

## **“DAVID AND GOLIATH”**

1 Samuel 17: 1a, 2-11, 24-26, 31-51

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### *Introduction to the reading::*

This week’s favorite Sunday School Bible story is a story of the young future King David, when he was still a shepherd boy and the kid brother of a bunch of older, tougher big brothers, before he became the great King David of Israel’s golden age, before he was honored as the ancestor of the future Messiah, before he was celebrated as a symbol of the just and peaceful kingdom the people of Israel would spend centuries longing for.

The setting: Saul is the King, the first king of Israel, which is at this time a collection of tribes attempting to make itself into a “real” nation. The main task of the king is to lead the people in fighting off enemies who also want to dominate this land. This struggle had been going on for a long time and was the primary reason the people had demanded a king in the first place, someone to lead them. But it’s not going well. The enemies – the Philistines, mainly – are strong. Saul himself has become kind of unstable. And we’re told that God, through the prophet Samuel, has expressed disappointment in Saul and declared that neither Saul nor his heirs will be allowed to continue to rule. So this Sunday School story is part of a larger story about a political upheaval.

Meanwhile, the Philistine conflict continues. We don’t know a lot about the Philistines. They seem to have mainly lived in and around five cities near the Mediterranean coast, west of the area where the Israelite tribes settled. It’s unclear if they represent one unified people or a loose alliance of these different city-states. They left no texts, so the only descriptions of them come from other peoples they encountered – enemies - who, unsurprisingly, described them in negative terms, much as we use the word “philistines” today, as rough, violent, uncivilized, uncultured.

This story was probably told – and retold – to emphasize how David was destined for greatness from a young age, and to highlight the qualities that made him so. It’s kind of akin to our story about George Washington and the cherry tree.

It’s the third of three “introductory” stories about David. The first describes him as a shepherd - who in that story is quietly anointed by the prophet Samuel as God’s choice to be the next king of Israel. The second portrays him as a musician who is brought in to play for King Saul, who is suffering from some kind of mental, emotional, or spiritual disturbance; music soothes him and helps him sleep. The story we’re focusing on today gives us yet a different picture of the future king.

*Read the scripture*

What I remember most about stories from Sunday School – and what to me defines the essence of a good Sunday School story and makes it compelling – is that we instinctively respond by imagining ourselves into the story.

In this story, we identify, of course, with David. Who else? That's who we're meant to identify with: David the boy, the underdog, the vulnerable yet courageous defender of his people. The brave fighter who stands up against the vicious, boastful, powerful (not to mention well-armed!) enemy.

It's an adventure story that can be read as the prototype for thousands of stories of similar plotline that came after it, from *Don Quixote* to *Jack in the Beanstalk* to *A Wrinkle in Time* to *Lord of the Rings* to *Harry Potter*. There is nothing like a story of the little guy standing up to a powerful evil enemy.

This kind of story stirs us up; it lets us share in that terror and suspense, in the struggle, and then in the triumph of good over evil. It takes us through outrage and fear to courage and determination, to suspense and action, and finally to pride and inspiration.

It's an iconic story – so much that “David and Goliath” is a widely used shorthand way to describe any situation in which somebody of little power takes on a big or powerful enemy.

We can really identify with David in this story.

Anybody can, who has ever faced a fearful situation,  
ever fought with an insurance company to get medical care  
stood up to a bully  
tried to save a historic building or a much-needed community program  
tried to fight off an attacker  
worked to change an unjust law  
can identify with David's situation.

It's no small thing to face off against a person or an entity with vastly more power and resources than you have.

Anybody who has felt powerless, fearful, defenseless, or outnumbered can put himself or herself in the shoes of a teenage boy looking up at a huge and heavily armored seasoned warrior who is prepared to crush him.

Sometimes people read this story of David and Goliath as a metaphor for more personal struggles, which also require faith and creativity and determination and courage –  
a struggle against addiction  
against depression  
against illness  
against temptation  
against the expectations and fears and unspoken “rules” that hold us back.

