

***The Power of One***  
1 Samuel 17:32-49  
Sermon by Mark Schloneger  
June 20, 2021

*Only a boy named David, only a little sling,  
only a boy named David, but he could pray and sing.  
Only a boy named David, only a rippling brook,  
only a boy named David, but five little stones he took.  
And one little stone went in the sling,  
and the sling went round and round.  
And one little stone went in the sling,  
and the sling went round and round,  
and round and round and round and round,  
and round and round and round.  
And one little stone went up in the air,  
and the giant came tumbling down.*

Do any of you remember singing those words as a child?  
I do.

The story of David and Goliath was one of my favorite stories  
and that was because of what that song emphasizes:  
little David takes his little sling and chooses little stones  
from the little brook to defeat the giant standing before him.

Little guy takes down the big guy.  
We love stories like that.

But whether we are talking about our country, our church, or ourselves,  
we first have to acknowledge the power that we do possess --  
and David and Goliath is not the underdog story that we like to tell.

Before reading about David's encounter with Goliath in 1 Samuel, chapter 17,  
let me set up the story for you.

The people of Israel go before the prophet Samuel.  
We want a king so that we can be like other nations --  
we want a king who will go out before us and fight our battles.  
Through the prophet Samuel, God told them,  
It's up to you, but your desire for a king is a rejection of me as your king.  
I'm warning you, the king you desire will rule over you and exploit you.  
But they insisted, and so Saul was anointed by Samuel to be their king.  
The way 1 Samuel tells it, Saul's got it going on --  
he was the most handsome man in all of Israel,  
and he also was the tallest – he stood head and shoulders above anyone else.  
Well, Saul wound up doing things that were right in his own eyes – not God's,  
and he even built a monument to himself.  
When Samuel asked him about this, Saul blamed the people,

basically saying, “What could I do? The people wanted those things.”  
But Samuel tells him, Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa” – well, that’s not a direct quotation.  
But Samuel did say this, “[Saul], [t]hough you are little in your own eyes,  
are you not the head of the tribes of Israel?  
The Lord anointed you king over Israel.”  
Because Saul didn’t recognize or refused to use his own power.  
we’re told that because God was sorry for having made Saul king,  
God led Samuel to anoint David as king.  
Do you see a problem, here?  
David is anointed to be king while Saul is still ruling as king.  
Two kings, one kingdom.

And so, at this time, Israel has two problems, both dealing with national security.  
The first is, who is our real leader? The anointed king or the sitting king?  
Who has the power?  
And that made the second problem scarier.  
The powerful Philistine army is on the march, coming closer and closer,  
to the point that they occupied Elah,  
a valley that was essential for Israel’s survival-  
for natural resources, for trade, and for national security.<sup>1</sup>

Well, the Philistines set up camp in the hills on the southern ridge of that valley,  
and so Saul rushed the Israelites to the hills on the northern ridge.  
This left the two armies looking across a ravine at each other,  
neither willing to give up its good position to launch an attack  
that would make them vulnerable.

Finally, the Philistines had enough.  
They sent their greatest warrior, Goliath, down into the valley,  
to propose a one-on-one battle.

1 Samuel 17, verses 32 to 40, 45 to 49.

*David said to Saul, “Let no one’s heart fail because of [Goliath]; 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*

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<sup>1</sup> See John A. Beck, “David and Goliath, A Story of Place: A Narrative-Geographical Shaping of 1 Samuel 17,” *The Westminster Theological Journal* 68 (January 1, 2006);  
<http://web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=4&sid=7ada45f9-cccc-491f-8773-ddb532dbf98e%40sdc-v-sessmgr01>

*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.*

*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, and I will strike you down and cut off your head; and I will give the dead bodies of the Philistine army this very day to the birds of the air and to the wild animals of the earth, 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. (1 Samuel 17:32-49)*

And the Philistines scattered.

Do you see what happened here?

When Goliath shouted out to the Israelites to send someone to fight him  
he was asking for hand-to-hand combat.

This was a common practice in the ancient world,  
to avoid heavy bloodshed,  
two warring armies would send representatives to fight for them.

And so Goliath came equipped for that sort of fight –  
wearing a helmet and heavy armor to protect himself against blows,  
carrying a javelin, sword, and spear.

It's no wonder why none of the Israelites, Saul included, wouldn't fight Goliath.  
When David volunteered, Saul tried to give him his armor, helmet and sword.  
You see, Saul simply assumed these were the only tools for battle.

But David refused to fight Goliath on Goliath's terms, up close.  
So he took off the armor, he dropped the sword,  
and he used his sling to confront Goliath from a distance.

Make no mistake, the sling was not simply a shepherd's tool --  
it was a weapon used in ancient warfare.

And David was not simply a shepherd boy.  
Just a few verses before the ones that I read,  
he's introduced to Saul as a warrior, a man of valor.

A ballistics expert with the Israeli Defense Forces recently calculated  
that a typical stone hurled by an expert slinger  
at a distance of 115 feet  
would have taken just a little over a second to make impact --  
equivalent to a fair-sized modern handgun.

