

# Approaching Goliath

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## I Samuel 17

What a great story. No wonder it is so well known by Jews and Christians and people of many traditions. Because it is so well known, this story pops up in unexpected places. We were at St. John's College a few years ago for a staff picnic. It came time for bingo and when Jamie won he got to pick a prize. One prize looked bigger than the others, so the choice was not too difficult. He opened the box and there was a music box, about 10 inches high. When you turned it on, around and around went young David, his foot on Goliath's chest and Goliath's head in his hand. Any guesses on the music it played as it went round and round? "Jesus loves me" of course. Could there be a better prize for a pastor's kid?

Of course, my biblical sensibilities were troubled by this pairing of David and Goliath with "Jesus loves me." For one thing David was Jewish, for another, what does peace-loving Jesus have to do with this gory scene? But being the two best known pieces of Jewish and Christian culture known in America, why not bring them together in a Chinese-made product? I can't believe I got rid of it before this story came up in the lectionary.

The previous chapter of I Samuel tells the story of the prophet Samuel visiting David's family and how the youngest son, David, was anointed the next king (to take effect eventually, not immediately). David must derive some sort of strength from that ritual with Samuel for when he hears about Goliath he goes straight to King Saul saying he wants to fight this giant. Saul is incredulous; who does this child think he is? Eventually relenting, he gives David the king's own armor and appropriate weaponry for a battle such as the one David will enter. And in a comical turn, David can't even move with all of this armor on, he can't begin to lift the heavy sword. He takes it all off.

The stakes are high. We are made to believe that Israel's future rests on this battle between Goliath and David. If Goliath wins, the Philistines take over Israel's territory and the Israelites all become slaves. But if David wins, the Philistines are the property of Israel. What a way to fight a war. Only one life lost, theoretically.

Unable to move with the armor or weapons provided, David approaches Goliath on terms of his own with the only weapon he knows how to use; a few small stones, his sling and trust in God.

We aren't surprised that David does so well, that's how it is in the Bible. God seems to be on the side of the underdog, the youngest, the oppressed. Liberation theologians are known for saying that God has a preferential option for the poor, whether that is poor in spirit, poor financially or those with little power.

David certainly qualifies as the small fry. The writer does everything possible to emphasize the disparity between Goliath and David. Goliath is a giant, nearly 10 feet tall with a bronze helmet and 125 pounds of armor covering him nearly head to toe. His spear tip alone weighs over 15 pounds and someone goes ahead of him bearing a shield. He is not only big, he is obnoxious as well. David is portrayed as a sweet, handsome, maybe pimply faced (what does ruddy mean anyway) young kid just playing with stones. These two are about as unevenly matched as they can be.

But Goliath has this one weak spot, right there where his helmet doesn't cover him. Even the invincible have weak spots; Achilles had his heel, Goliath his forehead. Perhaps the small spot, the heel or the forehead, represent a much bigger weakness. Goliath seems to be all brawn and no heart. David, on the other hand, is chosen by God precisely for what is in his heart.

We can build up David, but his oldest brother, Eliab, has a different idea of what David is like. He is not so convinced of David's heart. It might be jealousy or it might be insight. Eliab accuses David of conceit and corruption in his heart when David volunteers to go fight Goliath.

This mention of Eliab tells us that David is a complicated character, not unlike the rest of us. In this story, from I Samuel 17, he is the hero. But once

elevated to king, he has his problems. Perhaps Eliab is more insightful than jealous after all. There is that memorable incident with Bathsheba and the subsequent arranged murder of her husband, Uriah. And then of course there are David's children with their experiences of jealousy, incest, rape and murder. A good king he may have been, but fathering and home life seem to have been less of a priority, probably like most men of his status. David is all too human, not larger than life even if he slays a giant in his youth.

Who are the giant slayers of our time? We might call Martin Luther King Jr. a David. His weapons seemed ridiculous; faith and women, men and children who were willing to stand up for the truth. King had brains and, like David, he had heart. He had determination. He was up against armies, guns and hoses, even the law. But he had the truth that injustice was real, and he had some ideas of how to show what that injustice looked like and what it was costing the heart of the country. (He started out young and died too young, but we know that just as King David was human so was Martin.)

