

Sermon 7b 2018: God Empowers Us to Face Our Challenges and Overcome Them

Introduction: The Underdog Story

Few stories in the Bible have captured the imagination of western cultures through time

Like the story of David and Goliath;

The underdog taking on the giant;

The most unlikely person or weaker team succeeding;

Someone overcoming impossible odds and winning through.

The story of little David taking down big Goliath is a story most children will remember

And hold close to their hearts and why not;

Not only are children little compared to the adults around them, the giants;

But it's also a story that gives hope and promise for all the challenges a child faces;

And an ending that encourages children to press on and to overcome the giants they're facing.

As we grow there are other challenges, other seeming giants that we will face in life;

Tests, papers, athletic contests, performances, struggling through life's many challenges;

And David overcoming Goliath can become a helpful dose of hope to get us through

To remind us that we can make it; that we can face tough struggles and overcome them;

That when we try and work at it and give our all, we will make it through the storm.

And for sports, well, the story of David and Goliath is a very well-worn path;

And we just witnessed a Super Bowl championship run

In which grown men playing a children's game, their coaches and their supporters

Grabbed hold of the David and Goliath theme to proudly announce to the world

That they were the underdogs, masks and all, with little chance of winning;

With little chance of winning except by drawing closely together, doing their best;

Supporting each person on the team and in the organization;

And they took down an historically great franchise in the New England Patriots – Philly Special

There are moments in all of our lives when we come face to face with giants to overcome;
Sometimes it's in school with some subject we struggle with;
Sometimes it's with our classmates who may be pushing us around;
Sometimes it's on an athletic field
When we're playing someone or a team that's better than we are;
Sometimes it's a tough business cycle or some personal struggle at work;
And sometimes it's in our own homes and families when love grows cold;
When someone we love is struggling; when we have to face sickness and dying and death.

And the story of David standing up to Goliath gives us courage, fuels our sense of hope;
Helps us to face the giant before us and to try and overcome it;
David beating Goliath reminds us that it's worth the fight and that hope is a powerful force.

Using Our Special Skill Set

The popular author, Malcolm Gladwell, has written a very fine book
Called David and Goliath that takes the story in a very different direction;
It's not an underdog story about overcoming more powerful opponents at all;
It's a story about using our gifts and our giftedness
And playing the game, living life, facing a struggle or a giant on our own terms,
With our own natural and learned advantages and even disadvantages.

Gladwell reminds us that it was very common in the world of the Bible
For single combat to decide a great battle and armies often had great champions;
Single combat would cut down on the bloodshed that war always brings
And the side with the better champion could win the day more easily.

The Biblical narrative suggests that Goliath was the Philistine nation's champion;
A giant, perhaps nearly 7 feet tall would make a formidable opponent in one on one combat;
Against some other champion also carrying a spear and a sword and a shield.

David, on the other hand, refuses King Saul's armor and sword and spear;
Because they're way too big for him and because he's not used to fighting that way;
Instead he faces Goliath as he has faced wild animals while protecting the sheep;
He's fast and agile and comes at the giant with a sling and stones;
He keeps his distance, thus nullifying Goliath's huge size advantage.

Like armies with cavalry and archers overwhelming foot soldiers in ancient times;
Or air power overwhelming ground troops in set targets in our own day;
David comes at Goliath with a weaponry advantage that nullifies Goliath's advantage.

Gladwell also drops in some interesting medical expertise based on Goliath's words and actions
That suggests that Goliath is a giant because he has a pituitary problem
That causes him to grow, but also gives him double vision;
Goliath yells at David that David comes at him with sticks, not stick,
Not the single staff that David took with him.

So Goliath the champion, Goliath the giant is big and slow and has poor eyesight;
Who sees two of David, two staffs and presumably two slings;
And instead of being the one with the big advantage that Goliath would have
Over another champion, foot soldier to foot soldier;
David actually has the advantage over Goliath who doesn't stand a chance in the fight
Instead of fighting the battle Goliath's way, David uses who he is to win the day.

Gladwell suggests that when we use our gifts, our wisdom and experience;
And even our disadvantages to face our Goliaths, to face our struggles and challenges;
We can prevail;
And the rest of this very good book is taken up with modern stories
Of women and men who have done just that.

The power of God at Work

There is much to this story that speaks to the unlikely results of the undersized, underdog

Winning the day against a much more powerful opponent;

But whether it is a story to give us hope for success against powerful opponents;

Against the struggles in life that appear too big to tackle;

Or whether it's a story about using our gifts, our experience,

Our natural advantages to deal with the giants we face in life;

There's another player in the story, another power;

Just as there is another person and power present in our lives.

And that person or power or presence or gift giver is God working in us and through us;

We are not alone, you see, unless we choose to be.

Overcoming the giants, the struggles, the storms we face in life

Is not just about human hope only giving us encouragement to try even against long odds;

And it's not just about using our gifts and experience only;

It's about the power of God at work in us that empowers our hopefulness

Far beyond human hope;

It's about God multiplying our abilities and experiences

To something far beyond our natural abilities.

In the letter to the Romans, St. Paul wrote, "Glory to God whose power working in us

Can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine";

That's the difference that comes when we are aware and open to the power of God

Instilling a hope that never fails;

And escalating our natural gifts to something much more;

Expanding them to a higher level of effectiveness and goodness.

David has no idea that he has an agility and technological advantage over Goliath;

He doesn't recognize that his particular gift in slinging a stone
Learned in his years of watching over his father's sheep,
Is any kind of advantage in his fight with Goliath.

No, David believes and goes into battle with one certainty in his heart and mind;

He believes and goes to face Goliath not in his own hope for success
Or in some deep knowledge of using his gifts to the best of his abilities;
David believes that he will prevail because he has the power of God
At work in him and that power can never fail him.

"You come to me with sword and spear and javelin, David cries out;

But I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel
Who you have defied."

And that's what this story in either version is really all about.

For whether it's the human hope of the underdog succeeding against a stronger opponent;

Or the better use of human technology, natural gifts and our experiences and wisdom;
They all come from God;
And when we rely on God and not on our own hope or might;
The results will be incredible and we will prevail.

Hope is one of God's primary gifts to those of us who follow Him;

Hope gives us the courage and strength to face whatever struggles we are confronting;
Hope gives us the peace of mind and heart and a clarity about what is before us;
The clarity that whatever we are facing, God will be with us;
Hope is the power that raises us above the fray;
And when we have hope, we always have a chance.

It was the power of hope that moved Jesus to go to the cross to die for our sins;
And it was the power of hope that God used to raise Him from the dead
To take away the fear and power of death for all time.

And if it's the better use of technology or the gifts of agility and speed;
If it's the experience of driving off lions and bears with a sling and a stone;
The giver of the technology, the agility, the speed, and the experience
Is the God who created and led David in this battle and through his life;
The giver of our gifts and experiences and even our disadvantages
Is the same God who created and leads you and me today.

Never Really Underdogs

When we turn our lives over to God and follow in the way of Jesus;
Relying on God's power at work in us and not just our own
Then we are never really underdogs because we are never alone.

Oh, there will be times when we lose a battle, but never the war;
Times when we fail and stumble, but not for always;
Times when the struggles of life seem too great to bear
And we will be tempted to quit or to give up, but it will pass.

The God who created all that is and has redeemed people by the cross of Jesus through all time;
Is also the God who is intimately interested in you, in me and in all people;
God will come quickly to enliven our hope and multiply our abilities;
When we remember and rely on Him first.

So the next time you're facing some Goliath in your life, don't face it alone;
God is more than ready and willing to enter into the fray with you
And you will never face your struggles alone. Amen.