Giant Killer

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Last year, I was invited to speak to a high school football team on the afternoon of its big game against their arch rival. The team they were playing was formidable. They were highly touted and heavily favored. The coaches of this underdog team asked me to tell the story of David and Goliath. No doubt they were hoping, just as David prevailed against overwhelming odds, that their team would be successful in slaying this giant. I thought my talk was pretty good. I had visions that the headline would read that a minister’s sermon inspired this underdog team to become a giant killer. Sad to say, their team still lost by two touch-downs!

The David and Goliath story is a perennial favorite. We like to root for the underdog. It’s called “the underdog effect.” According to the research, 81 percent of us root for the underdog. Consider all the movies that pull for the underdog: Sea Biscuit, Rocky, Rudy, Erin Brockovich, Million Dollar Baby and Cinderella Man.

I’ll bet 99 percent of us identify with David. Almost no one associates with Goliath. We pull for the underdog because we are underdogs!

I read for you a small portion of today’s lesson. Our narrator takes his time over the expanse of 58 verses to recount this improbable story. Allow me to retell the story and think with you about its relevance for our lives.

Philistia and Israel function as arch enemies in the Old Testament. Their respective armies assemble in a well-known valley of Judah. The Philistines occupy one side of the hill while the Israelites gather on the opposite side.

One soldier in the Philistine army, Goliath, is a giant of a man, standing nine feet tall. I mean, the guy could slam dunk a basketball flat-footed. Goliath is covered from head to toe in battle armor weighing 125 pounds. Goliath is big, beefy and belligerent. He challenges the Israelites to a duel. He boasts, “Am I not the Philistine?” (17:8). In the original Hebrew, the sense of his brag is even more audacious, “Am I not the Philistine?” Am I not the biggest, baddest dude among all the Philistines? Goliath’s trash-talking leaves his opponents cowering in fear.

King Saul has offered a cash reward to anyone willing to take out Goliath. When he has no takers, he sweetens the pot...
by offering his daughter’s hand in marriage and later offers a special exemption from paying taxes.

Enter David into the drama. David serves in the role of water boy in our story, shuttling food and supplies back and forth to the troops on the front lines. While he happens to be on delivery, Goliath launches into his daily harangue.

David boasts that he’s willing to do battle with Goliath. David’s oldest brother, Eliab, takes umbrage with his brother’s assertion. He asks in mocking fashion, “Why have you come here? And with whom did you leave those few sheep?” (17:28). Eliab’s reference to a few sheep is intended as a dig. He can’t stand the thought that his kid brother is willing to do something that he won’t do. David’s response is classic baby brother, “What have I done? Can’t I even speak?”

David’s offer to fight Goliath is reported to King Saul. Saul dismisses David’s offer as sheer bravado. Yet, David presses the issue. As a shepherd who fights lions and bears in defense of his sheep, he will fight this Philistine: “The Lord who delivered me from the paw of the lion and the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine” (17:37). This is the first instance where God’s name factors into the equation!

Saul offers David his personal battle armor, but he finds it bulky and clumsy. Instead, David selects five smooth stones from a nearby stream. Smooth stones work well in a slingshot. Slings were formidable weapons in ancient battle. A slinger would place a stone the size of a tennis ball into the leather pocket of a long strap. A slinger would swing the sling in an underhanded motion, much like a pitcher would throw a softball. Slingers could be deadly accurate, achieving a speed of 60 mph. In Judges, 700 left-handed slingers could hurl a stone at a hair and hit their target (Judges 20:16).

For 40 days running, Goliath stands before the Israelites to mock his intimidated foes. On the 41st day, David takes him up on the challenge. Goliath is incensed that the Israelites have sent a boy to do a man’s job. Yet, David won’t be deterred. “You come against me with sword and spear, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty… It is not by sword and spear that the Lord saves; for the battle is the Lord’s and he will give all of you into our hands” (17:45-47).

David chucks a stone at Goliath, who never knows what hits him. The stone hits Goliath right between the eyes and knocks him unconscious. David rushes forward, takes his sword and decapitates Goliath. My Sunday school teacher, Miss Buckholt, conveniently left this portion out of the story. Undoubtedly, she thought it
would be too intense for rambunctious boys like me.

Well, it’s all over but the shouting for the Philistines. Goliath hits the deck with force that causes the windows to rattle back in Philistia. The Israelite army is now emboldened and routs the opposition. Little David has become a giant killer.

Last Sunday, we introduced 12 Sundays worth of sermons on telling David’s story. Why David, you ask? We know more about David than anyone else in Scripture. God wants us to learn through the multiple experiences in David’s life.

We’re first introduced to David in 1 Samuel 13. King Saul is about to go AWOL. David is identified by the prophet Samuel “as a man after God’s own heart” (13:14).

David appears a second time in 1 Samuel 16, in the passage that served as the subject of last Sunday’s sermon. God selects David, the youngest of eight brothers, to be anointed as Israel’s next king. God sees something in David that no one else sees. People see with their eyes a shepherd boy, but God sees into David’s heart the makings of a great leader. When Samuel anoints him as the next king, the Holy Spirit of God comes upon David with power (16:13).

David has no speaking role as yet in our story. But, in chapter 17, David delivers two eloquent speeches. The first is spoken to Saul and the other is delivered to Goliath. David’s resolute faith and unwavering courage is in stark contrast to King Saul’s timidity.

We’ve tended, in the church, to extrapolate this story from its Biblical moorings and refashion it into a type of Aesop’s fable. We let this narrative stand alone as an inspiring story with a simple moral attached to it. The moralism goes something like this: be brave like David and face your giants. While David’s courage is singled out for special commendation, clearly other things are intended here.

You will notice a curious irony as we make our way through David’s story. David will one day become Goliath. David the giant killer becomes David the giant king. The underdog will one day become top dog. What happens to David is all too common. He will disregard his humble beginnings and grab for control. Once he is top dog, he will act as a bully and throw his weight around. He will make some boneheaded decisions. Some of his sins are colossal in scope. It won’t be pretty.

Yet, this sprawling narrative is not merely a story about David. As I said last Sunday, this narrative is also a story about God. God functions as the chief protagonist. God will take the raw material in David, this man with a heart after God’s heart, and make something of him.
David will learn trust. Mostly he will learn it by trial and error. David comes to epitomize trust in the Bible. You could say that he wrote the book on trust. The book of Psalms, many of which were written by David, typifies trust. David writes in Psalm 20, “Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the Lord our God” (20:7).

This past week, Chris and I spent several days with my daughter, Emily, and husband, Mike. Since Emily and Mike were preoccupied at the hospital with the birth of their baby, we took care of them and helped out around the home. One of my jobs was to take care of their dog, Tucker.

When Tucker is with family, he is docile and sweet. He loves to retrieve tennis balls. I’m eternally grateful to the person who introduced me to the dog toy Chuck-it.

Tucker is not docile and sweet with strangers. He spends hours by the window, barking at people on the sidewalk. I feel sorry for the people who are jolted by his menacing growl and intimidating bark. When the Fed Ex driver brings a package to the front door, you can forget about it.

Tucker is an amalgam of admirable and confusing traits. So are we! We possess honorable qualities. We also possess less honorable traits. Why are we spending 12 Sundays on David? If you haven’t guessed by now, David is everyone. David demonstrates admirable, even heroic qualities, yet also possesses serious flaws and shortcomings. David must learn trust and so must we.

We build trust with God the same way we do with each other; a little at a time. We don’t know what lies around the bend. We don’t know if delight or hardship awaits us. But we trust that God’s intentions for our lives are merciful and gracious. Trust the Lord. Know your place.