With all of that armor weighing Goliath down,  
there's no way he could have reacted in time.<sup>2</sup>

David and Goliath?

This is no underdog story.

This is a story of a warrior, a man of valor refusing to fight Goliath on Goliath's terms,  
using Goliath's tools.

Goliath had no chance.

Now, before going on,

I feel like I first need to acknowledge

that there are aspects of this story that make us uncomfortable:

David does follow through on what he said he would do to Goliath and the Philistines --  
gruesome things that he said would glorify God.

But let's not get ourselves too hung up about that.

Jesus is the fullest revelation we have of God in the flesh,

and, in Jesus, we know the type of life that glorifies God,

and it does not include the way of the sword, the spear, the sling, or the gun.

We proclaim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus,

marks the fulcrum in which all of history points --

and so we interpret all of history, all of scripture, through the lens of Jesus.

Jesus is how we know who God is.

And so what do we do with this story, what might it teach us?

Well, let's first know one of the lessons that the people of Israel surely taught their children  
as they told this story to them.

God is not on the side of those who do right in their own eyes,

who build monuments to themselves,

who will not exercise the power that God has given them.

No, God is on the side of those who obey God, serve God, trust God,

and are good stewards of the power that God gives them.

In other words, God is on the side of David, and not Saul.

But let's also resist the temptation to tell this story as an underdog story --

as an against-all-odds, out of nowhere, Cinderella story

of one team, one individual

having one shot,

or one opportunity

to seize everything they ever wanted

in one moment, and never let it go. No.

That's not this story.

This story teaches us to name the power we possess

and to reflect on how we will use it or not use it.

Great harm and destruction follow in the wake

of individuals or groups or churches who deny the power that they have.

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<sup>2</sup> Malcolm Gladwell, *David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits, and the Art of Battling Giants* (New York, NY: Little Brown & Co., 2013); 7-12.

Either their inaction allows for an oppressive status quo to continue,  
or their actions allow them to oppress others while claiming innocence.

This past week, I read an article in *Christian Century* by William Cavanaugh,  
a Catholic theologian, known for his work in political theology and Christian ethics.

The article's title was "As a theology student, I fell in love with the church:  
What I needed was to learn to love God."<sup>3</sup>

He writes that the faithful church is always on the verge of failing –  
that's because any alternative to the powers and principalities  
will always face great obstacles.

But it's only through the action of the Holy Spirit that life and hope break through.

He says that we can easily spend too much attention to the church and not enough attention to God.  
"The Church needs to contemplate God in the eyes of the poor," he writes,  
and not contemplate itself in the mirror of its self-identity."

"If the church in the US rises from the ashes,  
it will not be because we elected the right president  
who packed the federal courts with judges who will defend the church's prerogatives.

Nor will it be because the church has established its brand  
as a prophetic agitator for social justice.

The church is only attractive when people can see the poor Christ in it.

The church should be a sacrament, a material form through which God is seen –  
a window to God, not an object in itself."<sup>4</sup>

I think we've told the story of David and Goliath in a way  
that misses the power that David did possess.

And I wonder, sometimes, if we as a church sometimes do that do.

Catherine Thiel Lee, in a 2018 presentation for the Women Doing Theology Conference  
put on by Mennonite Church USA., writes this,

"We cannot remove ourselves from the  
worlds we care about and live in, nor do we want to.

But when we reenter the cycles and spheres of power,  
we often end up, well,

reentering the same cycles and spheres of power.

Last year's victims become next year's despots.

Last week's principled rebel becomes next week's strongman.

The oppressed become the oppressors.

We've seen this story before.

And if we choose to ignore that tendency toward domination  
with a bland, "but when I have power, when I rule the world, I will do better,"  
we are ignoring history—frequently to our own peril."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> William T. Cavanaugh, "As a Theology Student, I Fell in Love with the Church: What I Needed was to Learn to Love God," *Christian Century* (June 7, 2021); <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/how-my-mind-has-changed/i-had-learn-love-church>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Catherine Thiel Lee, "Inescapable Dream: Hannah Arendt and Theories of Power," in *I've Got the Power! Naming and Reclaiming Power as a Force for Good* (Jenny Castro, Ed.); Presentations from the Women Doing Theology

The power to transform, to heal, to reconcile, to save, to free,  
to love as God loves,  
will not ultimately be found in a new administration  
but in people who have been filled and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

No, we believe that this power lies in the Body and the Blood of Jesus Christ,  
our living Lord and the head of the church.

That's the power that has been passed on to us, together, through the Holy Spirit.

That day when evening came, Jesus said to his disciples, "Let us go over to the other side."

Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along,  
just as he was, in the boat.

There were also other boats with him.

A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat,  
so that it was nearly swamped.

Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion.

The disciples woke him and said to him, "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?"

He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, "Quiet! Be still!"

Then the wind died down and it was completely calm.

He said to his disciples, "Why are you so afraid?" (Mark 4:35-41)