

Smackdown

Preached 28-June-2009 at Community UMC, Romulus MI
by Rev Mark Alan Miller

Text: 1 Samuel 17

David & Goliath. One of the great Bible stories known to almost everyone. So well known that it is part of the larger culture that generally knows nothing of the Bible's message about God. And David is a favorite because he's the little guy who beats both the long odds and the big bully to win the day. That kind of story has always been a favorite in our culture of "can-do", rooting for the underdog, and cheers for the so-called "little guy" who prevails over the Goliath corporation.

But beware letting David & Goliath become merely a fairy tale or myth, the probability and plausibility of its reality are just too compelling.

First, Goliath is said to be 18 cubits and a span. This works out to 9.8 feet, which is maybe a little bit of an exaggeration. Yet the tallest human on record was 8'11".

Second, what about David killing this giant with a single stone? It's more likely than one might think. The sling David used was probably made of leather or heavy fabric, about 5 to 6 feet long held end-to-end with a pouch in the middle to hold a stone. The ends would have been held in one hand and the sling spun overhead. When one end was released, the stone would follow its inertial trajectory propelled by the sizable centrifugal force it received by being spun. As it left the pouch, friction against the fabric would have caused the stone to rotate rapidly. Somewhat like a bullet leaving a rifled gun barrel the rotating stone would have been very stable in flight as well as generating a cushion of air around it that gave it an aerodynamic slipperiness. If the stone were large enough, say 4 to 8 ounces, then the force of collision against Goliath's forehead would easily have shattered the bones in the front of his head and possibly the stone as well. Inertia would have driven a lot of that shrapnel into Goliath's brain.

Big Goliath; death by sling-stone; plausible on both counts.

But probable? The biggest problem seems to be the odds against David having been able to hit Goliath just where it hurt while on the run. A great shot, yes, but not improbable for someone having much skill.

No the greatest problem with the story of David and Goliath is not technical but one of human nature. There's no way a youth, such as David, was going to step out against a heavily armed Goliath. Cocky as a lot of teenage boys tend to be, most of the

ones I've known back off when real danger is so clearly apparent. We credit teens, especially boys, with risky behavior, but they behave that way only when they don't understand or they deny the risk. But a 9-foot, heavily armored warrior with sword and spear is not a risk that can easily be misunderstood or denied!

So for David to have done what he did implies that there is something else going on that allowed David to overcome his fear and any lack of confidence. A close reading of the Biblical text gives us an answer – all we have to do is follow the evidence.

To begin with, let's ask the question: Why didn't Saul's army simply attack the Philistines and get it over with? Why did they all stand around letting themselves be intimidated by Goliath's trash-talk?

For an answer to this we can look backward into the book of Numbers, chapters 13 and 14. There, the Scripture tells of a moment in the Israelites' journey from Egypt to the promised land when scouts sent into the borderland of Canaan – what is now Palestine – returned with reports of how strong the Canaanites were. The Israelite warriors then mutinied and refused to invade Canaan, against God's instruction to Moses to take the people there. Their fear overshadowed their faith and they told God and their leader, “NO.” In response, God barred them from entering Canaan for another generation – years more as a nomadic wandering people waiting for a new generation of warriors came of age.

So when King Saul and his army hug the hillside, reluctant to engage the Philistines in battle, I believe it is because they are simply afraid. They had forgotten their own history, a history replete with stories like Joshua's conquest of Jericho and Gideon's defeat of the Midianites. Both men led armies that were impossibly outmatched by their opponents. Both men could have cowered away from their callings to advance the cause of their people. But both men won victories that seem as impossible as the Lions winning the Super Bowl.

What then is the difference? Why Joshua and Gideon but not Saul?

Why David ... alone?

As the Cowardly Lion said in “The Wizard of Oz”, it's

“what makes a king out of a slave.”

It's “what makes the flag on its mast to wave.”

It's “what makes the muskrat guard his musk.”

It's “what makes the Hottentot so hot” and “puts the ape in apricot.”

What did David have that Saul and his men, and the Cowardly Lion, didn't have?

Courage! ... But not reckless, stupid, bravado. ... Real, honest, courage. The kind of courage that knows and understands fear but pushes through the wall built by fear.

Courage that is simply the ability of average people to do extraordinary things because they refuse to quit or to turn away.

Courage grounded firmly in faith.

And this brings us to how David was able to take up Goliath's challenge without flinching. It wasn't the brassy bravado of youth. It wasn't stupidity. But it was a confident assurance that God had David's back, and, more importantly, David knew that God intended that God's people would prevail. He believed in God with that innocent naivete of youth that doesn't impose upon God our adult realism – a realism that leads us to believe that God is just too small or uninterested, or both, to help us deal with the problems of the real world ... just because it is we who are afraid.

