

STICKS AND STONES

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on Sunday, June 22, 2003
Scripture: 1 Samuel 17:1a, 4-11, 19-23, 32-49

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Any child or high school kid who's been intimidated and humiliated by a bully on the playground or locker room will identify with the story of David and Goliath. If a teacher, boss, or parent has browbeaten you, you dream of defeating your Goliath.

The story of David and Goliath is the world's most popular story. Even biblically illiterate people know it. David gathers stones from a riverbed. He slips a stone into his sling and runs toward the nine foot tall Goliath. David twirls his sling around his head and releases the stone like a mini-missile on a deadly flight. Goliath never knew what hit him. Fred Anderson comments, "the nation and king who have quaked in the face of Philistine menace are suddenly liberated by God, not at the hands of the king they had so sought to lead them, but by a boy who will one day be a king and will lead them into their golden age." The point of the story is simple: the little guy who trusts in the Lord can defeat giants. David represents anyone who, "when facing a giant in life, does so by trusting in God's faithfulness, taking up the tools at hand, and stepping forward to meet the challenge. What others might call courage, the Bible calls faith – trust in action."¹

The story of David and Goliath has been retold for thousands of years. We've seen the story replayed in movies. For example, have you seen the movie, "Braveheart?" Braveheart tells the story of William Wallace, one of Scotland's greatest national heroes. Wallace lived in the thirteenth century when English armies, like the philistines, occupied Scotland. The leaders of Scotland, at that time were weak and cowardly. Like King Saul before the Philistines, "they were dismayed and greatly afraid." But William Wallace put his faith in God, and went out to do battle ^{with} Goliath. At one point he faces the English army and says, "Go back to England, and tell them there that Scotland's daughters and her sons are yours no more. Tell them Scotland is free." At the Battle of Stirling Bridge in the year 1297, William Wallace defeated the English against all odds. The story of David and Goliath is the story of William Wallace against the English. When I'm faced with seemingly insurmountable problems – I think of how David and William Wallace put their trust in God - and they encourage me. The greatest battles in history have been won, not by military might, but by moral ^{or superiority} might.

Engel Brock...
The hand of David...
Star Wars

The story of David and Goliath has been retold in other movies. Most of us have seen, It's a Wonderful Life, which retells the story of David and Goliath within the context of a small town America. A young George Bailey, the manager of a Savings and Loan bank, plays the role of David. He faces the Goliath, Mr. Potter, a rich, powerful bank owner who wants to own *everything* and *everybody* in town. When George Bailey's father dies, Potter tries to shut down the Savings and Loan bank because the loan policies enable working class poor people to own their own homes. Like David before Goliath, George Bailey goes head to head with Potter. He says,

Do you know how long it takes a workingman to save five thousand dollars? Just remember this, Mr. Potter, that this rabble you're talking about. They do most of the working and paying and living and dying in this community. Well, is it too much to have them work and pay and live and die in a couple of decent rooms and a bath? Anyway, my father didn't think so. People were human beings to him, but to you, a warped, frustrated old man, they're cattle. Well, in my book, he died a much richer man than you'll ever be.

You know how the movie ends. David beats Goliath by his courage and moral character. The little guy wins not by force of weapons but by honesty, integrity, and faith in God. *It doesn't always happen that way. Sometimes the little guy gets crushed... but*
Fred Anderson has said that goliaths come in three different forms. *Some of us face personal goliaths,* an overbearing bully who threatens and intimidates us. *Some face impersonal goliaths* like cancer. We feel powerless and weak. Our knees shake when the doctor simply pronounces the word. But through faith and the support of our loved ones we can defeat the fear of cancer – if not the disease itself. Another impersonal goliath is doubt. We want to believe in a gracious God who forgives our sin. But we repeat our sins again and again we despair of God's grace. John Donne prays to God,

Wilt Thou forgive that sin which I did shun
A year, or two: but wallowed in, a score?

Doubt and despair are goliaths.

We also face cultural giants. The American Heritage Dictionary defines a "philistine" as a smug, ignorant, middle class person who is indifferent to cultural values. Our nation has plenty of cultural philistines who threaten to destroy beauty and common decency.

My sermon is unfinished. I want you to finish it this afternoon. Go home and discuss several questions around the dinner table.²

Where do you see faithful people standing up¹ against the power of governments, corporations, big business, or other powerful entities? *like David*
Eryn Brockoufels
Leis Gubbs

Several years ago some young people in our church went up to Philadelphia to volunteer at Trevor's Place named after a young boy who faced the Goliath of homelessness. Can you think of other young people (perhaps even in our church) who've faced Goliaths?

Can you name some nations who have been Goliath's, boasting of their military strength and intimidating smaller neighbors?

Can you think of times when you've been Goliath? You used your power to threaten, intimidate and bully people?

Finally, how is David like Jesus? Who or what was the Goliath Jesus faced and defeated? What weapons did Jesus use to defeat his goliath?

Oh God, we know that you do not save by sword and spear, but we are often timid in the face of the world's power. We pray you will empower us to use the potent weapons of love, justice, and compassion to right the wrongs of this world. Help us to respond to the challenges we face with courage born out of believing that you will provide the wisdom and strength we need. You have given us powerful examples in the lives of faithful people of every age. Help us to remember and find courage in their struggle and strength in their witness. Amen.³

¹ Fred Anderson, "Dealing with Giants in Your Life", June 25, 2003.

² The idea for these questions came from the Website, "Seasons of the Spirit."

³ The source of this prayer is unknown to me.