

David and Goliath – Ben Wayman

I Samuel 17:1a, 4-11, 19-23, 32-49

I'd like today to talk about David and Goliath. What a great story. Here we have kings and giants and conflict and combat. It's like watching an ancient NBA Finals game, but with all the perks – private locker room access, players wearing microphones, and even a camera attached to Goliath's helmet for on-the-battlefield action. The difference between modern Finals and ancient Finals, though, is that the winners of the ancient Finals got to live another day. The ancients had a bit more on the line than a gaudy ring and bragging rights.

But what particularly interests me today is what type of story David and Goliath is – because when we can figure out a story's type, we can better understand what a story's all about. What's especially tricky about David and Goliath, though, is that most of us assume right from the beginning that this story is an Underdog Story. Well okay, maybe a religious Underdog Story.

So, we assume it's an Underdog Story and we conclude that its point is that we need to call on God in those moments in life when we need a boost to get us through a difficult time. With God's help, we can knock down our giants.

Today I'd like to suggest that we've been wrong about David and Goliath. This story is many things, but it's not an Underdog story. This may come as a surprise to many of you as it did to me. From an early age this story is stamped in our minds as the day when against all odds, the little guy won. And not only did the little guy win, he whooped a GIANT. A ten-foot tall giant, if you follow the texts that read "six cubits and a span." I'm not surprised this is Caden's favorite Bible Story.

And it's been one of my favorite stories in Scripture since I was a child. But it was not until recently that I realized that I was missing the point. I was missing what the story was all about because I was confused about its type.

David and Goliath is not a story about a heroic stone-slinging shepherd. And it's certainly not a story about a giant who underestimated the skill of a young boy. The story of David and Goliath is fundamentally about GOD.

So today I'd like to suggest that the story of David and Goliath is not an Underdog story, but an Ordinary Story about God. I realize I need to make a case first, in why it's not an Underdog Story. After I do that, I'd like to explore what's at stake, why it matters, that we see David and

Goliath as a story about God. Finally, I'd like to consider how we might learn to see the world as David did.

I think we should admit upfront that we all love a good Underdog story. I think this is because a lot of the time, we see ourselves as the Underdog. There's always someone who's stronger, or smarter, or funnier, or more generous, or more creative, or more pulled together than us. For many of us, that someone represents a threat to the things we celebrate most about ourselves. So what's great about an Underdog story is that the Threat is utterly defeated.

It's hard for me to remember a Christmas when I haven't watched the beloved TV movie, *A Christmas Story*. I can't tell you if this is because I like the movie, or because I've had little choice – 24-hour movie marathons of one movie have a way of grabbing my attention. One of the most memorable scenes of *A Christmas Story* was the last day when the neighborhood bully, Scut Farkus, ever again bullied Ralphie Parker. Scut Farkus, What a rotten name.

You might remember that Scut Farkus had yellow eyes. So help me, God! Yellow eyes! On one fateful day, though, Ralphie puts an end to Scut Farkus's bullying when, triumphantly, in an Underdog kind of way, Ralphie finally stands up for himself, channels an incredible amount of anger, and pounds Scut Farkus into submission. Yes! Never again would Scut Farkus appear in the back alley and cause problems for Ralphie and his friends. The Threat is utterly defeated.

The thing about Underdog stories, though, is that they happen when God doesn't figure into the picture. Underdog victories are the result of some skill or tactic or weapon the Big Dog hadn't considered. In the Trojan War, it was the Trojan Horse; In the *Karate Kid*, it was the praying mantis; In the *Mighty Ducks*, it was the Flying V. We know and love these Underdog stories because they're stories of how the Big Dogs were bested because the Underdogs discovered a chink in their opponents' armor.

A "Christian" Underdog story, then, is wrongly named. It's wrongly named because first of all, it assumes that God is not the main character; at best, God is a secret weapon. It's wrongly named in the second place because it implies that the guy who won shouldn't have won. Remember, the guy who wins in so-called "Christian" Underdog stories is the guy who gets by with a little help from his God.

This is precisely why *David and Goliath* is not an Underdog story. David should have won. In fact, we should be surprised if David didn't win. Can you imagine? David misses with stone #1, stone #2 ... and stone #5. Meanwhile, Goliath steadily advances and fillets David's head with one breathtaking swing of the sword; now that's an Underdog story. The reason why David is not the "patron saint of Underdogs" (Frank Spina) is because God won; not David. And David himself was never confused about this.

