

Davids and Goliaths
 King David Sermon Series
 [1 Samuel 17](#)
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 Rev. Abigail Henderson

We begin a new sermon series this morning. We're spending three weeks on King David, exploring his story and themes. David is one of the most vivid, compelling figures in the Hebrew Bible: he's a soldier; a great leader; an infamous lover; a poet—the Psalms are traditionally attributed to him; a man of profound devotion to God; and a deeply flawed human being. So, the whole package, in other words.

The time is right to look closer at David. In a few weeks, it will be Advent. During Advent and Christmas, the church always makes a big deal about how David is the ancestor of Jesus. "Jesus will inherit the throne of the house of David." Early followers of Jesus wanted people to think of Jesus in the same way they thought of David: as a great King of Israel, as God's anointed one, as a person with special insight into the nature of God.

And, significantly, as people of faith in the Judeo-Christian tradition, we are called to see David and Jesus as models of leadership, as bearers of power. Now, more than ever, I think we must pay careful attention to what our faith has to say about power, for what it has to say is a counter-cultural narrative that we need to hear and share and live.

But let's start with our story, David's famous origin story, from before he was king, when he was just a boy shepherd who became an unexpected hero: the story of David and Goliath.

Even if you are not well-versed in the Bible, you probably know this one. The image of a young boy facing down a giant with his slingshot—it's embedded in your psyche. The Bible surely didn't invent this image, but it helped it go viral. Versions are told over and over again, popping up in generation after generation of media. The most recent example I saw was in the Netflix show *Stranger Things*. I won't spoil anything, but there's several scenes where a character, Lucas, probably thirteen years old, bravely points his homemade rubber-band catapult at a big, terrifying, computer-generated monster.

If I remember the scene correctly, Lucas' arm is shaking slightly but his aim is true, and he has this fierce, determined expression on his face.

Will can tell you that I basically shouted at the screen in a mix of horror and admiration.

“What are you doing, Lucas?!” I cried. (I'm a very emotional TV viewer.) “That's not going to work!”

Lately, I feel like I see Goliaths everywhere. Turn on the news, there they are. Big, scary, undefeatable Goliaths. Of course, I'm thinking of some notorious people: bullies, abusers of power, merchants of lies. I'll let you fill in those blanks about who they are, as you see fit.

But Goliaths, to me, aren't just people. Goliaths can be anything that feels too big, too unmanageable, too frightening to fully wrap one's mind around.

Climate change is a Goliath. War is a Goliath. Misogyny and violence against women, Goliaths. Gun violence: I turn on my phone, a news alert pops up on my screen, and there it is: another mass shooting, like another Goliath approaching across an empty field, armed and unstoppable.

Sometimes it can't be denied that we part of the problem, feeding the Goliath with our complicity, our denial, our ignorance. The Goliaths of racism and colonialism, enormous complex multi-generational and structural sins that poison us all. Or take poverty. I wonder: am I David, or am I Goliath? I want to fight poverty, I want to be on the right side, but if I look hard at myself, I know I'm hardly the underdog when it comes to class, having lived with a safety net my whole life, accessing certain privileges and comforts without question, ones I'd be reluctant to give up.

Goliaths are everywhere, sometimes even in our own hearts.

Goliaths aren't just societal. They're personal, too. When you have Goliath in your personal life, like addiction or physical and mental illness, or grief and trauma, or regret and conflict. It doesn't matter if the trouble seems relatively smaller than those epic ones I've named; from your point of view, your Goliath still the biggest giant you've ever seen, and you feel small and powerless in comparison.

If only we could be like David! If only it were as easy as having faith in God, the right weapon, and knowledge of your enemy's weakness! If only unsurmountable problems could be surmounted in one decisive showdown! If only we could, each of us, whip out our little slingshots and fell our giants and walk away with our rewards!

There is an element of wish fulfillment in the David and Goliath story, and that is surely why it's so popular. Who doesn't love when the underdog wins? Who doesn't relish when the tables turn at the last minute? That's the stuff of a great story.

