

FAITH & FEAR

July 25, 2021 | 1 Samuel 17

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Some of the best stories in the Bible are the stories of David, the shepherd boy, the musician, the poet, the warrior, a great king of Israel, an ancestor of Jesus. There are a lot of kings mentioned in the Bible, some good and some bad, and some who were a bit of both; but of them all, we know David best. And because we read about David as a young man and as a warrior, because we read and sing his poetry in the Psalms, because we know the highs and lows of his reign as king, above all things, David is the king of Israel who feels the most like us: wonderfully, messily, human.

Our connection to David starts with today's story, which begins with two armies at a standoff. These were agrarian tribes, so we are not talking a huge battle; probably more of a small, organised skirmish. The Philistines had two advantages over the Israelites: imported iron weapons and an enormous warrior named Goliath — picture Arnold Swarzenegger in his Terminator days, but about one and half times taller. King Saul of Israel wisely refused to let his army engage with the Philistines, because he knew they'd get slaughtered. David, the youngest of his family, had been sent by his father to bring provisions to his older brothers, who were soldiers. He enters the scene and witnesses the terror that overcomes the Israelites when Goliath taunts them. David ends up being the only one on the battlefield brave enough to take on the giant, armed only with his slingshot and a deeply held conviction that he fights in the name and with the power of God. And sure enough, with one well-aimed shot, David fells Goliath.

Is there anything more satisfying than a story where the underdog triumphs? Some of the most popular films about sports teams and athletes are underdog stories, where the odds are stacked against someone or some team, and they manage to win in spite of it all, beating the best equipped, big city team. Some of the best books we read show us the same thing: someone who starts out with every disadvantage, at the bottom of the heap, and manages to fight their way to a good and satisfying life. We like it when the underdog wins the day. Because it makes the world seem just. If the strongest win all the battles, there's no hope for the rest of us, is there? If the same people who have all the power and all the money and all the authority are also going to win every contest, what's the point of even trying for the rest of us?

An underdog story gives all of us who are not on top hope: if we work hard and try our best, the unlikely will become possible and we may win the day, because underneath all the power struggles and unfairness and inequality, we secretly hope and want to believe that the world is a more just place than it appears to be.

And when God's involved, that secret hope becomes reality.

The story of David and Goliath is the ultimate underdog moment, and served a similar purpose for the people who experienced it, and for the theological historians who wrote it down, centuries later. The historians who edited together the stories of King David into what we call 1 and 2 Samuel did so using Samuel's old manuscripts and other old writings a couple of centuries after King David's reign, after the Israelites had been taken into exile in Babylon, driven from their land, their homes destroyed. This history became newly important for a community in total despair, a people who were trying to figure out how things had gone so wrong, what the future could possibly hold, and where God was in these terrible events.

For a community at its lowest ebb in Babylon, for King Saul and his army on the spot that day, this text described an all-too-familiar scene: the giant Goliath threatening to tear apart the warriors of Israel and take the people as the Philistines' slaves. The people of God have been there, done that. They know all about a life of slavery from their time in Egypt and they are desperate to avoid it again. And they are terrified because they know that there is no Israelite who can successfully meet Goliath in combat. There isn't even anyone willing to try.

King Saul and his army can only imagine two options: send someone to battle Goliath and watch them fail, which means they will all end up enslaved to the Philistines; or do nothing and hope the Philistine army and their awful giant will get bored and leave them alone, which doesn't seem likely to happen. Needless to say, morale is low.

But when the young shepherd David arrives, he offers a whole new perspective.

Among the verses we skipped in our reading of chapter 17 is David's rather cocky assessment of the situation. He sounds a bit naïve, and his brothers try and shush him.

But for all that he sounds untested and over-confident, David is also the only one there able to remember the most important thing of all, the thing all these seasoned warriors have forgotten: they are the people of the living God, and they are the army of that God! The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The God of Moses; the God who rained down plagues on Pharaoh and parted the sea so that the Israelites walked on dry land while Pharaoh's army drowned behind them. The God who brought the people through the wilderness and into the Promised Land.

David refuses to let Goliath and his size and strength and threats define David's own response to the situation. He sees this frightening, paralysing scene with an imagination dominated by God. For King Saul and his army, Goliath and the fear he invoked in them had become the center of their universe, the most important thing about the situation, the thing that will dictate and control their future. In their minds, Goliath is in charge. But David shows them — and us — a different way.

