

**The Punch of a Well-Flung Stone**  
**1 Samuel 17:1-39**  
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**(From 1 Samuel 17 NIV) Now the Philistines gathered their forces for war and assembled at Socoh in Judah. A champion named Goliath, who was from Gath, came out of the Philistine camp. He was over nine feet tall.**

**Then the Philistine said, "This day I defy the ranks of Israel! Give me a man and let us fight each other."**

**On hearing the Philistine's words, Saul and all the Israelites were dismayed and terrified.**

**Now David was the son of an Ephrathite named Jesse, who was from Bethlehem in Judah. Jesse had eight sons, and in Saul's time he was old and well advanced in years. Jesse's three oldest sons had followed Saul to the war. The three oldest followed Saul, but David went back and forth from Saul to tend his father's sheep at Bethlehem.**

**For forty days the Philistine came forward every morning and evening and took his stand.**

**Now Jesse said to his son David, "Take this ephah of roasted grain and these ten loaves of bread for your brothers and hurry to their camp."**

**Early in the morning David left the flock with a shepherd, loaded up and set out, as Jesse had directed. He reached the camp as the army was going out to its battle positions, shouting the war cry.**

**Israel and the Philistines were drawing up their lines facing each other. David left his things with the keeper of supplies, ran to the battle lines and greeted his brothers. As he was talking with them, Goliath, the Philistine champion from Gath, stepped out from his lines and shouted his usual defiance, and David heard it. When the Israelites saw the man, they all ran from him in great fear.**

**David asked the men standing near him, "What will be done for the man who kills this Philistine and removes this disgrace from Israel? Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?" They repeated to him what they had been saying and told him, "This is what will be done for the man who kills him."**

**What David said was overheard and reported to Saul, and Saul sent for him.**

**David said to Saul, "Let no one lose heart on account of this Philistine; your servant will go and fight him."**

**Saul replied, "You are not able to go out against this Philistine and fight him; you are only a boy, and he has been a fighting man from his youth."**

**But David said to Saul, "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 delivered me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine." Saul said to David, "Go, and the LORD be with you."**

**Then Saul dressed David in his own tunic. He put a coat of armor on him and a bronze helmet on his head. "I cannot go in these," he said to Saul, "because I am not used to them." So he took them off. Then he took his staff in his hand, chose five smooth stones from the stream, put them in the pouch of his shepherd's bag and, with his sling in his hand, approached the Philistine.**

**Meanwhile, the Philistine, with his shield bearer in front of him, kept coming closer to David. He looked David over and saw that he was only a boy, ruddy and handsome, and he despised him. He said to David, "Am I a dog, that you come at me with sticks?" And the Philistine cursed David by his gods. "Come here," he said, "and I'll give your flesh to the birds of the air and the beasts of the field!"**

**David said to the Philistine, " This day the LORD will hand you over to me, and I'll strike you down and cut off your head. 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."**

**As the Philistine moved closer to attack him, David ran quickly toward the battle line to meet him. Reaching into his bag and taking out a stone, he slung it and struck the Philistine on the forehead. The stone sank into his forehead, and he fell facedown on the ground.**

Several memory tributaries flow together for me when I encounter again this classic story. One stream is that of my little orange childhood Bible storybook. My grandmother, my mother's mother who lived with us most of my growing up years, Big Mama we called her, read to me out of that little orange colored Bible story book. Now, lest you get the picture of a warm-hearted caring grandmother, let me stop right there. Big Mama was not a happy camper. She had lived through some rough times—her house burned down, she endured a terrible flood, her husband deserted her and five small children and on. For some people adversity makes them kinder and gentler. Not Big Mama. Adversity only made her grumpier and grouchier. But she loved to read, especially the daily newspaper and *Readers Digest*. And since I was the only one of the four brothers who would sit still long enough to be read to, she read me the Bible stories. Despite her grumpiness I came to love the Bible stories—Abraham and Isaac, Joseph and his brothers, Moses in the bull rushes, Elijah and the fiery chariot and the story of David and Goliath.

