

Becoming Goliath

II Samuel 11:1-5; Matthew 18:1-5

The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, (June 30) 2024

Kyle Childress

Dallas is a city that would have pulled for Goliath.

-Molly Ivins

Last week, we talked about David and Goliath. We began by reminding ourselves how much we love the underdogs, the little guy who upsets the giants. The small-time lawyer against the giant corporation, the newcomer basketball team against the perennial champions, the lone housewife going up against city hall.

So, here is my question this morning: why is it we say we like the little guy, but we spend our lives trying to be Goliath? We love it that David goes out to take on the giant with a slingshot, five smooth stones, and a shepherd's staff, but we spend trillions of dollars stockpiling swords and spears and armor. We admire the simple life of the shepherd boy but devote our lives to accumulating more stuff. Modern capitalism is like what old Samuel said about Israel having a king, "They'll take, take, and take." Not exactly a shepherd kind of economy or politics. Our goal in most everything we do is to get big or bigger – grow our business, grow our income, grow the economy, grow our waistlines, grow our portfolio. The old saying from agribusiness since the end of WWII has been, "get big or get out." Pamphlets, articles, invitations to conferences, and books on how to grow your church, enlarge your ministry, and increase your influence come to me every day and have for forty years. I have never received anything on getting small, how to decrease your church, how to have an ensmallment campaign ...

Journalist Molly Ivins once said that Dallas was a city that would have pulled for Goliath. So would all of Texas. Indeed, the American way is the Goliath way of bigness, power, and bullying, until we get what we want. There was an America, full of humble people who worked for a living, raised families, built communities, supported each other's children through public education, and even when they disagreed there was always an underlying trust. At least, that was our goal. Now, we're the Goliath in the world and with each other, and proud of it.

Goliaths take and destroy and diminish, extract and exploit. Goliaths don't usually start off being Goliath. They start small and get successful in taking and soon taking becomes an addiction. Eventually the entire planet is at risk because of Goliaths.

What happened?

What happened to David?

When we left David last week, remember that he was a shepherd boy who went out in full confidence in the living God, telling Saul he did not need the heavy armor and big weapons. He faced Goliath and defeated him. What happened after that, is that the people shifted their loyalty to David. He became the hero, and eventually became king. And over time, he became what he had stood against when he was a shepherd boy. David became Goliath.

When David became the popular hero, eventually King Saul was so threatened by him, that he tried to kill David. David was constantly on the run, hiding out, and fighting skirmishes with Saul's troops. Eventually, Saul is killed in battle against – you guessed it – the Philistines and David becomes king. In turn David is constantly in battle against the Philistines. At the same time, he

consolidates and centralizes his powerbase as the new king, creates a new capital in capturing Jerusalem, and grows in wealth and influence and power, while expanding his kingdom's borders by defeating the Philistines. David, the shepherd boy, has become not only king, but empire builder. Most of all, and this is important, David no longer relies on the living God for his victories. David has a great military to do his fighting. Kings of empires don't rely on God and go out and fight with slingshots and five smooth stones.

David was a success at everything he had ever tried. He was handsome, a natural leader of men, who took a rough confederation of tribes and turned them into a kingdom that other nations envied. Women swooned over him, enemies feared him, men followed him, children wanted to be like him, later kings looked back at him, . . . and Israel loved him. But, oh my, what a price. Power and success, becomes addictive. To get what you want whenever you want it. Oh my!

Which brings us to II Samuel 11 and 12. The great biblical theologian, Walter Brueggemann, says that when we come to this story we are in the presence of greatness. All the Old Testament scholars that I know speak of how well-crafted this story is. This is the King Lear of the Bible. And this story is the turning point in the history of Israel. Everything changes after this.

It begins simply, "In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle ..." (What an opening line.) "In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab ... and David stayed behind in Jerusalem." After an afternoon nap, David sees from his rooftop a beautiful woman taking a bath; he finds out who she is. She is "the wife of Uriah the Hittite, one of your most loyal and faithful officers." But David is king, and he does what kings do, what bullies do, he takes. Notice the verbs: He saw. He sent. He took. He lay.