David's faith was, thankfully, more pure.

Thankfully, because when David took up Goliath's challenge he showed us how to act out of a faith that isn't afraid to confront the challenges of a world that doesn't operate by God's rules,

a world that is very unfair a lot of the time,

a world that needs people to stand up and do what's right for each other and for God.

And a thousand years later, one of David's descendents, Jesus of Nazareth, also took up the challenge, but the challenge to right everything that had gone wrong in God's Creation with a faith unafraid to confront the evil that blackens all human hearts and would see us all rot.

With a sling and stone, David defeated Goliath.

With a death on a cross, Jesus defeated death and all that would destroy our souls.

Now, before you all, and especially you graduates, go out to all gung-ho to win over the world, I need to give you a warning. You can't just simply name and claim your victory. Whatever you do – to be successful in the long run – **must align** with God's character, God's will, and God's purposes. If you think you can go out there and prosper in the name of God while lying, cheating, and treating others badly, then you've got a rude surprise coming ... sometime ... someday. When we behave out of that kind of hubris and recklessness, then one day God will shake each of us awake and force us to look into the mirror and see ourselves as we really are, and how far away from God we've drifted.

But if we stay close to God and the example and teaching of Jesus, depending always on the Holy Spirit to strengthen and guide us along the right road, then when

each of us looks in that mirror we'll see a Christlike image looking back, and looking back at one who has prospered in the kind of abundance that God provides, a prosperity that allows us to say that no matter where we are and what's happened to us, all is well in God's keeping.

So who do **you**, **I**, and **we** want to be – Saul, cowering at the sight of Goliath because we feel that we have only ourselves to rely on – or David, taking on what confronts us ready to give it our best shot with the courage and confidence that God has our back and will see us through?

Don't know about you, but I choose David!

Okay then, how do we get that courage, assured that we aren't just fooling ourselves and setting ourselves up for disaster? How do we take on our Goliaths with real hope of victory?

(1) Ever see one of those billboards for the U. S. Marines? Like the Marines, God doesn't take applications; God takes only commitments. So, if you haven't already, commit your life to God by becoming a disciple of Jesus and letting him be the Lord of your life. Everyone else might try re-committing to Jesus. In other words, get your loyalties straightened out and **put God first** where he belongs.

(2) You want the faith and courage of David, then get a grip on your fear and anxiety by remembering God's promises, God's faithfulness, God's assurance that he will never abandon you but will support you and strengthen you and work miracles through you if your heart stays close to God's and your will accords with His.

This is no minor step. Fear is contagious and makes a real mess out of things causing people to react rashly rather than act thoughtfully. But courage is also contagious, and the courage that God can give you will bless a lot of worried folk around you.

(3) To slay the Goliath God **calls on you** to slay, first get that nasty, four-letter, "C"-word out of your vocabulary. You won't take out Goliath if all you can do is repeat the two sorriest words in the English language - "I can't" - two words that stop us before we have a chance even to try.

(4) If you want David's success then don't simply presume that God will do all the work for you if you won't do it yourself. As a shepherd with responsibility for the safety of his father's flocks, David worked hard and prepared himself to defend his charges. When he went out to meet Goliath he was as ready as possible. What's more, he knew himself – his strengths, weaknesses, and gifts. He knew he was better off with a sling than a sword. And David trusted that God would even things up so he could do what he had learned to do.

(5) Finally, if you want to be faithful David rather than cowering Saul, meeting the challenges we all face head on with courage and grace, then live the kind of life that Jesus lived, the kind of life the God made each of us for. A life that can be summed up in three short phrases:

Do no harm.
Do all the good you can.
Stay in love with God.

I met my Goliath when I entered 3 years of probationary status as a minister. At any time the Board of Ordained Ministry could have pulled my credentials and sent me packing. That fueled a lot of anxiety, which ratcheted up to fear when I approached my ordination interview with the Board.

I was forgetting my own faith as I felt more and more that my future was not so much in God's hands but my own. But a buddy of mine who was ordained last year told me something that shook me out of it and I found my inner-David again. He said, "if God wants something to happen, then there's nothing that can stop it." And at that moment my own courage returned as I remembered who I was and what I had been called by God to do.

If you told me I'd be an ordained minister a dozen years ago, I'd have thought you were nuts... But, here I am.

And there's nothing special about me, so if I could get to where I needed to be, taking out my Goliaths along the way, then imagine what you folk – with God – can do.