

Sermon on 1 Samuel 17
CCRC, 23 June 2024
Rev. Tom Bomhof
The Look in David's Eyes



Dear Friends of God,

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This is Gian Lorenzo Bernini's 17th Century statue of David, which Art History professor Andrea Olsen Lam says tells the story of David and Goliath in a powerful and unique way. Bernini depicts David as an ideal male athlete, with the addition of a cloth that drapes for modesty and stability for the heavy marble. Underneath him lies the rejected armor of King Saul.

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The earlier and more famous David statue by Michelangelo depicts David calmly staring down his enemy before battle, casually grabbing his sling from his shoulder.

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Even before that, Donatello's David depicts him victorious standing over Goliath's head.

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But here is David in the middle of the action, winding up like a major league pitcher, just about to unleash the smooth stone from his sling at 150 kilometres per hour. Here is David's fierce focus, his active aim on Goliath.

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What is striking is his face. The look in his eyes draws us into the story. Early commentators on the piece identified the dominant emotion in his eyes as “righteous anger” against the enemy who defied God’s armies. Other commentators have identified it as a blend of determination and faith in God.

His lips are pursed, his jaw is set, his brow is furled. But it’s his eyes that tell us that he is going to stop that uncircumcised Philistine, that defy-er of the armies of the living God. We feel the power, the righteousness, the spiritual purity. These are the eyes of the first one in this story to take up the name of God on his lips. This is what mocking Goliath saw when he came face-to-face with faith-in-action.

There is something deep in David’s eyes.

It’s more than just confidence in his own skill.

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On a long road trip we listened to the book David and Goliath by Malcolm Gladwell. It was a fascinating account of this story, told with a new angle. His argument is simple: when it comes to struggles between the powerful and underdogs, things are not always as they seem.

Research, Gladwell explains, suggests that David – the Bible’s famous giant slayer – was not just a shepherd boy, but also likely a skilled marksman, accustomed to defending his flock from bears and wolves with his sling, a common weapon at the time, capable of hurtling a rock with a force equivalent to that of a .45 automatic pistol. He was probably introduced to the sling as a toddler; his first toy. He started playing with it, then working with it, and then he was taught by the older shepherds and challenged by his peers to hone his skill with deadly accuracy. By the time he met Goliath, he would have not missed many shots. You don’t mess with shepherds from the hill country.

Research has also suggested that Goliath may have suffered from a brain tumour that caused acromegaly, a disease that manifests in gigantism and degraded eyesight. That’s why Goliath needed a servant to walk in front of him and kept getting closer to David: he couldn’t see him. He was strong as anything, but he also had serious weaknesses.

Also, Goliath was heavy infantry—he wore heavy armor, had a huge spear and a strong shield. He was trained to fight shoulder to shoulder in rigid lines of battle, not hand-to-hand open combat. He was a defensive guard, and his strength was hurtling spears like cannons at the enemy. He was fierce and effective in that role. Nobody could get past him. David was light

infantry—no armor, but was agile and could hurtle a stone at the vulnerable places. He was a skirmisher and fought in the open.

Common sense, argues Gladwell, holds that massive Goliath should have handily defeated puny David, but when we dig deeper we discover that Goliath was actually no match for the boy. David won because he broke the conventional rules of engagement: he ran at Goliath. He didn't approach slowly, warily, tentatively. Goliath lumbered along, slowly, confidently. But David ran at Goliath, unencumbered by conventional armor and weapons. David acted against expectation, against the standard rules of engagement. He used his speed and agility as a way to surprise Goliath. Gladwell says that when David does that, Goliath is easy. David was bound to win, hands down. Our common sense is flawed, and according to Gladwell there is a perfectly logical explanation here. It's all a matter of simple physics meeting up with simple physiology and poor military strategy. Goliath had set himself up for defeat by standing out in the Valley of Elah, exposing his slowness to someone who was quicker and more agile.

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That may be true, but is that the real story here? Is the real story that David was able to see disadvantage in what everyone saw as an advantage? That David could cut through the fear and trembling and identify what the military mistake standing in front of them and know how to use his skill against it? That he could think out of the box?

Perhaps that's an element in this story. This *is* the story of the rise of King David, and his ability to see things differently and strategize in counter-intuitive ways is part of the unique gifts that qualify him as the better king than pitiful, trembling Saul.

But that's not the deepest story here. Leaving it there would betray the true power of this story. In those eyes are the look of faith in God. In those eyes are the determination that comes from a close life with God:

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Your servant has killed both the lion and the bear; this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, because he has defied the armies of the living God. The Lord who rescued me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will rescue me from the hand of this Philistine.

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David knows God. David knows how God protects from even the fiercest enemy. David knows that it will be God who wins this battle, too.

Scott Hoezee comments,

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The whole arc of this narrative is precisely to say that what brought Goliath down was not David's skill with the slingshot nor the precise flight path of his smooth-stone projectile. Rather, it was all the work of the LORD God of Israel that won the day and made all the difference in the world. Scott Hoezee

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Certainly David had been trained in the deadly use of the sling since he was a child. But his confidence was not in his skill. His confidence was in the God of Israel. Truly, David saw something that those quaking Israelites with their quaking King Saul did not. God is with us and if our God is with us, nothing can stand against us. That's the deepest story.

This was on David's lips as he called out to Goliath and all the Philistines in verse 47,

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All those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the LORD saves; for the battle is the LORD's, and he will give all of you into our hands.

