

WESTMINSTER
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SERMON

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Champions Among Us

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The story tellers in the Old Testament books of 1st and 2nd Samuel through 1st and 2nd Kings describe the political landscape in the Holy Land. Monarchs rise to govern the Israelite people. Later, they fall. All the while enemies continually threaten.

On the surface, this arc in our faith history reads as *Game of Thrones*. At the core, the thread woven throughout pleads for loyalty to God before any earthly rulers. Whenever we doubt God or place our faith in a mortal king, we all lose.

Last week I tried to persuade you that the call of David would make a top-ten list of stories in scripture. Israel's first king, Saul, was a brawny-warrior who is now exiled in disgrace. His size and bravado deceived the people into thinking he would win their battles.

The prophet Samuel follows God's instructions, goes to Bethlehem, inspects all of Jesse's sons, and anoints the youngest shepherd boy, whom God selects.

Scripture proceeds to shape this underdog into the greatest king to rule. Today's story rises as one of the best known and oft-told stories.

Dear God,

We think we know these stories.

We think we know what to expect of you and ourselves.

Help us listen with a fresh naivete.

*Send your spirit among us
so that we hear your truth in this ancient story
about ourselves. Amen.*

1 Samuel 17:1-51 (selected verses)

Now the Philistines gathered their armies for battle and there came a champion named Goliath whose height was four cubits and a span. He had a helmet of bronze and was armed with a coat; 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 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? 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 serve us."

When all Israel heard these words of the Philistine, they were dismayed and greatly afraid.

Now David was the son of Jesse.

David was the youngest; the three eldest followed Saul, but David went back and forth from Saul to feed his father's sheep at Bethlehem.

For forty days the Philistine came forward and took his stand, morning and evening.

David said to the men who stood by him, “What shall be done for the man who kills this Philistine? For who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?”

His eldest brother Eliab heard him talking, and Eliab’s anger was kindled against David. He said, “Why have you come down? With whom have you left those few sheep in the wilderness? I know your presumption and the evil of your heart, for you have come down just to see the battle.”

David said, “What have I done now? It was only a question.”

David said to Saul, “Let no one’s heart fail because of him; your servant will go and fight with this Philistine.”

Saul said, “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, “Your servant used to keep sheep for his father and has killed both lions and bears. This uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them, since he has defied the armies of the living God. 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.”

Saul said, "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.

David said, "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 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 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. The Philistine said, "Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks?" And he cursed David by his gods.

He said, "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, "You come to me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come to you in the name of the LORD of hosts...so that all this assembly may know that the LORD does not save by sword and spear, for the battle is the LORD's, and the Lord will give you into our hand."

When the Philistine drew nearer, David ran quickly toward the battle.

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.

No one wants to fight the champion of the Philistines. He stands nearly ten feet tall, cloths his body in the latest in weaponry, and carries a spear as big as a tree.

Compounding the visual terror, for forty days this Philistine taunts the Israelites, morning and night: “Look at me. No one can conquer me.”

Forty days in scripture is short-hand for the end of human endurance. The Philistine drives their fear to gigantic proportions, letting them imagine him to be a super-human no one could defeat. This psychological warfare causes the Israelites to lose hope in themselves, their future, and to forget about God.

When David arrives, he offers a whole new perspective. He’s not endured the twice-daily bullying. This fresh-faced kid, too young for

battle, also imagines possibility, not inevitable death the adults believe.

As an aside, let's remember that teens tend to overestimate their own strength and agility. They possess a sense of immortality. Consider how often they refuse to wear helmets when launching their bikes over a curb. Or ignore speed limits when they get in the driver's seat.

David also gained confidence in his physical tenacity and mental acuity by defending his father's sheep against the deadly lions and bears. Day after day, he perfects his skills with the sling.