The story of David and Goliath is an old story, and perhaps not only because of where it falls in the timeline of Israel's history. If you grew up going to Sunday School, this story is likely an old story for you, too, one of the first Bible stories you learned as a child. But revisiting it as adults is important, because, from time to time, we all need the reminder that there is a different way to see every fearful, uncertain, out-of-our-control situation. Because it is very easy to let the Goliaths in our lives take over. We all have things we fear — getting sick or hurt, ourselves or those we love, addiction, job security, loneliness, failure, financial trouble, or some secret we are sure we cannot share — and those fears can grow bigger and bigger until they take over our imagination, and we lose the capacity to envision a future beyond the challenges of today.

The Goliaths in our lives — our fears — can so easily and insidiously eclipse our capacity to remember and sense the presence and love of God. The story of David and Goliath answers a question that every individual, every community, every nation — and, yes, every church — faces at one time or another: what do we do when fear overshadows hope?

What David did, when he came face to face with Goliath, was remember what he already knew: that God is faithful, that God is present, that God equips us with what we need for the task at hand, that he, David, belonged to God.

David remembered God.

When bogged down and surrounded by our fears, it is so easy, and so human, to let them take over and make our decisions for us. When that happens, our minds might start to race, or we might get panicky or stubborn, or lash out, or act and speak in ways we wouldn't, ordinarily. But what we really need is to remember something very simple and familiar: who we are and who we belong to. We are the beloved people of the living God, whose claim on us and whose love for us is stronger and deeper than any fear that threatens to overwhelm us.

As we wrestle with how God is calling us to be the church in this place at this time in the midst of profound change — changes in our culture, changes in our communities, changes in the way we “do church” — we would do well to imagine ourselves into David's story. When he stands across the valley from that terrible giant and the well-armed Philistines, he remembers God's faithfulness and, with a God-dominated imagination, he trusts his practiced aim with a slingshot and a stone, and he does what no one else there could.

There is a wonderful simplicity to the story of David and Goliath. And you might well be thinking, as I did while re-reading this passage of Scripture, how convenient it would be to have all our fears and uncertainties embodied in a single giant that can be brought down in one act of courage with a well-aimed blow. Very often the giants in our lives or in our life together as a community or a church are of a bigger and more complicated sort than an over-sized giant of a man.

As David gets older, he will face challenges that are at least as big as Goliath, and they will not be dealt with so easily. When it becomes clear that David is next in line for the throne, Saul will come after him in a murderous rage. David will have to live like a fugitive in order to stay alive. His best friend will be killed, and his wife will be taken away and given to another man. After he is finally king, David will abuse his power in the worst ways, sexually assaulting a married woman, and then murdering her husband, one of his loyal soldiers, to cover it up. His infant son will die. He will deal with terrible conflict and tragedy in his own family, as his grown children plot to violate one another and their father. And near the end of his life, David will face a coup from his son, Absalom, who will be killed by David's own men.

And I suspect that this is why those who wrote down the history of King David while they themselves were in exile made sure that this story, the one where the shepherd boy takes down a mighty giant, comes right at the beginning of David's story. Because David will not be the underdog for long, and there will be many days when David forgets all about God and the promises and love between them. There will come a time when David's imagination becomes dominated by fear and lust and greed and doubt. Through it all, narrated in the beautiful, emotive poetry of his psalms, we see into David's faithful, imperfect, and very human heart, as he turns again and again back to God, back to the relationship that shaped him, back to the God who faithfully forgives, who endlessly loves, and who is always, always, there.

And perhaps because this childhood story of taking down Goliath persists in his memory — and in ours — David, even at his worst moments, eventually remembers, and shows us, what is most important: that though we may turn from God, God never turns from us. God is faithful, even when we are led away from him by our fear. As uncertain as the future might be, as much as we might fear the changes it requires of us or the awful things that do or might happen to us and those we love, what we know for certain is that God is faithfully with us every step of the way. In David's own immortal words, our Lord leads us beside still waters, walks with us through life's darkest valleys, and fills us abundantly with a heavenly feast when our giants are all vanquished and he brings us home. Thanks be to God! Amen.