It was Yahweh whom Goliath had insulted. Not just King Saul, and not just the armies of Israel. He had insulted the God of Israel. David had heard that insult for what it was. This was a spiritual battle as much as it was a physical battle. It was the God of Israel against the Baals, Ashtoreths, and Dagon of the Philistines. Goliath would find out very quickly and personally how that would end.

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How is it possible that King Saul and the army of Israel didn't see this? How could they only see this as a physical battle, one of political power, of one nation trying to push another nation around? How could they not have framed this in terms of Yahweh and his power? How could everyone, from King Saul down to the lowly shield carrier not be able to see this battle in terms of God's ability to take care of his people? Why the terror? Had they not remembered Pharaoh and his army? Had they not remembered their miraculous entry into the Promised Land? Had they forgotten the fall of the walls of Jericho? Had they forgotten Gideon and his 300 men against the armies of Midian? Had they forgotten that God went before them? Where was their faith? Why was it not helping them see this battle for what it is?

David saved his people from an army that was pressing against them. Young David, pushed around by his brothers, insignificant, not trained in war, stepped up and took down the giant. He is the world's most famous giant-slayer. He is the ultimate underdog who we still refer to when we are up against power. David rose above the Israelites that day. David rose head and shoulders over King Saul that day. He had eyes to see what was truly standing out there in the Valley of Elah and he knew who would defeat it.

Yet he not only saved the people from a physical enemy. He also saved them from a spiritual enemy. One that was in their own hearts.

In his book on David, *Leap over a Wall*, Eugene Peterson thinks that the whole David saga is finally about becoming human, about awakening to the reality of a God-infused world. David is the only one who is awakened to that reality in this scene. As Peterson puts it,

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While David knelt by the brook, the world was bounded on one side by the arrogant and bullying people of Philistia and on the other side by the demoralized and anxious people of Israel. To the north of the brook the powerful but stupid giant; to the south of the brook the anointed but deeply flawed king. No one could have guessed that the young

man picking stones out of the brook was doing the most significant work of the day . . .
Only a prayer-saturated imagination accounts for what made holy history that day—the
striking immersion in God-reality, the robust exhibitionism of David-humanity.

Eugene Peterson, Leap over a Wall

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That leads us to ask, where do you find yourself in this story?

One way to find ourselves in this story is to look at those eyes again. Andrea Olsen Lam
comments about this statue:

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David's intense expression and convincing pose bring us so psychologically and
physically near the battle that we half-expect to glimpse Goliath over our shoulder.
Scholars have alternately suggested that the viewer stands between David and Goliath,
behind David, or even that the viewer is a potential target. Andrea Olsen Lam

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Is David looking at us, seeing us as the target? What would David be targeting in us? Goliath
and the Philistines could have made a different choice than to line up against the armies of
God's people. They could have accepted their role as a nation who is called to bless God's
people, not curse them. In doing so they would have found a great blessing. But in the
hardness of their hearts they fought against them, thinking that the God of Israel was just
another god of the nations who could be defeated. They got that wrong and felt the
consequences. So with David aiming his sling at us, what kind of anti-God rebellion would he
be aiming at? What kind of defiance, disobedience, selfishness or functional atheism that we
harbour in our hearts would he be targeting? When Jesus comes into our lives he puts to death
the old nature and brings to life the new nature. What parts of the old nature is he aiming at in
you?

There is another way we find ourselves in those eyes. We find our true humanity when we
awaken to the reality of a God-infused world; when we gain a prayer-saturated imagination.
How can I be enabled to see through what is right before me and to see it for what it is? How
can I see the world with God at the centre and his love surrounding me and his people? Where
can I get those eyes of faith?

David is known as the king after God's own heart. He turns out to be a flawed king, for sure.
But one early feature about him is instructive for us all. He saw the world through the eyes of
faith. He was not discouraged by what he saw, because he knew that God is in charge and God
will take care of his people.

David's greater Son, Jesus, came to this world to give us those eyes of faith, to enable the
coming to life of the new self. He was always calling us to faith, to believe, to trust in God and
trust in him. When he calmed the storm on the Sea of Galilee, amid the terror of the disciples,
he said,

Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?

Mark 4:40

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In other words, trust in me. See beyond what you see right in front of you and know who is in the boat with you. You don't have to cower when the Goliaths of this world sally back and forth with this cultural movement or that atheistic argument. You don't have to be afraid when powers that wrap themselves in religious language seem to win the day. You don't have to think that the powers that seek to enslave, impoverish, marginalize, and roll over people will always win. You can see the world as it truly is: the possession of the rightful king, whose kingdom of love, compassion, truth, and sacrificial service will win the day.

You don't have to fight on the world's terms, with the weapons of the world. You can trust the weapons of the spirit. You can trust that love, gentleness, kindness, and all the fruit the Spirit is working within us are sufficient to win the day.

In times of trouble, when things are in chaos and under threat, Jesus calls us to see with the eyes of faith to see that though the wrong is great and strong, God is the ruler yet. He gives us the eyes to see that his cross and resurrection is strong enough to protect us. His Holy Spirit can use our skill, our witness, our humility, our Christ-likeness, to accomplish great things.

May God give us all the eyes to see that.

AMEN

O God, Goliath taunted and Saul tasted fear—and all Israel with him. Yet you raised up David, who saw beyond the fear to something more powerful: your great name. He inspires us to that spiritual sight, to a holy perspective of a world where you are King who provides, blesses, and protects. In this world the and giants will taunt and fear will weaken our steps. Still David offers a different way, beckoning to the heart of the timid to find deeper courage, seeing beyond the fear, focused on the greater power, calling us to do the same. May we find liberation through faith in you. In Jesus, who calls us to such faith, we pray. AMEN