Finally, the one time the wife of Uriah the Hittite speaks, she says, “I am pregnant.” David must think fast on how to cover this up. He tries several different ways to get Uriah to go home and visit with his wife. But Uriah, loyal and faithful, remembers the Torah, that while in battle, you are to abstain from sex. Eventually, David sends a message to Joab. Every king has their Joab – Joab is the General of the Army, but more, he is David’s loyal hatchet man. He sends a message to Joab to put Uriah in the most dangerous place on the battlefield and leave him out there. Then David sends the written dispatch to Joab with Uriah himself. Sure enough, it happens, and Uriah is killed in battle. Joab sends word back and David is relieved. It looks like it all is contained. Bathsheba mourns over her husband’s death. Afterwards, David sends for her and makes her his wife, although, throughout the rest of the Bible, she will always be known as “Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite.”

Yet the story says, “What David did was evil in the sight of the Lord.” David thought that as king, he had the power to do as he pleased. He was not accountable to anyone to himself. He could push people around, take Bathsheba because he wanted to, and send her husband Uriah to his death. He had become no different from Goliath.

But God sees and God says otherwise. God sends the prophet Nathan to the King and Nathan confronts David. Then Nathan tells David of God’s long graciousness to him. Notice the change in verbs in contrast to those used about David and kings and Goliaths. Nathan speaks of how God “gives.” God says, “I anointed you. I rescued you. I gave you. I gave you. I would have given you more. But you broke the covenant. You broke our relationship; you abused my trust and my gracious gifts.” David thought this story was about autonomy, and power, and becoming a giant. God says this story is about covenant. This is about trust.

Even at this late hour, David still has the capacity to confess his sin, admit his fault, and ask for forgiveness. He repents. Read Psalm 51.

God forgives him. But Nathan reminds David there are consequences to his sin. This is important to remember. There is forgiveness and repentance, but the consequences remain. Sin is the punishment of sin, is how Augustine put it. The consequence of sin is that there will be more sin. When we break our covenant with God, when we sin, we cannot control the consequences. There are more repercussions to our actions than we realize or that we can control. So beware, beware, beware.

What follows in David's life and the lives of his descendants is one tragedy after another. The baby dies, then David and Bathsheba have Solomon. The rest of David's reign is filled with rebellion, assassination, war, and tragedy. David's much beloved son, Absalom, the one whom David loved and trusted the most to follow him, instead, betrays that trust, tries to overthrow David, seize the throne for himself, and tries to kill David, in turn Absalom is killed by no other than Joab. Eventually, Solomon becomes king, but his reign is filled with tragedy, and even the enslavement of some of God's own people by God's own people! At Solomon's death, the kingdom splits into warring factions and the downward spiral continues over the next couple of hundred years until Assyria and eventually Babylon destroy the kingdoms and the cities, including Jerusalem, and carries everyone into exile.

David is forgiven by God but from this point on, things were different between God and David. The trust that was broken was never fully restored. Israel never got over David. They always loved him, always yearned over "what could have been." In fact, they were always looking for another, a "son of David."

Wow! What a story. ...

The curtain comes down. But wait. Don't hurry out the door. Wait roughly 500 years and discover that this is only the intermission, not "the end." The story continues with a "son of David," indeed, "*the* Son of David."

Jesus of Nazareth, born in Bethlehem, is the son of David come to set things right. Of course, how he sets things right is not anticipated by anyone. Everyone is looking for another successful David and Jesus comes along, "emptying himself, taking the form of a slave, being born human ... he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:6-8).

Matthew tells us that one time a bunch of grown-ups were arguing about who is going to be the biggest, baddest giant in God's new empire? Someone says, "I mean, King David was Rambo, and we need a new Rambo." Someone else responds, "Everything feels like chaos, we're threatened, and feeling like we need to bunker up, so who will come and go MAGA – 'Make America Goliath Again'?"

Hear me, as I make a quick aside. As you already know, White Christian Nationalism is on the rise, and White Christian Nationalism is nothing less than turning Jesus into Goliath. It's a tragedy, it is heresy, and it is dangerous. Jesus is not a spiritual or political or cultural bully. Jesus is not Goliath. Jesus is the Good Shepherd.

So, all these grown-ups are talking about a Goliath-like son of David coming back and kicking some butt, and they're hoping Jesus will be the new Goliath to do just that, and furthermore, they're hoping that some of them might become the new Joab. Meanwhile, Jesus walks in holding a child.