We know that David recognizes that this is God's battle because throughout this story he insists that Goliath's challenge to fight is all about God. God is the main character; not David or

anyone else. David clearly sees that when Goliath “[defies] the ranks of Israel” (17:10), Goliath has called out God. For David, the situation is crystal clear: Goliath’s bullying of the armies of the living God is exactly the same thing as defying God himself. In his bullying, Goliath barks for a man from Israel with whom to fight without realizing that he has demanded a showdown with God.

This story is full of irony. This irony of calling for a man, but getting God is artistically played out in the story when Goliath ridicules David and all of Israel for sending out a mere boy. Goliath calls for a man, he thinks he gets a boy, but he really gets God. Now that’s ironic.

What’s really troubling, though, is that King Saul also thinks he has sent out a boy to fight Goliath. In verse 33 Saul says to David, “You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him; for you are just a boy, and he has been a warrior from his youth.” A wrong reading, I’m suggesting, is to interpret Saul’s pessimism as setting the stage for an Underdog story. But this is not a Coming of Age story when little David the shepherd boy grows up and gets hair on his chest. Rather, we should hear in Saul’s despair a clear message that Saul is no different than Goliath. Despite his kingship over God’s people, Saul does not see the world any differently than the people of Philistia.

In this story, the boy David stands alone as the one who sees the world rightly. To help us understand how David sees the world, it’s helpful to be aware that there’s a good deal of tension surrounding the beginnings of kingship in Israel.

You might remember that Saul was Israel’s first king. He is anointed by Samuel, with God’s authorization; but there is never a sense that God fully approves of this new season in Israel’s life. Instead, God mourns Israel’s request to be “like other nations” (8:5,20). In fact, God understands this impulse for a human king as a rejection of His Divine Kingship. In I Samuel 8:7 the Lord says to Samuel, “Listen to the voice of the people in all they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them.” And so this wild enterprise of kings and battles fought on behalf of men enters into the life of Israel.

The tensions surrounding the two views of kingship in Israel might be described in terms of the Old and New School.

For those in the Old School, Israel was God’s covenant community. Their understanding of this community was that God was sovereign. Israel had a king, and their King was divine. This all stemmed from Israel’s special relationship with God; the same God who had delivered Israel from Pharaoh and covenanted with them at Sinai.

For those in the New School, the Old School way of living and thinking was outdated. Israel was getting bigger, they had more people and land and stuff than ever before and they needed to protect it. In this New School thinking, a divine King was a bit too unpredictable and difficult to control. How do we know if God will fight for us when we ask? What if God doesn’t agree

with us about when to go to war? It's time we become respectable like all the other nations who have kings that fight their battles for them. After all, this divine kingship deal just isn't realistic in this day and age. And Saul appeared to be the perfect man for the job. You might remember that he was described as being "taller than any of the people from his shoulders upward" (10:23). Saul, you see, was "Goliath's Israelite counterpart" (Frank Spina).

Which is another way of saying, "Saul is New School." Saul bought into this view of the world – a world where conflicts are settled and victories are won with sword and spear. Up to the last minute, Saul was trying to convince David of this perspective – that if he wanted a fighting chance, David should at least put on a little armor. So to recap, the world that Saul sees is no different than the world seen by Goliath.

David, on the other hand, is Old School. He sees a world before men ruled Israel and Yahweh was the Divine King. I used to think that while his brothers were at war David was back home, moping around the valleys of Bethlehem, pining for a piece of the action. But actually, I think David was a bit disinterested in what Saul and his soldiers were up to. Despite the fact that Saul makes David his armor-bearer in chapter 16, here we find David still tending his father's sheep back at Bethlehem.

Now this is the 40th day of the stand-off between the Israelites and Philistines. One would think that Saul's armor bearer would be within earshot at all times. But the only reason we are given for David's arrival at the encampment was because his father Jesse commanded him to go visit his brothers, bring them provisions, and return home. There is nothing in the text that suggests that David was eager to join his brothers at the battle line or to get involved in the conflict. Until David heard Goliath.

What roused David to action, I am suggesting today, was not his Underdog instinct. Rather, what roused David to action was that the vision of reality espoused not only by Goliath, but by Saul, his brothers and the whole Israelite army, was deeply out of focus with how David himself saw the world. How could a man challenge God? And why would Israel, God's covenant people, be afraid of a Philistine? For David, it was as simple as this. His vision of reality was so different from that of both armies, that he could not understand their responses. Similarly, because those armies saw the world so differently from David, David's actions surely appeared to them stupid; and only in hindsight, heroic.

