

Sermon, St. David's Episcopal Church, 1 Samuel 17: 1a, 4-11, 19-23, 32-49, 6/20/2021
(*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

When the bishop came two weeks ago, I underwent something that has become a tradition for me every two to three years when a bishop visits: the Purging of the Rector's Office. I cannot believe how much junk accumulates on my desk, and how many books get stacked on shelves so that they buckle and stacked on the floor and under the chair and all over. Sheri Blume helped me get rid enough books to fill a car trunk and backseat, and Connie, who loves order, helped me rearrange John the Baptist and Noah's ark and the remaining books. Then Connie said that she next wanted to tackle the two big drawers in my desk, as well as the items piled under it. I laughed. As long as the bishop couldn't see it, I didn't care.

But Connie got her chance to purge one of those drawers on Thursday when I was frantically seeking my David figurine to put in the box for the children's sermon today. I found Goliath easily, probably because he's so much bigger; but David was missing underneath bunny ears and ornaments and balloons. So Connie grabbed a garbage bag and gleefully helped me toss out notes from the 2009 annual meeting, catalogues from 2001, and dried-out glue sticks, playdough, toothpaste and feathers. She didn't let me stop when we finally unearthed David: we cleaned that drawer out. She let me keep my snakes and golden calf and the three kings, but bits of cardboard and damaged party favors and many, many feathers now languish in the dumpster.

Before we found the David I was looking for, we found a set of 36 flashcards called "Bible Heroes" which had one card with David on it. He is shirtless, revealing bulging pecs and big biceps, with a perfectly clean sword in one hand and a slingshot in the other. This David has blond hair and the sun shines behind him. He stands atop Goliath, a bearded giant with gray skin and "x"s in place of eyes.

My last year in seminary, a big biblical scholars' conference happened in DC, and we seminarians were encouraged to take advantage of the proximity and attend as many sessions as we could. The one that still sticks with me fifteen years later had to do with illustrations in children's Bible stories over the years, focusing on David and Goliath. The oldest illustrations, the young scholar pointed out, were extremely gory, with David holding Goliath's head in one hand with bloody tendons hanging from the neck. Several decades later, the head was much less graphic; and by the 1950s or so, David was generally depicted alone, just holding a slingshot.

Her thesis was that as executions stopped being public, children weren't exposed to as much violence. I wonder if that flashcard with Goliath's eyes x'd out in my office drawer means that the routine violence in cartoons or other media is taking us back in the other direction.

I hope not. I wonder sometimes about the stories we share with our kids, including Bible stories like Noah's ark, which has all the cute fluffy animals but is a disturbing tale. The crucifixion, of course: the greatest story ever told, yet full of violence and darkness. And today, David and

Goliath. David and Goliath is familiar even to the nonreligious, having become a trope for any situation where an underdog is pitted against a powerful opponent.

I love preaching on the stories of the kings of Israel and Judah every three years, but we leave out a lot. We leave out a lot but we highlight this story, presumably because it makes David look good. The deck is stacked against him, but David the simple shepherd triumphs. He had actually been anointed king before this story, remember—just last Sunday here in church, we read about David and his seven brothers being paraded beauty-pageant style in front of the prophet Samuel to find out which one God had picked to replace Saul; but that was done secretly, because King Saul was still alive. David impressed Saul in today's story by defeating Goliath, and then next week, we will move on David lamenting over the death of Saul and his son Jonathan.

That means we'll skip 23 chapters: the whole rest of the first book of Samuel. This week we end with David's triumph. After that he briefly basks in Saul's approval, becomes close to Jonathan, and marries Saul's daughter Michal. But then things go south pretty fast. David is no longer the little guy who defeats the giant. In today's reading, Saul's armor may not have fit David, but soon David dons his own armor and becomes a respected warrior. Men want to follow him into battle: they are much more impressed with David, in fact, than they are with King Saul. This creates problems. The rest of the first book of Samuel has a lot about Saul being jealous of David and wanting to kill David and killing people who help David.

So today, instead of thinking about how we, who might think of ourselves as the Davids of the world: instead of thinking how we Davids can crush the Goliaths, I invite you to ponder with me what happens after we get what we want. After we crush Goliath.

What happens after the pandemic is defeated by vaccines?

What happens after we marry our dream spouse, like David and Michal got each other?

What happens after we get our dream job, like David becoming king?

What happens after we achieve "big hairy audacious goals"?

What happens after we win—after we move from the margins to a place of power?

What happens after we crush Goliath?

The text today makes clear that David won because God was on his side. David was faithful, and prayed, and in the parts we won't read from here until the end of the first book of Samuel, David tried again and again to follow God's will: in chapter 23, he asks God, "should I fight these Philistines?" In chapter 30, David asks God, "Should I go after this raiding party?" If we stopped reading before second Samuel, we might think that as long as we pray and seek God's direction, everything will always work out for us, because that's what it seems like for David.

But stories later in the summer show us that even faithful heroes like David can lose their way. Even after they achieve their dream job and marry their dream girl. Even after slaying the giant.

Society teaches us to set goals and work to achieve them. This is good practice as individual Christians as well as a church. But today, don't stop at the end of this David and Goliath story. Don't be satisfied with "and they lived happily ever after." Because what real story do you know that ends that way? Even our story of Jesus. He died horribly, and then, praise God, he was resurrected. Jesus defeated death.

But after he ascended into heaven his disciples mostly died horrible deaths after lives spent impoverished wandering around trying to preach an impossible story. Then the church was built and the church did beautiful and terrible things. Our story has not ended with happily ever after.

So what comes next?

This summer we will study stories of kings and heroes, and we can learn from those stories, but we will learn the most if we don't stop with Goliath on the ground and David smiling before he bloodies his sword by cutting off the monster's head. This summer, keep asking yourself, and then what?

If you get everything you've dreamed about: then what? What's next? Because God will never be done with you.