
Don't Fancy It

I Samuel 17

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on June 21, 2009 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

The story of David and Goliath is easily told. God wanted to be Israel's only king. But Israel wanted its own king. So God gave Israel King Saul. But Saul lost his way and Israel started to become too much like other nations. So God chose David. First Samuel chapter 17 shows a lot of what went wrong with Saul and a lot of what was different about David. The Philistines were dominating Israel in battle. Their commanders had their foot on Israel's neck. But rather than proceed with the mass slaughter of battle, they decided to settle matters with a duel between their champion and Israel's champion.

Their champion is the massive Goliath. Goliath is ten foot tall and has so much armor he has to get someone to carry his shield for him. Israel's champion ought to be Saul, who is also, after all, very tall, and who has, as we discover in the course of this story, plenty of armor of his own. But Saul isn't interested. So David steps forth from obscurity. Using wit and wisdom rather than hustle and muscle, David defeats Goliath. The Philistines flee and the Israelite army is rejuvenated.

There's a simpler way to tell the story, and it goes like this.

The Israelites looked at the Philistines and said, "Don't fancy it."

The Israelites looked at Goliath and said, "Don't fancy it."

Saul looked at Goliath and said, "Don't fancy it."

David looked at the Israelites, Saul, Goliath and the Philistines and said, "I fancy it."

David looked at Saul's armor and said, "Don't fancy it."

Goliath was struck between his eyes by David's slingshot and said, "Don't.... fancy... it."

The Philistines took one look at what had become of Goliath and screamed, "Don't fancy it."

Finally the Israelites saw the fleeing Philistines and said to one another for the first time in a long time, "We fancy it."

We like this story because it confirms something we believe is at the heart of our culture. Stand up for the little guy. There's nothing we love more than to see the small liberal arts college fight through to the final four of the NCAA to take on the big state school powerhouse. It makes everyone feel great. If you're the little guy it makes you feel you really could make it. If you're the big guy it reassures you that with hard work, ingenuity and a little luck, anyone can make it.

Everyone loves the movie where the small-town attorney takes on the sprawling multinational conglomerate that's poisoning the water in the local streams. Everyone cries in the final frame of the film when she clenches her fist in victory. But privately everyone knows the inspiring movie about the resilience of the little guy has been made by exactly the kind of giant faceless multi-media corporation the attorney in the movie is standing up against.

The figure of David before Goliath has captured the imagination of our public conversation. In the last presidential election both parties wanted to tell us they were on David's side. They were standing up for the honest little guy against the big heartless corporate world. Both parties love to present themselves as standing bravely for fundamental rights that those dangerous other guys are poised to seize away any moment. And this sense of being David against Goliath is just as much to be found on this university campus. When I came to Duke four years ago many people told me I would find it hard to be a Christian amid the marauding hordes of pluralists. Quickly I met people of other faiths and secularists who said how hard it was for them to stand up against the marauding hordes of Christians. We somehow all like to see ourselves as David, with the odds stacked up against us.

So why then do we spend so much time trying so hard to be Goliath? We think it's quaint and clever that David got by with five smooth stones and a sling, but we spend our energies building up our supply of swords and spears and javelins. We clad our car and our house and our country to look like Goliath, with so many safety and security features we can hardly move around in them.

Why is a Duke degree so coveted? Because it gives you a chance to be Goliath. It gives you the armor, it gives you the weapons, it gives you the respect, it gives you the acclaim. All the things Goliath had. All the things David didn't have.

Why are mainline denominations feeling such a creeping sense of panic in this country right now? Because they're facing numerical decline. Why is that a problem? After all Christianity isn't any less true just because is less widely believed. The reason it's a problem is that mainline denominations have assumed for as long as anyone can remember that they're supposed to be Goliaths. They're supposed to be huge, they're supposed to be important, they're supposed to be players on the national stage, they're supposed to be the acknowledged voice of the people. All the things Goliath was. All the things David wasn't.

There's a painful irony about what becomes of David after he puts down the slingshot. If only David had stuck with the five smooth stones, history might have turned out a little differently. Here he is, full of confidence, full of faith, full of hope, telling Saul he doesn't need the heavy armor and telling Goliath he doesn't need mighty power and bombastic big talk. David defeated Goliath. The people swung behind David. David became king. And gradually the terrible irony began to kick in. *David became Goliath*. David became the inflated, bullying, beached whale he had begun his career by destroying. Just like Elvis Presley, for whom fame and fortune turned gyrating hips into bloated cheeks. David became Goliath. What a tragedy that was.

But the poignancy doesn't end there. When we read this story we don't just see the contrast with David's later life. We also think of the one whom a dozen or more times in the gospels people call the Son of David. When we think of Jesus as Son of David, are we thinking of the David who *became* Goliath? Or are we thinking of the David who *overcame* Goliath? The tragic irony is the same as before. We know that in walking the way of the cross, Jesus was the disarmed young David who walked slowly and calmly without armor to face the Goliath of empire and death. But we constantly fall back into celebrating Jesus as if he were the kingly David of power politics and conquest – the David who became Goliath. We take a long, lingering look at the God revealed in Jesus of Galilee, the God made known in touch, and word, and silence, and not in weapon, or wealth, or war ... and we say, "Don't fancy it."