But for David, he was just doing what made sense given the fact that the Lord was the Divine King. It would have never occurred to David to consider himself an Underdog, simply because he never considered himself. Goliath's challenge was not about David; it was about God, and David knew the kind of thing that God does: He delivers his people. Not only had God delivered Israel from the hands of Pharaoh, but in David's own life, God had delivered him from the paws of lions and bears.

One of my favorite theologians likes to say, “You can only act in a world you can see” (Stanley Hauerwas). The world David saw was one in which God was active and present and faithful to deliver. It was in this world, that David saw so clearly, that David “took out a stone, slung it, and struck the Philistine on his forehead and he fell face down on the ground.” Business as usual. I don’t think that David was surprised by what happened. It was simply a matter of God being God.

It’s interesting to note that in this epic story it takes forty-seven verses to build to the climax of the actual encounter between David and Goliath. And then, in two verses, the battle is over. Our tendency is to hit slow motion on the remote control once we get to the battle – to see how it was that this little boy took down a Giant. But that would be the wrong place to look. The how to the story comes in the preceding verses. It was not David’s skill, but David’s God, doing an ordinary thing, that leveled the Giant. After all, this is the kind of thing God does – he topples Giants.

I think this is why I don’t care much for the term “supernatural.” Just like the term “Underdog,” it assumes that God does not figure into life’s picture; or at least not much. Just as “Underdog” implies that Goliath should have won, “supernatural” implies that God normally doesn’t act because it’s not natural for God to act. But this is not how David saw the world. And it is my suggestion today that it’s not how we are to see the world.

Perhaps the greatest irony of all related to this story of David and Goliath is that our own failure to see this story as a story about God is actually what the story is all about. When we read this as an Underdog story, we become Goliath and Saul and all of the people who don’t believe that God figures much into human history. When we see the world in this deistic kind of way, we are surprised when God does act, and we call people like David a hero.

But David is not a hero. He was merely acting in the world he could see. His confrontation with Goliath was not stupid or heroic. David was doing what was practical given what he knew to be real. God.

The challenge for us today is to see the world as David does. Not because it’s the heroic thing to do, but because it is the clearest and truest picture of the world. Even better than HD or Blue Ray.

We’d like to think that there are no consequences for reading the story of David and Goliath as an Underdog Story. The problem is, when we see this story as an Underdog Story we leave more than our forehead exposed. What is at stake is a vision of reality. God is not the Underdog – just ask Goliath.

Which leaves me with one question: What kind of community would we have to be to both be and raise Davids? Not Underdogs, but people who see the world clearly and live accordingly. To be a people who live, every day, in a world where in Christ, God has changed everything ...

I think it's easy for Christians to forget how decisive and definitive the event of Christ is (Hauerwas). I think this is due, in large part, because we live most of our lives through the lenses of Saul and Goliath. Whether at work or school or leisure, there is little that helps us see the world as a playground for friendship with God, where God comes to play, every day.

One reason why I think it's so hard to see this world is because Sunday morning is for many Christians the only block of time we set aside to learn how to see the world in this way. In my own life, I've found that Sunday morning is not enough to fuel my memory for 7 more days. This one-hour-block does not have enough staying power in my mind to help me remember the kind of God we serve and work and play with.

One corrective to the blurry vision of Saul and Goliath is Morning Prayer. Daily, through the stories of Scripture, we are reminded of the ways in which God is actively involved in the world. And Daily we meet and worship with other people who see the world like David – or are at least trying to. To be sure – It's hard to see this world all of the time. There are too many threats and challenges in life that suggest that Giants, not God rule the world. But prayerful friends help us see the world as it really is.

I like to think of Morning Prayer as Christian boot camp. It trains and forms us as Christians. First, it helps us see the world rightly and then we practice living in that world by extending peace to one another other and eating with each other and God. Morning Prayer helps us become the kind of community that sees the world as David did.

But again, this way of seeing the world is not heroic. What makes the Christian life extraordinary is not the people or our ability to see the world clearly. We are just ordinary people living the Christian life before other ordinary people (Hauerwas). What makes the Christian life extraordinary is God. And God being Ordinary in this Ordinary time is an extraordinary thing. Amen.