Martin's weapon was to show, in as peaceful way as possible, that those who would keep the unjust law were more violent and dangerous than those who would march for justice. King said, "*Nonviolent resistance does not seek to defeat or humiliate the opponent but to win his friendship and understanding.*" We may call Martin Luther King Jr. a David but his was certainly a different approach to oppression and violence than young David's. Seeking friendship and understanding rather than humiliation and death is not the usual way to defeat the oppressor.

So here we have at least two ways to approach the giant. David with his small stones that kill, and Martin with his determination to love. Where do we find ourselves in this story? Does this work as a metaphor for our own lives? Which approach do we want to use?

My mind immediately goes to the work I have been doing with the Open Letter and preparing for Columbus. I hardly feel like a teenage boy who trots out onto the field with nothing but a few pebbles and a slingshot. I certainly don't feel

like the powerful giant of a man, weighed down with armor, and determined to make a fool of anyone who dares come close to him.

If my colleagues and I are like David, do we approach Goliath with faith? With nothing in our hands and five smooth stones? Like Martin, committed to nonviolence, can our statements and stories, banners and bandanas bring change? If these are our small stones how will we use them and where will we aim? Or will we be more like Martin, seeking to change minds and hearts with friendship?

But how can we be David? We are pastors with credentials; we have the power to marry and bury, to baptize and preach. With all that influence, how can we possibly be like David? There are even a few people who respect us and we certainly aren't young anymore.

Perhaps we are really more like Goliath, powerful and strong. Certainly we have heard that some folks are afraid of the work for inclusion. We are seen as throwing our weight around. We come from congregations with money and jobs, houses and education. And from a country with oil and cars and weapons and technology. We have some power in front and behind us. How can we be David?

While power is important, we also must be mindful where we put our faith and trust. My former Hebrew Bible professor, Bruce Birch, writes in his commentary on I Samuel — *“Well meaning movements and efforts for justice in the church and society sometimes clank around in the armor of Saul, attempting to imitate and best oppression on its own terms. When the church imagines that its mission can go forward only with massive numbers, large budgets, corporate styles of planning and hierarchical structures of authority, then maybe we should read this story again. It is God who saves, not Goliath, God saves, not without human agents, but in ways that astonish us in our usual ways of measuring influence and power.”*

As we work for inclusion in the church, I hope we will go forward with faith (nonviolently and strategically) shedding the armor and carrying only our posters and outstretched hands. This is our aim.

The giants we face today are many headed: racism, heterosexism, sexism, poverty, war, militarism, immigration and healthcare reform, collapse of the financial system, issues of hunger — locally and worldwide, nationalism, climate change. Or perhaps the giants are closer to home — depression, health crises, family crises, loss of a job, aging parents ... the list goes on and on, I probably missed the giant that looms over you.

How do we approach these giants who threaten us? They are so many and so huge as to overwhelm us. We are told David fought Goliath alone. We often remember Martin King as a lone leader (though he was not). But we do not have to do it that way. We are here to support each other, to hear and learn from each other about how we are working to defeat or befriend those things that threaten us personally or as a larger body.

In this story, young and idealistic David had God on his side. But there is an important end to this episode in the next chapter, after David kills Goliath. Saul calls David to him and asks him to identify himself. Saul knows who David is. He gave him armor before the battle, and David has previously sung and played harp to calm Saul's frayed nerves. But David will not say his name, only that he is the son of Jesse. Robert Polzin understands that there is more going on here than Saul trying to get David's name. Saul is trying to claim David, trying to claim this new warrior hero as his own. He wants David to say, "I am now your son, your servant, my Lord." But David will not renounce his own father and become a warrior for Saul. His allegiance is to God and his own family.

If and when we defeat or befriend the giant, we too may be given opportunities, even demands, to pledge allegiance to power or other warriors. Let us not be claimed by those who would take our power from us, who would have us place our faith in institutions and the establishment, in weapons of violence and war. We are children of God, we have this family to give us identity. We are not orphans left alone — we are children of love.

Like David, let us remember where our true allegiance and trust reside, in being part of the family of God. And like Martin, let us approach the giant, without violence and whenever possible, seeking friendship and understanding.