Jesus says, “If you want to become part of God’s new reign, you’re going to have to become like this child.” In other words, those of us who are grown-ups are going to have to learn from the children and youth and become more like them. And Jesus is not telling them or us, that we need to be cute. Cuteness is not what we need to learn in the world in which we find ourselves.

In the day and time of Jesus, in an agrarian economy, children were not first considered cute and precious. They were considered as uncertain investments in the future and whether there would be anyone to carry on the work of the farm, provide food for everyone, and take care of aging parents. They were loved but it was touch and go whether they would survive. Child mortality rates were grievously high. It’s why bar mitzvahs for boys and bat mitzvahs for girls, are such a big deal. “Coming of age” was never taken for granted. Their lives were unsure. They were vulnerable.

Now, some 2,000 years later we need to listen. In this world of uncertain futures, Jesus’s call to care for children and young people, put them in the center, and pay attention to them is as urgent as it was then (see Talitha Amadea Aho, *In Deep Waters: Spiritual Care for Young People in a Climate Crisis*, pp. 4-8).

Our job is to listen to their concerns and questions and learn from them. They know about uncertainty. They know about pandemics that cancelled graduations and forced isolation and they know there are more pandemics to come. They know about a burning up world and rising waters and more and more rapidly forming storms of great intensity, and they’re tired of our grown-up BS.

Jesus goes on to confront us so-called grown-ups, warning us about putting stumbling blocks before these children. “Take care that you do not despise one of

these little ones. For, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven” (Matt. 18:6-7, 10).

Then, according to Matthew, this is where Jesus tells the parable of the good shepherd having 100 sheep and one goes missing. The shepherd searches for that one lost sheep until he finds it. Jesus summarizes, “So, it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost” (vv.12-14).

So, as good shepherd people, we listen and learn and realize we are called to help these little ones, these young ones build the capacity to face hard things. When they go up before city councils and state legislatures pleading for help and good sense in making our cities more livable and walkable and less reliant on fossil fuels, and the Powers dismiss them and ignore them and knock the wind out of them. They need to know how to get up and keep going. When they reach out to help immigrant families and the Powers deport the families, we teach them to not give up. When they try five or six or seven things that fail, we train them to get up and try eight times. Stumbling blocks of grief, anger, and despair will be there every day and they need to know how to keep going. Indeed, we all need to know.

Our job is not to turn them into Goliaths. We do not need to tell them to “armor up” like Saul told shepherd boy David. Instead, we develop a resilience deep enough to risk failure and keep going. Be willing to try something hard, heavy, and emotionally taxing with no guarantee of success at all. Instead of toughening up and getting mean, we teach our children to enter the hard, heavy tasks. We must train shepherds not Goliaths (see Aho, *In Deep Waters*, p. 44).

So, let me ask you this question: What’s the hardest thing you’ve ever done? What’s the hardest thing you have ever done – and you had no control over it?

One of the first for me that I can talk about is I remember being in the ICU of Hendricks Medical Center in Abilene, TX holding my mother's hand as she was dying, and I could not fix it. I was totally helpless. I had no control. I was the first-born son who tried to hold my parents together and fix them, fix their anger, fix their grief, fix their failures by being a success, and here in ICU, I could not do a thing to make it right. I remember holding her hand and reading the Psalms and whispering to her good things as the monitors showed her declining numbers. I could hear her labored breathing slowing down. Then it stopped.

That was one of the hardest things in my life up to that time and it was completely out of my control.

But here's the thing. I wasn't alone. You were there. Austin Heights was there in the person of Jim Garrett, and Bob and Ruth Carroll. You see we can do very hard things if we do not do them alone. Living in an uncertain world, with many hard things in front of us, we can't toughen up with more armor and build more walls. Our calling is to enter uncertainty and become vulnerable.

I was visiting someone who was recovering from surgery, and I remember her telling me how easy it was to order soup online and have it delivered, because she didn't want to burden her friends by asking for soup from them. We talked for a while, then she said she was changing her mind, "I need to go ahead and ask my friends for soup. Ordering online is just another way to put up walls."

I remember thinking, another wall has come tumbling down. Someone else decided to become vulnerable and trust her friends.

That's called church. It's what we do. It's how we train our children. It's what's people do who carry shepherd's staffs around instead of Goliath armor.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,
Mother of us all. Amen.