

June 24, 2017

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1 Samuel 17, selected verses

Underdogs

Who doesn't love a good underdog story? Malcolm Gladwell, author of *The Tipping Point* and *Outliers*, knows how much people love underdogs, and how many think of today's first reading as the quintessential underdog story, and so he named a book after it. *David and Goliath*, subtitle: *Underdogs, Misfits, and the Art of Battling Giants*. Good subtitle, right? "*The Art of Battling Giants*." As it turns out, Gladwell has an unexpected take on David and Goliath, which is this: David wasn't an underdog.

Here's why Gladwell says this: think of the type of combat involved in the story, what is expected and what actually takes place—and how each person is dressed for it. We did a little bit with costuming, but that long sheet didn't convey how Goliath was in full and heavy armor, the best technology of the time and he wears it, ready for hand-to-hand engagement, which would favor his much larger size. David, on the other hand, wasn't armored at all, that coffee urn helmet just didn't cut it. This lack of armor allowed David's movements to be light and quick. Moreover, for much of the meeting David kept himself at a distance, from which he could utilize weaponry more suitable to distance: a slingshot, which is much more than a child's toy and with which a shepherd boy would have much practice, and which could be deadly. Gladwell says that repeated revolutions of a slingshot could launch a stone at speeds rivaling major league pitches, and, Gladwell says, the stones of the place where this took place, the Valley of Elah, those stones are denser than typical rocks. Also, Gladwell believes, Goliath must have had a particular medical condition, which affects the pituitary gland, a condition called gigantism, it's rare, but still around today, and it has some difficult side effects, including nearsightedness and double vision. Gladwell says that Goliath reveals that he has such issues when he thinks David is carrying sticks, plural, not just one staff, "Am I a dog that you come to me with sticks?" and when Goliath tells David to "Come" to him, as if he can't see him. Also, because Goliath has a shield-bearer walk with him, Gladwell says he needs him as a helper, to lead him towards David, whom he's having trouble seeing. And it's at that point that Goliath is hit smack in the middle of his forehead and falls face down to the ground—not the super-adversary he was cracked up to be, Gladwell concludes: "Sometimes giants are not as large and powerful as they seem," and "Sometimes the shepherd boy has a sling in his pocket."

It's an interesting take. I think a fair number of Gladwell's argument are a bit forced, but in one very important way I think he is on to something, something critical to our understanding of this story, and that is this: David did not think of himself as an underdog.

This assessment by David, that he was not an underdog, has nothing to do with details upon which Gladwell focuses. Interesting as they may be, plausible or not, they are not the source of David's confidence, a confidence that is apparent throughout the long narrative: from the moment David volunteers, to the getting dressed (and undressed) for battle, to the encounter itself, down in the Valley of Elah. In all of this, David is confident. Goliath has some impressive taunts, cursing David, but David gives as good as he gets. David offers a graphic, gruesome description of what he will do to Goliath as a result of this battle.

We might recoil as we listen to that part of the story. We have put it on the bulletin cover. Gorgeous as this etching is, we should recoil at it, at all violence, and we should question how David can announce that God does not save by sword or spear and that he will cut off Goliath's head. If you keep on reading on David does just this. The appalling contradiction, the

awful irony of this cannot be ignored, and the violence will continue: by David, to David, violence will continue to curse him, and there is no victory in that.

Still, I do not want to miss the overarching movement and meaning of this reading, the powerful claim made in the story of David and Goliath, the ultimate assertion that takes place in the defeat of the Philistine of Gath, and that is this: There is a fight going on, a fight between the Lord who saves and armies of destruction. Those armies, and what rises out of their ranks, those giants, these terrors are not small, or quiet, or gentle. Evil is monstrous. Evil is monstrous, and it is covered with expensive armor, and celebrated as a champion, and it treats unprotected children with disdain. We see that in this story, and today: we see a child, at the border between two lands, alone, unprotected, while warring parties watch. Evil is monstrous, as the story says.

And it will be slain. It will fall flat on its face. It will be utterly vanquished. Do not forget the end of this story; do not forget what was said all along in it. We know the end of this story and the arc of whole Biblical story, and all along it tells us where to place our confidence. It says: "Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us." (Romans 8:36-38) David may have appeared to be an underdog, but he was not, because he knew the Lord, he knew the Lord had saved him in the past, and the Lord was with him still. David knew that, as he headed into battle against an immense adversary with little to no protection.

That is what we do, as children of God, we head out into a violent world wearing nothing more than our bodies, our bruise-able feelings, our naked selves, in all our vulnerability. We head out unprotected, and we will face formidable foes: afflictions, hardship, calamities, beatings, and much more, as it says in the second reading. We head out without a suit of metal, but we are not emptyhanded. We may appear to be underdogs, we have something powerful we keep in our pockets and carry with us wherever we go, we have something powerful at hand. David reached into the wadi, the wadi being a part of a desert that is made watery by rain, David reached into the waters and pulled out five smooth stones. Our David reached into the waters of our baptismal font for his smooth stones. In baptism we are given what we need to defeat evil. In baptism we are given weapons, weapons of another kind. As it says in the second reading, we are given weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left. They are there, for our hands to hold, both for the right, and for the left.

Here are some of these weapons of righteousness: purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech. God has given them, these smooth stones to us, many more than five, God has given them to us in the waters of baptism. Let us pick them up, and hurl them at monsters.