An ancient sling was a not a slingshot, a backyard toy for target practice against empty soup cans. Made from a cord doubled over on itself, a sling is easier to carry than a bow and more accurate in skilled hands. When launched, a sling's heavy bullet or stone could reach 100 mph. Imagine the speed from a Major League Baseball pitcher and a batter's inability to get out of the way. Only the stone's impact would cleave a skull.¹

In the ancient near east, a sling became the favored tool of the shepherd and warrior. A story in scripture claims 700 left-handed marksmen could "sling a stone at a hair (on your head) and not miss" (Judges 20:16).

¹ Jordan K. Monson, "The Other Giant," *Christianity Today*, July/August 2023, p. 64.

If they could do that, then David could probably aim at a giant the size of a Sherman tank and not miss.

So David is in many ways an *ordinary* youth. He enters the story with the swagger and athleticism of someone on the junior varsity team who asks, “What is Goliath but an oversized bear?”

David rises as the *champion* in this story as the only one who notices, “Why does no one trust God?”

For the Israelite army, the fear the giant Philistine invokes in them, that fear and despair, has become the center of their universe. Hopelessness has most important thing in their lives. They can do nothing but watch and listen to every move the Philistine makes and every word he utters.

David is the only one there able to remember the most important thing of all, the thing all these well-armed soldiers have forgotten:
they are the people of the living God.²

Curiously, this is not the only place in scripture that an ordinary man protects the Israelites by slaying Goliath of Gath, a giant.

A brief reference much later in 2 Samuel chapter 21 notes a battle victory over Goliath by a soldier serving in David’s army.

² Eugene Peterson, *Leap over a Wall*, (New York: HarperOne, 1998).

Could there be two Goliaths? Two giants?

Across cultures and human history, stories abound of some sort of ogre, monster, troll, or deadly presence who threatens a community. Then a young, unlikely individual musters the courage to seize upon what everyone else overlooks and saves them.³

Scholars believe the story we heard today and have enshrined as the ultimate story of the underdog's triumph is part of the literary shaping of our faith. Writers reimagined the giant's demise as part of David's debut.

When read closely, even though the story is known as David and Goliath, rarely does the name "Goliath," appear. Most often, the story refers to this giant as merely, "the Philistine" and with "Goliath" an occasional addition.

When studied, we see it littered with inconsistencies. And one of the primary actors in this book, the prophet Samuel, never appears.

What we know to be true is that the writers, editors, and redactors, who God inspired to stitch together these books in holy scriptures, did so at a time when Israel foundered in defeat and wondered if, when or who might pull them from despair.

³ Commentary on 1 Samuel in *The Jewish Study Bible*, The Jewish Publication Society TANAKH Translation, Ed. Edel Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

Israel lacked the military weaponry of their foes. They struggled for unity. They cowered in fear.

This story elevates an ordinary youth, who comes out of nowhere, to be a champion. It paints a portrait to tell us that heroic fitness never relies upon human form – not someone who stands head and shoulders taller or is clothed with heavy armor.

The goliaths in life come in all sorts of guises – racism, poverty, or any of those practices and beliefs we feel powerless against.

David succeeds by serving God. After this victory, he collects the disparate tribes of Israel into a kingdom. And later, when David starts to serve his self-interests, the long and steep decline begins, just as his older brother predicts. Our holy scripture presents David the champion who remains utterly human, terribly flawed, and just like us, always dependent upon God.

This story tells us that God raises champions from ordinary folk like you. These champions place their trust in God, before any other ruler, when facing the Goliaths.

Our reformed theology rises from this belief.

At the level ground of the foot of the cross, God calls each one of us to serve in the capacity given to us. Our time, talents, and

resources. We need one another's ideas and contributions for our collective good.

As we worship this morning, the general assembly, of the PC(USA) deliberates on our governance and the future of our denomination. It is a collection of ordinary folks, like you and me, called to serve, our common good. Not a hierarchy clothed in mystery or secrecy. They rely upon God.

This same trust in ordinary folk infuses our country's democratic ideals, which we will celebrate this week. Our nation rises from belief in equality, not privileging one over another.

This story invites us to take on the boyish confidence of David, to see through the false bravado of the bullies who attempt to strike fear in your heart, and rely upon the living God.



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