to a brighter future. Let Goliath be the reality you were taught not to question, the circumstance you've been told cannot be changed.

Let Goliath be the headlines that tell of more hatred, more violence, more terror, more destruction, more lives cut short and more families in the grip of grief.

Let Goliath be the final enemy—the power of death itself, not just physical death but the death of hope and faith—the fear that lurks behind every other fear.

Prayers, silent and spoken. The surrounding presence of God. Five smooth stones. That's all we have as we enter the battle. Use them wisely. Hold them close. Hear the truth of David's story—you've been offered a power Goliath will never know. Amen.

ⁱ *Read-Aloud Bible Stories (v 1-5)*, Ella K. Lindvall and H. Kent Puckett. Moody Publishers.

ⁱⁱ <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/african-americans-many-rivers-to-cross/video/ruby-bridges-goes-to-school/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Leif Enger, *Peace Like A River*. Atlantic Monthly Press, 2001. pp. 35-36.

^{iv} "As Much Truth As One Can Bear" in *The New York Times Book Review* (14 January 1962).