

## **“Taking Off the Armor”**

### **1 Samuel 17: 1-11, 32-49**

June 24, 2012

Carbondale Community United Methodist Church

Melanie Dobson Hughes

#### **Introduction**

David and Goliath represents the classic epic story. More than any other story in the Old Testament, this story possesses rich detail and strong characterization. David emerges as the central hero, bold in action, unwavering in faith, and profound of speech.<sup>1</sup> By contrast in last week’s lection, David remained completely passive as he was anointed. Between last week’s text and this one, David plays for Saul and becomes his armor-bearer, but again stays silent. Now, this week, David emerges courageously emerges with a slingshot in hand as one worthy to lead Israel.

Notice that we are reading verses 1-11, then skipping over an entire portion to verses 32-49. The verses we are skipping tell of David bringing food to his brothers on the battlefield. Verses 12-31 are widely considered by Old Testament scholars to be added later; they are not present in the oldest manuscripts of the David and Goliath story. Saul doesn’t seem to know who David is in this portion of text, even though David become found favor in his sight in chapter sixteen. Due to the textual critical problems, I’ve omitted these later-redacted verses so that we hear the original story.

#### **Reading of 1 Samuel 17: 1-11, 32-49**

##### **I. Desire to be the underdog**

When we did the children’s time together, for this half of the congregation who played Goliath, what was it like for you to play the giant, the bully, the top dog? (allow for commentary) For some of us, playing the big, beefy, belligerent Goliath feels discomfoting.

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce Birch, “1 Samuel” in *New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary* vol. II (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998).

It feels much more virtuous to play the little guy, David. David's the underdog, the young shepherd boy. Probably ninety percent of people who read the story of David and Goliath identify more with David than with the six foot nine giant wearing helmet, coat of mail, and bronze on his legs. Young, defenseless David with only a few stones in hand wins our hearts. After all, we want to be with the one who comes out of obscurity, faces and incredible challenge. . . and comes out a winner. (I preached about that last week, and put us in the place of the underdog). We want our inspiring movies and sports teams to be like David

After all, listen to the courage in his speech to the giant. "You come to me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts." Wow! Weak little shepherd boy utters words with such power and confidence, such faith and hope. David trusts that God will deliver him against the odds. This story isn't so much about an underdog named David, but about a God who makes a way where there is no way. Young David points to a God who can deliver people facing evil and oppression. David points to an alternative to violence and insurrection—to trusting in a delivering God who led slaves out of Egypt across a sea, to a God who overcomes not with the power of sword but with the power of hope.<sup>2</sup> We want to root for this David who points us to this saving God.

## **II. Yet we are the giant!**

And yet, as much as we want to identify with David, as much as we admire his daring courage in forswearing Saul's armor and gadgetry, we spend our lives trying to be Goliath.<sup>3</sup> We may not accumulate a coat of mail that weighs 126 pounds, but look at all the rest of our stuff. (now here, I'm meddling, because this week we're not the underdog—

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Samuel Wells, "Five Smooth Stones," sermon. May 14, 2010 Duke Chapel, Duke University. Published online by Faith and Leadership June 8, 2010.

we're the giant). Our house, our car, our retirement accounts, our investments---all to protect us from possible slingshots of poverty. We've beefed ourselves up in homes and in our lives with every sort of safety and security feature. Just try to walk through an airport, and we see that our nation has done the same thing---outfitting with every possible security device in the hope of ducking any rocks so-called terrorists might fling our way. Friends, in our lives as white Americans living in the Roaring Fork Valley, we are much more like Goliath than we are David.

The ultimate irony is that David becomes Goliath. David becomes king, and then becomes a bully. In our coming weeks of texts we'll see him become a merciless military powerbroker and a ruthless acquirer of pleasure and advantage (keep coming to church in July to hear these). David becomes the belligerence he once defeated.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps that is our story, too. As very young people, we came at the world with courage and spoke truth. . . and then we gradually accommodated—becoming less courageous as we had children and accumulated the accouterments of life in America.