When I read the David and Goliath story today, another tributary begins to flow. Across the years studying the texts, I discovered actually two David and Goliath traditions. One is the story of the boy going up against the giant. The other tradition right there in 1 Samuel portrays David as a strapping young warrior going up against the giant. Apparently when the ancient editors of the tradition came up with two really good accounts of great events, rather than pick and choose, they just ran both of them. So we have two accounts of creation, of Noah and the flood and here, David and Goliath. For my part, I pick the boy against the giant story as does most of the rest of the Bible reading world.

The David and Goliath story calls to my mind yet another tributary. I grew up in Atlanta in the late 1940's into the middle 1950's. I graduated from high school in the dim, distant past of 1955. It was the era of racial segregation in the south. Separate everything—restrooms were separate if “colored” restrooms even existed, separate water fountains, coloreds in the back of the bus, no mainline restaurants and motels and hotels would accommodate black people. Black students endured separate and terribly unequal school buildings, most often with no buses for African American children to ride, and battered, hand-me-down textbooks. If a person of color needed to see the doctor, they waited in separate waiting rooms to be seen by the doctor only after all the white patients had their turn. To get a prescription filled they had to come in the drug store by the side door with no place to sit while the druggist filled the prescription. They had to sit in the upper balcony at the local movie theater.

Why? I asked my mother when I became old enough to notice.

Not right, she said but that's just the way it is. And nothing can be done about it, she said.

My university of the late 1950's, Baylor, the largest Baptist school in the world was lily white with the exception of a hand full of Asian students who managed to come from abroad and study science. For all any of us knew about these students, they could have been from Mars. I never spoke to a single one of them. We did not discriminate against the Asian students. They simply did not exist in our Baptist world. And certainly we had no black students and only one Hispanic student according to my recollection. Of course we students had car washes and bake sales to make money to send missionaries to Africa. We could go to them. They could not come to us.

But then another tributary begin to flow at that lily-white Baptist school. Someone in a place of power at the university began to invite Bill Lawson to come preach periodically. Bill, a black minister, was and is the pastor of the African/American Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church in Houston, Texas. Unlike some other black preachers I have heard, Bill preached in a powerful yet modulated manner. But like many black preachers I have heard and admired, poetry filled his soul and framed every sentence. In his inimitable, quiet way he began to toss well-flung stones at the giant of segregation. Not only did he declare segregation a terrible evil, a thrombosis on the heart of the nation and especially the south, he begin to tell us white Baptist students we could do something about the wrong. We could begin to toss our own well-flung stones at the giant.

Another tributary flows. With the exception of a couple professors, my seminary years were pretty much of a wash. Most of all I remember one diminutive, quiet man, T.B. Maston, professor of Christian ethics. Dr. Maston schooled three generations of Baptist preachers in the fine art of stone tossing, especially at that giant of racial segregation in the south and particularly in Baptist institutions. Dr. Maston refused to be ordained though God had certainly called him to minister. In what was then and remains largely a Baptist wasteland of genuine scholarship, Dr. Maston stood out as a man of national reputation along with the Niebuhrs and Bonhoeffers as a world class thinker abetted by the courage to act on what he taught. I had him for ethics the last year he taught before retirement and I have always thanked God for those months in his class. Between Bill Lawson and T.B. Maston my worldview began to change. I was not yet a bona fide stone thrower. In fact I did not want to become a stone thrower. But like

young David with his Goliath, I began to see the giant of racial discrimination in all its disgusting societal and political armor.

Then another tributary flows in this stream of consciousness sermon. This one came in my first pastorate after seminary in deep South Georgia from 1964-68. By then the Martin Luther King, Andrew Young, William Sloan Coffin, Malcolm X and countless more of their ilk held the giant of segregation quaking, stumbling under the constant barrage of unerringly aimed well-flung stones. The people of my town, Vienna, Georgia, whom we loved, lived in fear and loathing that their segregated way of life might be taken from them.

