

Five Smooth Stones

Text: 1 Samuel 17:20-23; 33-37; 48-51

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Some stories in the Bible are larger than life. They convey something of a moment or an event that speaks in volumes far beyond the instance. And quite often they cascade as telling turns its way through time.

Sometimes such stories take on a literary form we call mythology, which paradoxically, does not diminish the truth of which they speak at all but merely lifts it to a larger setting. And though not all myths are true, there is truth in every myth.

And so it is for us this morning with an old tale about five smooth stones harvested from a streambed. One of those stones found its way into the sling of a young shepherd and brought down a giant warrior, who was the nemesis of his time.

I want us to turn our minds around that story together. I'm sure we all know at least parts of the legend and the lore. The giant was a not-so-nice Philistine warrior by the name of: (Goliath). And the shepherd's name was: (David).

Did it happen the way that cinema and storybooks have portrayed? Certainly not. Has it been over-told to the point of being interesting perhaps but not very useful in the 21st century? Surely in some ways. But can we say that this story is true? Yes we can.

So let's turn it in the light and see what comes home. Let's hold it closely enough so we ponder the salient points and yet loosely enough so that new ways of perceiving its truth might be found.

A first pause is with the proportion of challenges that come to us in life. Large and small, seen and unseen, known and unknown – we've all tasted them. Let's not simplify as these are not often linear or met with easy metrics. The story presents us with a vast differential in magnitude and proportion.

I did some research with my friend Google. "Goliath's stature as described in various ancient manuscripts varies: the oldest manuscripts, the Dead Sea Scroll text of Samuel, 1st-century historian Josephus, and 4th-century Septuagint manuscripts, all give his height as "four cubits and a span" (6 feet 9 inches). But the Masoretic text says he was "six cubits and a span" (9 feet 9 inches)."ⁱ O my goodness!

The truth of Goliath's stature is an archetypal portrayal that takes us to the rich pools of the collective unconscious. It taps into our awareness that some things in life, some dilemmas that we face, some circumstances that test us, do so to the marrow because they are so large and almost crushing.

And so I pause to wonder. Are there any large and overwhelming challenges in the real-time of today that you know of? Personal mountains? Collective valleys? Secret wounds? Political quagmires? Broken systems that paralyze? Circumstances that challenge with both consequence and opportunity?

Remember: back in the day of our story even the boy who one day would be the greatest king was told, "You are not able to go against this Philistine; for you are just a boy and he has been a warrior from his youth." *O my goodness, again!*

Then a second pause. Consider the resources at hand. Even if they are small or unknown. Enter from stage left an unlikely figure, the someday monarch, whose name is attributed as the author of almost all of our Psalms. Not much experience on his resume at the time. Certainly no match for a giant.

But David knew enough to scoop up five smooth stones from the stream. And he knew it would only take one of those stones to stun the giant to fall; one stone delivered squarely to the forehead with stunning velocity and precision. It was not by random measure. It was not by happenstance. It was by focused intent. David had spent lots of time honing that skill as he protected his sheep from the predators of the fields.

Last weekend we had an awesome experience with an author and teacher by the name of Debby Irving.ⁱⁱ We invited her to be our guide in opening up a deeper understanding of race. Her book "Waking Up White" has placed her at the intersection of a national conversation. The effectiveness of Debby's message went right to our hearts because she started with her own lived-experience. She blended her own autobiography with social analysis that was spot-on: economics, politics, history, sociology, religion. She took the best resource she had – the one smooth stone of her own story – and then followed with the courage to dare and tell and challenge.

Feminist theologian and Episcopal priest Carter Heyward said: "You and I are called to participate in taming giants; in healing and liberating the world around us and with us."ⁱⁱⁱ

And then one last pause. It lands us right here, precisely here, especially here, exactly here. Because the epic tale of David and Goliath plants an urgent seed of wondering in the laps of our lives. And we are presented, each and all, with the real-time of our own era – ginormous or not.

Nelson Mandela has been a hero in our own time. Marianne Williamson is a beloved writer. And, wouldn't you know it, by some continued confusion of attribution it is not clear which of these souls first spoke these words. So I credit them both.

*Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.
Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.
It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us.*

*We ask ourselves who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?
Actually, who are you not to be?
You are a child of God.
Your playing small does not serve the world.
There's nothing enlightened about shrinking.
We are all meant to shine.
We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us.
And as we let our own light shine,
we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.*

Good thing that David didn't shrink those many years ago! Good thing he didn't hide behind his youthfulness! Good thing that he took what small measure was waiting nearby in the streambed! Good thing he knew how to make the shot of his life with his sling! And good thing he had the courage and the faith to act when the moment called!

Now, I have no idea how any of this intersects with your life today. David and Goliath. Proportion and magnitude. Giants and shepherds. Challenges and power. Our own thoughts, initiatives and actions in the face of the enormity of now.

But I hope that they stir something of faithful resolve and substance within for each of us. Because though we might think we are small in the face of so much, we are not. And though we may not know how to get to the better future that God has in mind, I do happen to know where we can find five smooth stones. And all it takes is one.

May it be according to God's word. Amen.

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ⁱ Google search for "Goliath."

ⁱⁱ Debby Irving. Waking Up White: Finding Myself in the Story of Race. Elephant Room Press, 2014.

ⁱⁱⁱ Susan A. Blain, ed. Imaging the Word. United Church Press, 1996, p. 244.