

“I Cannot Go in These”
Based on I Samuel 17:1-51
© Stacey Steck
Preached June 25, 2006 at San José, Costa Rica

If there is a better known story in the Hebrew Scriptures than today’s about David and Goliath, it must only be Noah’s ark. Both of these stories form the backbone of Sunday School classes and Vacation Bible Schools because they are so visual, so engaging, so memorable. What child doesn’t like the animals, marching two by two into the ark? What kid doesn’t think about David whipping out that slingshot, taking down, with one clean shot, the giant Goliath, who incidentally happens to bear a remarkable resemblance to the neighborhood bully who has just chased him down the block?

David and Goliath must be the prototypical underdog story: when it’s the Cinderella team versus the number one seed, David is playing Goliath; when a mom and pop grocery store decides to stay when a supermarket moves into the neighborhood, David meets Goliath once again. Whenever some underwhelming entity takes on the overbearing behemoth, the picture of David and Goliath, facing off on the battlefield, appears in our heads and goes “click.”

The underdog factor is a compelling one in gambling and sports and even high school romances, but I think that the writer of First Samuel was probably less interested in creating an easily recognizable way of provoking sympathy for his main character, than he was interested in trying to illustrate probably the most

important transition in the history of the Hebrew people up to that time. The David and Goliath story is a cute one we can almost all identify with, surely, but it is also pivotal in the way the burgeoning monarchy was to be understood and remembered through the centuries.

This story works at a lot of levels. First, it tells of David's first public victory and sets the stage for his career—he's not king yet, but he's obviously got the makings. Second, it demonstrates his faith, a king's faith; no one else but David sees that Goliath and the Philistines are insulting the God of Israel as well as the army of Israel. David invokes God's saving power while everyone else cowers in terror. But most importantly, it contrasts David and Saul and in so doing, sets the standard for monarchical leadership of the period. This is how the king of Israel should act: in the name of the Lord, decisively, and victoriously.

As a side note to the contrast between David and Saul is the unmistakable symbolic similarity between Saul and Goliath which makes the battle even more pointed in the context of the narrative. You will recall that King Saul was a very tall man, the tallest by a foot in all of Israel. Goliath is Saul and his sins writ even larger and in Philistine script, a larger-than-life pagan edition of the Israelite warrior-king who lives and dies by the sword, forgetting that God is part of the equation. Indeed, I do not think it is an accident of the narrative that both Saul and Goliath have their heads cut off and carried around after they are killed.

For a review of the background to today's story, let me suggest you read the book of First Samuel up to this point, but for tonight recall that King Saul has been rejected by God for failing to follow fully God's commands, and that David has been anointed by the prophet Samuel to be God's choice for King, although Saul doesn't know it yet. Elaborated on later in the story of David, but hinted at strongly here, is David's faithfulness to, and faith in, God, a contrast to his predecessor. The writer of Samuel wants this to be known: that the next king of the Israelites was better than the first, possessed military power *and* an abiding faith, captured and made Jerusalem the capital. And following David was Solomon, who continued to lead a great army, was faithful *and* wise, established Israel as a great economic power and built the all-important temple. So it is the progression of the monarchy that the writer of Samuel is interested in chronicling, the strengths of the kings, and their leadership of the people during this important period.

Which is why this story is pivotal. For it is not really about David meeting Goliath on the battlefield and winning one for the underdogs of the world. Nor is it solely about David besting Goliath because God was on his side. No, it is about David meeting Saul and claiming his place as king. We read that when Saul put his tunic on David and placed armor on him, David took it off again saying, "I cannot go in these, for I am not used to them." This I think is where the story hinges for its author. By his rejection of the Saul's tunic and the armor and

weapons, David rejects Saul's discredited method of rule, a method based almost solely on his own military prowess. Instead, he asserts his own military methodology, one that combines weapons with faith in God. What does he say to Goliath? "You come to me with sword and javelin; but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts," and "The Lord does not save by sword and spear; for the battle is the Lord's and he will give you into our hand." This isn't about the Philistines and the Israelites, it's about leadership and faithfulness. Who is the right man to lead Israel? Who is the right person to represent God? How best is that done?

