
David and Goliath: Laying the Armor Down

A sermon by the Rev. Canon Cathy Zappa
Proper 7 – Year B

Don't you just love a good David-and-Goliath story? Today, we have the original! It's especially satisfying when you identify, as most of us do, most of the time, with David, the heroic underdog. So we cheer when he threatens and kills Goliath, and overlook David's own unsavory behavior when he becomes king... and quite a bully himself.

Indeed, if we're not careful, identifying with the underdog can become license for downright ugly behavior. If you've spent any time watching children's sports, you know what I mean! You've heard—or been—parents on the sidelines, feeling outmatched and talking loudly about the other team: how much more aggressive *they* are; how mean-spirited *their* fouls are; how the refs are clearly on *their* side. The talking can turn into yelling at, or bullying, refs, other spectators, even children.

Yes, it's quite convenient to identify with the underdog, with David. But I have sympathy for Goliath, too. Why? Well, for one, my baby brother is tall. About as tall as Goliath. Our translation measures Goliath at 6 cubits and a span tall—that is, almost 10 feet tall. No, my brother isn't ten feet tall! He's 6'7", which is how tall Goliath was in the better-attested sources: that is, 4 cubits and a span, or about 6'9".

When my brother was born, the story goes, the nurses were so surprised by his length that they rifled through hospital records to see if he'd set a new record. They determined that he had, indeed, at least as far as they could tell.

Later, as a tall child, he was expected to play basketball, and to be good at it. And he was! But he also played Little League, and soccer. And he was the kid that other parents talked about on the sidelines. You could hear them complaining that he clearly was too old to be on this team, making him out to be more of a threat than he was, just because of his height. Never mind how awkwardly skinny he was!

I could go on and on about the challenges he faced, like finding clothes that fit, or a bed he could sleep in without his feet dangling off the edge, or navigating ceiling fans. But you get the point: being tall is not always easy or mighty.

There's another reason I'm not so quick to write off Goliath as a mean-spirited bully: I relate to him. In some ways, I want to be like him. I mean, did you get a load of all that armor? It's state-of-the-art stuff, and it pretty much covers him head to toe. On top of that, he's got a shield bearer to go before him! This guy's indestructible!

But his armor is heavy, too. It's a lot to carry, all this stuff that's supposed to protect him from hurt or defeat, and to make his people feel safe and strong, as he fights, faces danger, does their dirty work, for them.

When I hear about all that armor Goliath hauled around, and how little good it did him ultimately, I see how absurd it is. But that doesn't stop me from wanting and wearing armor of my own, and coveting others' armor at the same time. We all do it, don't we? We wear all kinds of armor to protect ourselves, to keep ourselves from being hurt, exposed, seen as we are, fearing that "as we are" is somehow not ok.

This armor comes in many forms: in the causes or work or expertise or relationships we equate with our identity. In the exhausting pursuit of power success, security, esteem. In the need to be needed or perfect, as if that could shield us from the pain of rejection or correction.

Then there's the armor we carry for other people. Or the armor that we, like the Philistines expect others to carry for us, so that we don't feel so vulnerable ourselves. We expect it from leaders, of course; but we also expect it of those closest to us. As children, we may expect our parents to be invulnerable, flawless; and we can be so disappointed when we discover that they're not. As parents, we want so much to protect our children from the pain we experienced at their age, we want so much for them to be happy and successful, that we may communicate without meaning to that their failure or suffering embarrasses or scares us.

And "what about men?" In her book *Daring Greatly*, Brené Brown recalls a man asking her that, after she'd given a lecture on shame and vulnerability and signed books for his wife and daughters. "What about men?" he asked, "What have you learned about us?" She explained that she only studied women, to which he replied, "Well, that's convenient." Then, his eyes welling with tears, he told her that men have shame, too—that they feel vulnerable, too, but when they reach out and share their stories, no one wants to hear it. Especially, he said, "my wife and my daughters."

His honesty opened Brown's eyes. She realized, as she thought about the men in her own life, "Holy moly! [Not her exact words.] I am the patriarchy!" "Men," she says later, after expanding the scope of her research, "hear us asking for their vulnerability, but are also very aware that we may act scared or resentful when they show their vulnerable side."^[i] "[They] live under the pressure of one unrelenting message: Do not be perceived as weak."^[ii] In other words, be Goliath.

It's unfair to ask of anyone, and I don't want to contribute to that pressure! But at the same time, I'm grateful for the men in my life who have done this for me: my father and grandfathers, and my husband—who have tried to be—who have been—strong and protecting, because that's how they say, "I love you."

But Goliath isn't the whole story! There's also David, a shepherd boy delivering food to his older brothers at the front, when he hears Goliath threaten his people, and his God. David volunteers to take this giant on, but when Saul sees what a small fry he is, he says, "No, thank you."

David, however, knows who he is, and who God is. He doesn't need to be a soldier like Goliath; he needs to be a shepherd like David. His experiences have prepared him for this. And what's more, he trusts God will be with him, as God has been with him before.

So Saul agrees to send him, and outfits him with the king's armor, the best in Israel. Who wouldn't want that? Well, David, that's who! He tries it on; but it's too big, too heavy, too unwieldy. It's just not him, and it will get in the way of what he needs to do. So he takes it off. And he picks up instead the tools he's used to, the ordinary tools of his ordinary work: a staff, a sling, some stones, and the name of the Lord. And he fells the giant Goliath with a well-aimed slingshot and a prayer.

It is a great underdog story. And it's so much more. It invites us to do what David did: to take all that armor off—the masks and roles and people we hide behind. To give up trying to be who others think we are or should be. And to allow others to do the same.

It's an invitation to lean on God when you're feeling scared, or weak, or out of your league. There's nothing wrong with being weak or afraid! We all are at times. But what do you do with your fear? You can step into your armor and load your weapons; you can run and hide; you can cast about for someone to shield you or take responsibility for you. Or you can turn to God. You can trust in God and in yourself, in how God has prepared you and what God can do in you and through you. You can put on real courage and show up as you are. And let your loved ones do the same.

As we trust more and more in God and ourselves, we develop the courage also to trust others, too. To see through simplistic narratives and stereotypes and assumptions to the full humanity of others. As we grow in compassion toward our own failures and weaknesses, we grow in compassion toward others' too. And perhaps, just perhaps, we may all begin to lay the armor down.

^[i] <https://www.redbookmag.com/love-sex/mens-perspective/interviews/a14409/brene-brown-shame-vulnerability/>

^[ii] Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly*, 92.

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