

Small Stuff

I Samuel 17:34-49

Mark 4:30-32

I Samuel 17 opens with a detailed description of Goliath's armor. (These verses precede what we read today.) He stands about six feet, nine inches tall, an enormous height for that day. He wears a bronze helmet, chain mail, thigh and shin guards. He carries a massive sword and spear. Commentator Kyle McCarter, Jr. makes a great point. I cannot remember ever thinking about this. Where is the one unprotected spot on Goliath's entire body? His forehead. Where David slings his stone. The scholarly community divides over the true nature of this story. Did it actually happen? Or is it just a hero saga, a myth meant to bolster the Jews' sense of their own importance in the eyes of God?

My bias generally is to accept the truth of Bible stories. I understand the Bible has a variety of types of literature, each meant to be taken on its own terms. A quick listing of those types would include saga, history, moral typology, poetry, prophecy, Gospel, epistles and apocalyptic. I Samuel belongs to the history category. But we need to understand this "history" in the terms understood when this was written, some 800 years before Christ. People then wrote to firm up a narrative, or to support the powers that were. In fact, I would argue much history today is written for the same reasons. Even by serious scholars. I and II Samuel tell the history of the conversion

of Israel from a loose federation of tribes into a nation united under one king. But not just any king.

Saul, the first king, had proved a disaster. He was politically tone deaf and unwise in choosing his battles—both internal and with other nations. The next king needed to be better, much better. As the anonymous author of the Samuels tells it, David proved just the man for the job. He had his flaws, among them a wandering eye for the ladies and a taste for taking clever but risky gambles. Yet he had a terrific batting average in warfare, and the ability to form loyal and mutually beneficial friendships. He was a Renaissance Man thousands of years before the Renaissance, writing poetry and fighting courageously in battle, ruling deftly and maintaining an honest, close relationship with the Lord. The author of this history felt the need to paint a picture of David as, well, not a jack but a *king* of all trades. We might look at today's story through that lens. The message is that even as a teenager David displayed all the qualities of an ideal king—including the guts to stand up to a Philistine giant.

Dirk Nowitski played all-star basketball for a long time for the NBA Dallas Mavericks. A white guy, he stands 6'11". He married Jessica, an African-American woman. She stands 5'7", the average height for an American woman. In photographs of them together, he looms over her like a Tolkien Ent over a Tolkien dwarf. (In Tolkien's Lord of the Rings Ents are tree beings and dwarves, oh you know what dwarves are.) A huge part of the story of David and Goliath is the difference in their

stature. Many the scholar has pointed out that in some ways David personifies Israel. He is little. He must do battle with much larger forces surrounding himself. Yet somehow he perseveres. He more than survives; often he wins. His identity becomes the identity of his entire nation. He stands for them. He stands *up* for them.

David seems terrifically confident. Either that or filled with false bravado. The story relates a conversation he has with Saul. David explains that as a shepherd boy he has faced down predators; a mere man—even a 6’9” man—does not scare him. He and Goliath trade threats and insults in a conversation that bears all the marks of a screenwriter's work. Indeed, 19th century theologian Julian Wellhausen found repeated examples throughout the Old Testament of such bravado before conflict. He called it the “ritual typology of pre-battle narrative”. He also pointed out that the ancient literature “fairly swam” with it, finding examples in Roman, Greek, Hittite and Egyptian literature. As a matter of fact, this kind of stylized pre-combat posturing still appears in all kinds of movies, from the Japanese Samurai pictures, to American westerns, even to tween pictures about vampires or mean girls at school.

Having traded their ritual insults, Goliath and David square off. David stuns him with a slung rock and cuts off his head. The remaining Philistines flee. The Israelites pursue them, killing many. I Samuel chapter concludes with King Saul meeting David—apparently for the first time. Our New Revised Standard Version of the Bible calls David a “stripling”. He is young and skinny (or not muscle-bound, at any rate). His victory prefigures the success he will have later in life, when he succeeds Saul as

king. He will have military and political victory, and with him so will all Israel. The little guy. The youth. The one we know from reading earlier in I Samuel God has chosen to take the throne.