And I think we have to ask ourselves, what is the function of this story? Is it meant to describe the world as it always is? I don't think so. I think the chroniclers of this story knew that most serious challenges couldn't be overcome in one fell swoop. But maybe that's not the point. Maybe if we focus too much on the victory, the moment when Goliath crashes to the ground, we miss some of the key points.

This isn't just a story about David and Goliath, after all. This is a story about David and Goliath and God. We are meant to notice some things. First, that God does not prefer military might. Goliath is a fierce warrior from a mercenary culture. He is literally weighed down with 125 pounds of armor.

But God is not drawn to weapons.

I feel like this is something I want to yell from the rooftops. Our Bible tells us, over and over again, that God is not drawn to weapons.

God's allegiance is with the boy shepherd, who is armed *not* for fighting and killing people but for protecting sheep.

When Saul tries to give him a sword and armor, David responds, "I cannot walk with these; for I am not used to them."

There's a wonderful medieval French illuminated manuscript of this scene, showing David, future of king of Israel, bent over and flailing, trying to pull chainmail over his head, while soldiers stare awkwardly and Saul points at him as if to say, "Can you believe this kid?"

But David's onto something. He senses that he already has everything he needs to confront Goliath. He doesn't need to pretend to be something he isn't. Power doesn't look the same on David as it does on Goliath.

On Goliath, power looks like brute force and threats and weaponry.

On David, power looks like this:

- Power looks like abiding faith that God is present and will deliver him, somehow, in some way.
- Power looks like fighting for the protection of those more vulnerable than himself.
- Power looks like courage and steadiness in the face of threats, intimidation, and displays of violence.
- Powers looks like being rooted in one's real self, no more, no less.
- Power looks like staying anchored in one's own values, one's own sense of right and wrong, even in the face of doubt from friends and family.
- Power looks like trusting that God has already equipped you with the tools you need to survive and prevail, once you figure out how to use them.

I don't think this is meant to offer a blueprint for how to defeat a giant. It's meant to be a portrait of the king as a young man. It's meant to illustrate what a great leader does in a crisis: where life-giving power comes from, how it should be held and wielded.

Jesus modeled himself after many figures in the Hebrew Bible, including David, because he lived in this same story: the story of a God who with life-giving power, collaborates with it, *conspires* with it to change the world, not always on our preferred timelines, but someday. Exile is not the last chapter. Death is not the final word. Those are the promises of the God of Israel, David's God, Jesus' God, our God, whom we have inherited from them and whose story we are now invited to body.

I believe any person of faith can access this kind of power within themselves. If we wait for someone better equipped than we are to come along to do God's work in the world, it'll never get done. There isn't anyone better equipped than we are to be the body of Christ, to make God's love incarnate, to make it real in this place where we are planted. We have it within us, to make compassion radiate just not through our own church but through this whole community, through the larger church of which we are a part, through the whole world.

It's not easy. And it's not a sprint. It's a marathon, as I think we all know. The giant won't be felled in one day. But we tell the story so that we'll keep imagining the possibilities, searching for examples and noticing them and celebrating them.

Where have you seen Davids overcome Goliaths lately?

I can think of several. Here's just one.

Voters passed Amendment 4 in Florida, restoring voting rights to over 1 million residents with past criminal convictions. This is a huge step in the fight against the massive Goliaths of institutional racism and mass incarceration: "according to 2016 data from The Sentencing Project, more than 1 in every 4 people disenfranchised in Florida is black, and more than 1 in 5 black people in Florida is disenfranchised. By some estimates, continued disenfranchisement paired with state trends in mass incarceration" would have created a Florida *where 40 percent of black men could not vote* ([source](#)).

With Amendment 4, this terrible outcome has been avoided. A new world has come into being. Not the world entirely as it should be, but closer. Possibilities give birth to possibilities.

There is much work yet to do in Florida and around in the country, including Minnesota, on voter rights and criminal justice reform. But this victory reminds us that the world is far more malleable than we think. We are not stuck.

I'm sure you could add stories to the story I just told. We have a pretty exciting reason to celebrate right here, one that will bring transformation and new worlds to our church and beyond.

Let's fuel up on these stories, because we're facing a long road ahead.

There are Goliaths everywhere. But we must not forget that Davids are everywhere too.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.