So we root for David in this story. And that kind of feels like we're rooting for ourselves, to be similarly courageous, faithful, and triumphant.

We can see the qualities in David that the storyteller is lifting up:

David's courage is contrasted with the timidity and fearfulness of Saul and his troops. (The political implications are obvious: David is going to be a better king than Saul!)

David immediately sees the situation from the perspective of faith. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann points out that until David arrives on the scene, "no one else in the story has named the name of Yahweh." David trusts that God is with him, he believes that God's strength and power will help him. He believes what Saul and his armies don't seem to be convinced of: that there is a God in Israel, and that God will deliver his people. David brings "bold faith into an arena of fear." (Brueggemann again!)

David does not adopt the enemy's tactics, weapons or defenses. He has only himself and the things he knows. David might appear defenseless, but he isn't, because God is his defense.

No wonder we root for David. No wonder we identify with him. We are supposed to.

But a fresh look at a familiar Bible story sometimes means asking, "what if we put ourselves in another place in the story?"

What if we are more like Saul and his troops and David's brothers? Immobilized by our fear? Unwilling to take a stand? Afraid to confront or challenge someone more powerful? Forgetful of God's presence? Doubtful of God's power? Dismissive of the courage and idealism of youth? Scornful of the "Davids" who believe something can be done?

It's not too hard to see ourselves there, is it?

Or even ... what if we put ourselves in Goliath's shoes? He's certainly the villain in the story, but he probably didn't see himself as evil. He was a loyal soldier, just doing his job. He most likely was brought up to believe that strong was better than weak and bigger was better than little. That the world is a rough place and you can't afford to forget it. That winning is essential. He was probably taught to value toughness and self-reliance, weapons and tough talk. And he probably loved his home and his people. Likely he was convinced that it was important that they establish themselves as the definitive power in their part of the world, and that this was a cause worth fighting for. The people of another country, another ethnic group, were not his people and had no claim on his sympathy.

This, too, is kind of familiar. Although we gravitate to David, as we're meant to, in reality we are in some ways more like Goliath. We have privilege of race and class and education. We live in a culture that accepts and sometimes glorifies violence. We

admire the strong. We belong to a powerful nation that uses far more than its share of the world resources and has often used its power to the detriment of the rest of the world. Like Goliath, we think we have good reasons. But when we put ourselves back in David's shoes, those reasons seem murky.

This story – and our identification with it – is more complicated than it first seems.

But I have to tell you: this is just an introduction to the whole long and complex saga of David, who will become the king of Israel. And here's the sobering thing: when David does become the king, when he himself is in a position of power, when he isn't the underdog fighting the giant... he doesn't always look quite so much the hero as he is here.

He abuses his power at the expense of the less powerful. He turns a blind eye to dysfunction, violence, and conflict in his own family, with tragic consequences. He ignores wise advice and fails to appreciate those who are loyal to him. He unites all the Israelite tribes in one kingdom and defends it against their enemies, but there is a lot of bloodshed along the way. There is prayer and repentance and gratitude and celebration, but there is scheming and ambition and dishonesty, too. David is often torn between faithfulness to God and the pursuit of power. Still he loves God and will not let go of that core of faith that has sustained him.

It is a fascinating story, and a messy one (and a lot of it isn't suitable for children's Sunday school!). It lays out so clearly how readily human beings – even well-intentioned ones – can be blinded by power, ambition, and things they want to believe. It reminds us that even if this confrontation between David and Goliath looks like a “good guy vs. bad guy” story, the bigger picture is more complicated. It lets us see that even someone who truly believes in God's power and presence, who genuinely has a heart for God, who wants to be faithful, can violate his own values in appalling ways. It invites us to take a thoughtful look at our own hearts, at our mixed motives and divided loyalties, at the direction of our lives, ...and consider where we belong in God's story.

Amen

Resources:

The CEB Storytellers Bible, Common English Bible, 2017

Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel* (Interpretation Commentary), John Knox Press, 1990.