Going back to basketball, Tyrone “Muggsy” Bogues was the shortest player ever to play in the NBA. He stands at 5'3” tall. I stand at 6'2”, meaning he would come up only to my shoulders. His wife, Kim, is two inches taller than he is. Yet he had a 14-year career, even making the all-star team a couple of times. He played defense ferociously and set up his teammates with precise, often imaginative passing. Sometimes good things *do* come in small packages. Before the contest with Goliath, Saul had his soldiers outfit David with armor. It weighed too much for him. He could not move in it. So far as I can tell, the Bible never describes how large he may grow in adulthood. But at this moment he is small stuff. Yet with confidence that came from the Lord he defeated a fearsome giant. To pursue the typology argument just one step farther, the message for the Israelites should have been clear: though you, too, are small, with the Lord's help you can hold onto the Promised Land he has given you.

The small becoming large story line appears throughout the Bible. The younger twin Jacob outwits his tough-guy older brother Esau to inherit their father Isaac's estate. The prophet Malachi hearing the Lord telling him to proclaim, “But you, O Bethlehem, who are little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me the one who is to be the ruler of Israel...” And of course we believe that the one who fulfilled that prophecy was Jesus, born in Bethlehem, the Messiah. The one who

told the short parable, the one we read today, the Parable of the Mustard seed.

Just as the Bible contains types of literature, so Jesus' teaching in the Bible contains different types of story telling. Allegory, analogy, rhetoric, parables. Merriam Webster defines a parable as, "a simple story illustrating a moral or religious lesson." Jesus' longest parable in the written Gospels, The Prodigal Son, is actually not that simple—though its lesson, that the love of God the Father will never fail, is. The Parable of the Mustard Seed is kind of a mirror image. It tells a short, sweet story about an extraordinarily complicated topic, the Kingdom of God. The plot is simple: the tiny mustard seed grows into a shrub so large birds can nest in it. From small stuff can come big things. But this parable belongs to a whole section about the Kingdom of God that Mark the Gospel writer has placed one after another—though likely Jesus told them repeatedly and at different times. One theme unites them: growth.

The Kingdom of God grows when placed in fertile soil, Jesus says. But what *is* the Kingdom of God? Or as we call it today in order to use inclusive language, the *Realm* of God? The Realm of God happens in the time and place of God's own choosing. It represents God's sovereignty, God's power. Jesus often said it was "at hand", meaning nearly but not completely here in this world. He said it both, "was and is to come". It has started to break into this life but will not fully enter it until Jesus comes again. It is characterized by peace and joy. It is our eventual and eternal home. In Mark 4 we learn that it is capable of explosive growth, so that we can take shelter in it.

The failure rate for new church development is over fifty percent. More than half of all start-up congregations go out of business within five years. But in 1998, in Nashville, Indiana, an in-home Bible study outgrew the capacity of any of its members' houses. They began renting space at the Pine Box Theater and started worshipping and holding programming (like Bible studies). Today that church, called the Brown County Presbyterian Fellowship, has a thriving ministry. It purchased a church building from a defunct Roman Catholic parish and twice has expanded it. It has sent two young people to seminary and the ministry. From the mustard seed of about a dozen people reading the Bible together, it has grown into one of the leading churches in Brown County. Praise the Lord for parables that come true!

In 2021, just as we started emerging from the pandemic lockdowns, a small group here in Terre Haute coalesced around the idea of assisting Afghan refugees to settle in America. It started with just four or five people; at the height of its work over three dozen were active volunteers supporting the effort. We helped over two dozen Afghans successfully start new lives around the USA and Canada. From a mustard seed to a mission. Thank God for parables that come true!

God uses all sizes. None of us is too small, too quiet, too drab to become ineligible for the Realm of God. Whatever you can do to promote its growth, do it. Whatever you can say to promote its growth, say it. And God will use you in its service. Big things *can* come from small stuff. It happens all the time.