

The Giants We Face
1 Samuel 17
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Every week I search for a picture to put on the cover of our bulletins, one that expresses the theme of the service and is legally available for us to use without violating copyright laws, and preferably pictures that don't always focus on people who look like us. There are a few sources for these – a couple of websites that I go to regularly, an artist whose work I subscribe to, and also great art works from the past. This week I spent a lot of time poring over the great masterworks of art that depict David and Goliath. I was distressed to see that almost all of them depict David as European, and most show David cutting off Goliath's head, or carrying the head around. But I was interested more in an earlier point in the story, before the battle, when Goliath is taunting King Saul and the Israelites, the point where David, the underdog, is facing this well-armed giant. Eventually, I found this picture by William H. Johnson, from the Smithsonian American Art Museum. David before the battle. David facing an opponent much larger and more skilled than he. It is a moment we each come to at some point in our lives, I think, those moments that make us tremble in our boots, though the giants we face may not be in battle.

King Saul and the Israelite army are on one hill. Goliath and the Philistine army are on the opposite hill. The battle will take place in the valley between them. The Philistines have been winning at every turn. Saul's central challenge as king has been to rout the Philistines from Israel. But he has not been successful. He has not rallied the troops. He certainly has not called on the power of God to bring them victory. He has been a lackluster leader, and here he is facing almost certain defeat in battle. Worse, the giant warrior Goliath is taunting Saul's army. "Today I defy the ranks of Israel!" he shouts. "Give me a man that we may fight together." Out of your whole army there is not a single man who can beat me! Goliath was right. The whole Israelite army is cowering across the way, not knowing what to do.

At just this point, young David arrives. Three of his older brothers are in the army, and David, the youngest, has been sent from home to bring food to them – bread and grain and cheese. When David arrives, he hears the taunts from Goliath, and he is incensed. He asks, "Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the living God?!" David's words irritate his older brothers, who think he is just a trouble maker. But word of David's confidence in God in the face of this giant makes it back to King Saul, and he sends for David.

David says to Saul, "Don't worry; I will go and fight with this Philistine for you." Saul says, "You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him; for you are just a boy, and he has been a warrior from his youth." But David says, "I used to keep sheep for my father; and whenever a lion or a bear came, and took a lamb from the flock, I went after it and struck it down, rescuing the lamb from its mouth; and if it turned against me, I would catch it by the jaw, strike it down, and kill it. I have killed both lions and bears; and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them, since he has defied the armies of the living God. 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." So, Saul says to David, "Go, and may the LORD be with you!" Saul dresses David in armor from head to foot, but David can't even walk. He takes off all that weighty armor and goes out to face Goliath with just his sling shot and five smooth stones.

Goliath is not impressed. He says to David, "Come to me, and I will give your flesh to the birds of the air and to the wild animals of the field." But David responds, "You come to me with sword and spear and javelin; but I come to you in the name of the LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you

have defied. This very day the LORD will deliver you into my hand, and I will strike you down ... so that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, and that all this assembly may know that the LORD does not save by sword and spear; for the battle is the LORD's and he will give you into our hand." You know the rest of the story. David knocks Goliath out with a stone to the forehead, then rushes forward and cuts off his head. The Philistine army is routed, as David had predicted.

This seems almost like a miracle story, doesn't it, an event that is impossible to understand according to the normal course of events. David is everything Goliath thought he was – young, inexperienced in battle, unprotected by armor, an easy target. Yet David overcomes him and wins the day.

The author Malcolm Gladwell has recently written a bestselling book titled, *David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits, and the Art of Battling Giants*. Gladwell argues that David has advantages against Goliath that are not apparent, and Goliath isn't as formidable a foe as he seems. "First, David's sling is a devastating weapon," Gladwell says. "It's one of the most feared weapons in the ancient world. The stone that comes from his sling has the stopping power equivalent to a bullet from a .45 caliber pistol. It's a serious weapon. And second, there are many medical experts who believe that Goliath was suffering from acromegaly, which causes you to grow. Many giants have acromegaly, but it has a side effect which is, it causes restrictive sight.... So here we have a big, lumbering guy weighed down with armor, who can't see much more than a few feet in front of his face, up against a kid running at him with a devastating weapon and a rock traveling with the stopping power of a .45 caliber handgun. That's not a story of an underdog and a favorite. David has a ton of advantages in that battle, they're just not obvious."

For some of us, it is helpful to have a rational idea of how miracles may have occurred. But the Bible has a different answer: David kills Goliath because he has the sustaining power of the Lord of hosts on his side. More, he can remember all the times that God delivered him when he was in danger. He knows that God will not desert him. So, David calls on the name of the Lord. David walks in the power of the Holy Spirit. Everyone around him can see it, can feel the narrative of this battle change when David arrives. You have been in situations like that, haven't you, when everyone is feeling discouraged or beaten down, and someone comes in who reminds you of God's grace, God's providence, God's power in our lives. Suddenly, the energy in the room changes. People who were discouraged before can once again see possibilities. David slays his giant because he remembers all that God has done for him in the past, and he walks in that confidence right into battle with the greatest of all foes.

We all have giants to face – I think first of devastating medical diagnoses or insurmountable losses. But there are others – intractable issues in relationships, addictions, any situation that feels too great for us to handle alone. You have been in those situations, as I have. You know the trembling in the boots that the Israelite army was feeling when they looked across the battlefield and saw, not just the Philistine army, but also this giant of a warrior coming toward them.

But David's answer can be our answer, too. "You come at me with sword and spear and javelin," he said, "but I come in the name of the Lord of hosts. I remember what God has done for me in the past. I know that I am in God's hand." If, in that moment of trembling, we cannot remember this for ourselves, then it is an act of Christian grace when someone reminds us gently, as David reminded the Israelites. God will carry us in the palm of God's hand, now and always. No matter what giants we face in our lives, God is greater than all of them, and we come in the name of the Lord of hosts. Thanks be to God.

Amen