### **III. How Do We Drop the Armor?**

So the question then becomes to us---how do we drop some of the armor we've spent so long in bedecking ourselves? How do we become a people who forswear the swords and spears and javelins of affluence that we use to protect ourselves from the need all around us—especially in an economy still stumbling? What we don't do is go at the little guy, shepherd boy Davids of our community with massive numbers, or money, or hierarchical structures of authority, or a desire to fix things under the name of “service to others.”

John Wesley, the Oxford-educated founder of the people called Methodists, offers us lots of resources of how we can let go of our helmet, or coat of mail. . . and engage with

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

the little guy Davids who live around us. Wesley immersed himself in the lives of those struggling and suffering around him in the name of Christ. He went out into the sooty street corners where the rising populations of the industrial poor of the 1700s lived, and offered them the good news of Jesus Christ. He started the first free apothecary in London, so that people had access to medicines without having to pay the going exorbitant rates. He helped to found a school for poor children so they could learn not only to read and write but to “know God and Jesus Christ whom he hath sent.”<sup>5</sup> Wesley exemplifies one who took off the armor of his education and socio-economic class, and offered a ministry that spoke to the little Davids of his culture.

Even more, Wesley, in the early days of the Methodist movement, founded small groups—which he called class meetings. These classes met in neighborhoods with about twelve members each, one of those being the leader. This group of a dozen included the poorest of the neighborhood with the most prosperous. Different ages and walks of life met regularly together to share their lives’ stories with one another. They held each other accountable to living a faithful life. The Goliaths learned from the Davids. Everyone put down their swords or their slingshots, and they heard each other tell of domestic violence, or addiction, or of the inability to truly experience God. John Wesley wrote that at class meetings “a more full inquiry was made into the behavior of every person. . . advice or reproof was given as need required, quarrels made up, misunderstandings removed, and after an hour or two spent in this labour of love, they concluded with prayer and thanksgiving.”<sup>6</sup> The giants and the underdogs became deep soul friends through the power of a God who offers hope.

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<sup>5</sup> as quoted in Richard Heizenrater, *The People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 106.

<sup>6</sup> John Wesley (*Societies*, 262) as quoted in Heizenrater, *The People Called Methodists*, 119.

Throughout the centuries of Wesleyan spirituality since those first class meetings in London and Bristol, Methodists have created various iterations of class meetings, calling them small groups, covenant discipleship, Companions in Christ, Disciple bible studies, and on and on. A new version of class meetings has sprung up in the land of Texas near SMU and Perkins seminary called “New Day.” In these small micro-communities, as Dr. Elaine Heath described them at last week’s annual conference, the Goliath and Davids of Dallas’ culture meet once a week for a simple meal, fellowship, worship, and deep sharing of their stories. Refugees from Somalia sit beside university professors and sing forth their faith. People embody church together in a way that is incarnational and holistic. People become deep soul friends in relationships that sustain and nurture them. The armor comes clattering to the ground in a heap, and upon it the New Day communities celebrate the Lord’s Supper—together.

Now here I am meddling again. I’m suggesting that we here at CCUMC be open, just open our hearts, to the thought of taking off some of our armor—some of the things that keep us from knowing the little shepherd boys, the underdogs in our own community. I’m not suggesting that we attempt to imitate John Wesley’s class meetings or New Day, but rather that we seek to embody our God who trades in hope rather than violent power. I am committed this fall, for example, to offer a book study called *A Mile in My Shoes: Cultivating Compassion* by Trevor Hudson. My hope is that after six weeks of earnest preparation and study, we might sit together with some of the Davids in our community. . . and just listen. Perhaps we might dare to venture hearing the stories of others, Perhaps we might have to hear some things that sound like stones from a slingshot. Perhaps we might even pray and over thanksgiving together—we have to leave all of that to the working of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps we might be willing to take off our helmet to really learn another’s way of life.

Instead of us bearing Christ, we might just be able to hear them say to us, even if they don't use these words, "I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts." These Davids might just be the presence of Christ to us. May we have the courage to take off all that protects us, and be open to the Spirit of Christ in our neighborhood's shepherd boy. Amen