I had worked in that wonderful little town and church a few months when I decided I needed to toss a few stones. One fine spring Sunday morning I preached a sermon from Acts about Peter and Cornelius. Looking back, I regard it as a rather small stone. I did not rant and rave but I did remind the folks it was time to leave home, like Peter did, and find a new place and way to live with our black neighbors. Well, the sermon caused quite a stir, as you might expect. Later Linda told me, "Next time you decide to preach a sermon like that let me know. I was sitting right behind you in the choir. If someone decided to throw a hymn book at you, they might miss and hit me.

I am happy to say the church did not fire me. Pastor friends around me got fired for far less. My survival for four years in Deep South Georgia stands out as a testimony to the grace and forbearance of a wonderful group of people who in their quiet moments realized the south, their south had outlived itself. They reluctantly realized their world had changed and they reluctantly agreed to change with it.

The 60's stand out as a tumultuous time in our country. The air was thick with stones that Davids, black and white, young and old, academics and farm hands, north and south, tossed at the giant of segregation. Finally, the giant began to totter, almost imperceptibly at first. Over time, under the constant onslaught of well-tossed stones the giant of *legal* discrimination fell to the ground.

I heard Andrew Young speak in the spring of 1976 in Washington at a memorable Christian ethics conference. Young said that by the way the thousands of religious black people participated non-violently in the civil rights movement they gave permission, that was his phrase, permission to the white people of the south to begin doing what they knew for decades they should have been doing. A million stories, a million stones well flung brought down the giant.

I am honored to report that we still have Davids in our midst who cross the creeks of culture to confront the Goliaths of our time, especially the giant of sexual discrimination in our time. The Davids of the world, the Davids of this church, the Davids who will stand outside and hand out water after this service, the Davids who will march in the parade are still tossing their well-flung stones. Politicians from the President all the way through state and local legislatures try to prop up the giant. Religious leaders who know better shamelessly provide biblical and political armor.

The Davids of the 21<sup>st</sup> century CE are not as lucky as the David of the 10<sup>th</sup> century BCE. That David got his man with one stone. The Goliaths of today are harder to bring down. Maybe our Goliaths have more smarts than the rude and crude Goliath David faced. Maybe the Goliaths of today are more possessed of heady power. Maybe

they are more energized by the negative energy of prejudice. Or maybe whereas David had only one giant, we have battalions of Goliaths today.

But make no mistake, when struck squarely by well-flung stones of morality and ethics, by conscience and common sense, impelled, propelled by the power of God, the Goliaths stumble and eventually fall. Now, we don't have to literally kill the Goliaths. But we do need to kill the evil for which they stand.

And don't be fooled. The fight for justice and fairness never really ends. The Goliaths of our world Surprise! Surprise! do not fight fair and never have. Remember, David's Goliath assured the quaking Israelites if their champion slew him, the Philistines would throw down their arms and become servants of Saul. Not so. When Goliath fell, the Philistines did not meekly surrender. They turned and ran for the hills. They regrouped. For the next many years the Philistines came up against the Israelites' again and again. Only after years of battle did David, by then King David, finally dispose of the Philistines.

Goliath lay dead, beheaded on the field of battle. Thank God, we might be tempted to exult. The enemy lies vanquished. Wait. The arrogance of power he represented did not die that day. It lived on. And it lives on today. You and I who have done our share of well-flung stone tossing know the enemy only comes at us again wearing a new uniform. Or maybe not even wearing an identifiable uniform.

We don't give up though do we? By the power of God we carefully, faithfully without arrogance do our best to discover and use the energy implicit in the good fight, in the good cause. We know God and history will honor our best efforts. One well flung stone at a time, an editorial, a conversation at the office water cooler, a book a cup of

cold water in Jesus' name and Goliath begins to totter and then fall. I applaud the courage of the delegates in Birmingham and the delegates of the Episcopal Church in Columbus, Ohio who keep tossing those well-flung stones. I am glad to become a minister in the welcoming and affirming United Church of Christ. Our local church quietly but clearly displays the rainbow on its large sign on Bethesda's Massachusetts Avenue. We must all keep tossing those well-flung stones. This is the promise of God. This is the word of God for me.