Not surprisingly, there may be a few lessons for us to take home, our cultural distance from swords and spears and slingshots notwithstanding. David's confrontation with Goliath-slash-Saul would seem to indicate that faithfulness derives not only from good use of our military or administrative or domestic prowess, but that these must be combined with faith. Saul successfully chased the Philistines up and down the Jordan River valley and even made the Philistine god, Dagon, look a little foolish once in a while but he was not ultimately able to defeat them for he pursued his endeavors without keeping the God of Israel as part of his battle plan. David sees the situation with the Philistines for what it is: a chance for God to be made known to the whole world and put Dagon in his place permanently. Whatever and wherever our battlefields may be, the same thing applies. We can chase our life's pursuits or our dreams up and down the

Americas, but if we don't integrate them with an intention to make God known through them, we will lack the conviction take a stand for the reign of God when it is required of us. We will be like King Saul and all the rest of his warriors cowering behind the battle lines in the face of the taunts of the behemoth.

I think too, this story shows us that the faithful use the gifts they are endowed with and the tools at their disposal. The reason no one would fight Goliath is that no one but David had the right skills and the right weapon. Goliath was covered head to foot in armor, carried a big spear and intimidated the hell out of everyone. His only vulnerability was his forehead because to attack him with a sword anywhere else was foolhardy. David recognized this when he rejected the armor and weaponry, knowing that he was unable to use them effectively, because they were not his way of doing things. David's five smooth stones, gathered from the streambed, were the result of a choice to put his own talents to use authentically, rather than try to be the warrior-king in the same way Saul was. David put the first stone in the right place, right between Goliath's eyes, and then used the giant's own sword to finish him off. The right tool makes the job a lot easier. And so what are your five smooth stones, the tools you will carry with you to take down the Goliaths who would taunt the God you follow? Let me suggest you weigh in the palm of your hand some of these Biblical stones—stones like justice, compassion, integrity, service, praise—weigh them and see how well they fit you. And there are other stones, countless others, unique to each of us, and

waiting to be gathered from the streambed of faith God has set down before us. But you have to pick them up and learn how to use them, just as David did protecting the sheep long before he stepped forward to face Goliath.

The high dramatic moment of the Biblical story, David's statement that "I cannot go in these, for I am not used to them," is a dramatic moment we all face regularly as we try to lead a faithful Christian life. That ever present moment is our on-going opportunity to choose an authenticity in our lives, an authenticity we see reflected in the ways David demonstrates his faith. The story of David and Goliath is often retold emphasizing David's courage in the face of overwhelming odds. The authenticity required by the Christian life does indeed require courage, courage to make hard decisions combined with faith, courage to recognize our talents and use them, courage to pick up the tools at hand, even if they are not what the world finds useful, courage to find in others what is good, valuable, and unique and to help them bring out those God-given traits.

The authenticity required by the Christian life calls us, when we find ourselves in situations which challenge our core beliefs, to say, "Hey, I cannot go in these, for I am not used to them." It's what parents face when the refrain starts: "But Angie's mother lets her stay up late!" It's what employees confront when asked to put their ethics aside for the good of the company. It's what marginalized teenagers agonize over when finally asked to go along with the in-crowd they so much want to be a part of knowing that it will probably entail humiliating

somebody else. It's what Jesus faced when he could have taken the easy way out of the suffering that lay before him. David's rejection of Saul's brand of kingship, the turning point for Israel, is a starting point for us to live authentic lives, lives worthy of the God who gives them to us.

As part of our moving forward together at ECF, we will be engaging in a process of discovering this congregation's five smooth stones, those that represent our authentic response to the call and claim of Jesus Christ on our collective life. As part of that group process, it is my hope that you will take advantage of the opportunity to pick out your own individual stones, the gifts God has given you. Sometimes this is called "gifts assessment" and sometimes it is perceived as just another way for the church to get you to volunteer for something. But really it is a way for you to live authentically for Christ in everything you do, and to prepare yourself for those moments when you will be called upon to say, "I cannot go in these." May God help each of us to live authentically for the reign of Jesus Christ. Amen.