We say we like David but we choose Goliath. David started off with five smooth stones and a sling and ended up becoming Goliath. But Jesus didn't. We may turn Jesus into Goliath in our imaginations, in our politics, in our rhetoric, even, sometimes, I regret to say, in our worship. But Jesus never did. And Jesus never does. When we read the story of David and Goliath back through the lens of Jesus – when we realize that this story of the good shepherd from Bethlehem is an account of the choices facing Jesus as he set out on his ministry – we discover that this is a story about where power truly lies.

This is still a story for the little guy and for the big guy. You may have come this morning feeling like a very small boat on a very big and rough sea. You may be feeling that you're surrounded by mountainous waves, or perhaps just one in particular, and you don't know whether to cry with despair or bury your face in the pillow and hope it will all go away. Or you may be wondering if you've become Goliath, you've become the beached whale who's so busy and important and full of meetings and committees and task groups and action plans that you can't move. Either way maybe you get up most mornings and think, "Don't fancy it." Maybe it's a good time to look at where this story says power really comes from.

David's power lies in his five smooth stones. And this story shows us five sources of power. David's power. God's power. And your power. Let's turn these five stones over in our hands together for a moment.

Stone number one for David is, he knows how to serve. He knows how to put his own needs and desires to one side for an extended period to do unregarded work. That's what David does in the first part of this story. He looks after his father's sheep at Bethlehem. And he takes provisions to and fro between the various soldiers and commanders of the army. There are some parts of every life, and every part of some lives, that are unrewarding, unregarded, and unattractive. Have you lost the art of the everyday, and lapsed into a sequence of thrills

punctuated by hours and days of resentment? David finds a way to make the ordinary into a source of pride, a form of training, and a way to build relationships. That's where he gets his power. Is that where you get your power?

Stone number two for David is, he's close to the land. David doesn't rely on technology or physical advantage. He's spent his life outside. He knows how to keep sheep. He knows where to find smooth stones. He knows how to craft a sling. He knows how to snare an animal, even a lion or a bear. He knows the tricks of the forest and the wilds of the woods. If your life is feeling stuffy right now, ask yourself, When was the last time I felt my created nature and sharpened my wily wits by spending some time in the fields, in the streams, in the mountains? Have I so surrounded my life with gadgets and comforts that I've forgotten the exhilaration of the hillside breeze? David learns from his outdoor life the wisdom of the owl, the cunning of the fox, the agility of the wildcat, the sharp eye of the eagle. That's where he gets his power. Is that where you get your power?

Stone number three for David is, he knows himself. Saul assumed David should be dressed up to look as much like Goliath as possible. So he gets out the full set of armor – bronze helmet, coat of mail, and hefty sword. But David knows he's not Goliath. And he knows he's not Saul. If your life is an uphill struggle right now, is it because you're wearing someone else's armor, trying to be someone you're not and never will be? Strive to be what only you can be. Don't be a second-rate version of someone else. David knows there's no point putting on Saul's armor. Of course Saul might think he was being disrespectful, taking unnecessary risks, letting him down. But David knows there's no point in trusting someone else's half-baked judgement. He knows his own weaknesses, and he knows his own strengths. That's where he gets his power. Is that where you get your power?

Stone number four for David is, he knows God is on his side. Once before Saul and once before Goliath he shows his confidence in where power really lies. To Saul he says, "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." To Goliath he says, "You come to me with sword and spear and javelin; but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts." I once went through a painful period where I knew I was in the wrong job but I had no idea where the right job was coming from. A friend I didn't know all that well noticed I wasn't myself and asked the right question in the right way. I poured out all the problems and difficulties and constraints that made me wonder how things could ever come right. When I'd finished he just put his hand on my shoulder and looked in my eyes and said "Sam, where's your faith?" David has the trust I so desperately needed that day. Maybe you need it just as much today. In the end, it's the only power that counts. That's where David gets his power. Is that where you get your power?

Finally stone number five for David is, he knows how God exercises power. As we've seen, this is the hardest one of all. The other four are all important. David has a servant heart. He understands his territory. He knows himself. He trusts God. These all matter. But unless he realizes who God is and how God works, the sling and stones become just a technique for becoming Goliath himself. The same applies to Jesus. Cross and resurrection aren't techniques for Jesus becoming a cosmic bully like Goliath. They're our windows into the heart of God.

God isn't interested in becoming Goliath. God transforms the world through the Son of David. God isn't interested in *us* becoming Goliath. In fact our desire to become Goliath is a sign we've lost faith in God and lost sight of who God is. David did both, later on. Most of us do, for a season. Maybe you have, right now. If so, go back to where real power lies. Find joy in the ordinary, find the breath of life outdoors, come to know yourself, and trust God. But most of all, don't for a moment think God is Goliath. God is a shepherd, and all he's got in the face of violence and threats and fear are five smooth stones. But here's the good news. One of those stones is you.