

1 Samuel 17 is a thrilling story of David, presented by the biblical writer of Samuel as a modest shepherd boy who slew the arrogant giant Goliath of Gath. The drama of this event has captured our attention throughout history and is often one of the few stories from the Hebrew scriptures that even those who have never cracked the spine of a Bible know. From the early rabbinic sages, to today's Vacation Bible School materials, the theme of the victorious underdog profoundly resonates with people across cultures.

I'm sure you've also heard in sermons on this story before about how Goliath was a Philistine, meaning that he came from a culture that was comprised primarily of mercenaries, who traveled from the Aegean and wrought havoc all the way from Syria to Egypt. These dominant warriors were one of the major reasons that the Late Bronze Age Empires suddenly collapsed at the end of the Bronze Age.

And I'm sure it's been pointed out to you before that of the Philistines, this battle hardened army, Goliath, was the fiercest warrior of the entire group. Goliath was the largest and strongest human, long experienced in warfare, and prepared for both hand-to-hand combat with the sword as well as distance battles with his spear. Despite his size, he must have had to be quick and nimble. Giving David seemingly impossible odds to contend with...

You've might have even heard someone break into the physics of slingshots and been told that that the riverbed smooth stone, could probably be hurled by David with his slingshot in excess of 100 MPH.

You might have even been told that perhaps of the skills of nibble shepherd boy who spent his nights protecting his flock from Lions.

And you've probably been told by a pastor or two, that when two champions in the ancient world met like this they generally each made a speech, and sometimes recited some verses, filled them with allusions and epithets of the most opprobrious kind at least hurling contempt and defiance at one another. Hence David's proclamation of his trust in the Lord.

And I'm sure that you've heard preachers and Sunday school teachers, wax and wane, over this as an underdog narrative. Classically pointing out how unexpectedly outrageous David's victory is over Goliath.

And I'm sure you've been often told stories about how you too, with faith like Davids, can slay those giants in your own path, those Goliaths in our own lives; like illness, or financial distress, or lack of purpose, physical limitation or some other menace standing in our way.

And as much as you might enjoy hearing a sermon about slaying a prolific evil in our world, or in our individual lives, this is not going to be one of those sermons. And I'm not even gonna tell you that God will deliver you, that you should put your trust in the Lord will be rewarded.

No today, is a different sermon. Because for the life of me I couldn't shake one minor detail from this story. It was the bloody number of stones that David plucks from the wadi, from the riverbed, that numerical detail about just how many smooth river rocks he put into his shepherd's pouch.

Maybe it was the fact that we are preaching all fall about stones in the biblical narrative, about how rocks are sometimes big representing the immovability of God, or like we heard from Tim last week about how God used the cleft in the rock to place and protect Moses allowing God to pass by. Maybe I was just trying to hard to make something out of the theme of rocks in this passage.

Maybe it was the fact that in all the violence and warfare of the text, I was looking for something outside the common narrative of win through destroying your enemy.

Maybe it was all the time I got to sit with this text, thinking it through, after knowing the story well looking for a new insight a new way to think about this old tale. Trusting that scripture when mined for insight always produces a new angle, a new way, a new insight.

Yet, whatever it was, I kept returning to the idea of the 'five smooth stones'. All week, as I thought, read up, studied, reflected upon, referenced, and researched this story, I dwelt on and thought about the importance of the 'five smooth stones.'

Why more than one stone? Wasn't David a man of faith, who just put down all that bronze armor offered by King Saul? Shedding off the protections of this world to step out on faith with God.

Then why four more stones? Did he doubt his aim? Did he wonder if God would give him the timing and strength to use his trusty sling to take on this giant of an enemy? Certainly with God he would need only a single pebble to accomplish his mission?

Now, as you can imagine, I am not the first to wonder about these stones. Books have been written, clever acronyms have been crafted, careers... even congregations have been built on principles based off five stones.

The most popular versions typically include references to 2 samuel 21, where we are told that there are at least four other giants that might rally to Goliath's defense if something went wrong. Some even presuppose or speculate that they might be brothers of Goliath. Four more stones for four more giants. Yet, as it's presented in the text it is unlikely that young David would have been aware of any other giants. Yet, for every Goliath there is a stone.

Some chalk five smooth stones up to David's preparedness. This isn't about lack of trust in the Lord they say, much like with me and you, we never know exactly how the Lord will operate, so it's best to be prepared. Five stones are probably just a handful they say, enough to carry and enough to facilitate reserves, yet not enough to cast doubt upon David's belief or God's promise. It's him recognizing human responsibility as well as Divine providence.

Some bring layers of meaning to the text, creatively expediting the number of five or the smoothness of the stones to persuade us that these are the stones of our journey, of our work. That the five stones spell out something like F-A-I-T-H standing in for things like fortitude, allegiance, initiative, truth and help. Sometimes these stones represent attributes that pastors and teachers want to lift out about David, naming the stones things like Courage, Confidence, Preparation, Trust and Victory. For every stone creates a faithful metaphor encouraging us through teaching.

Now I suspect that one of the reasons that I couldn't shake the five smooth stones was that my mind was trying to recall a previous reference when I poured over my text this week in preparation. On Wednesday during my study, I thought I discovered it. I discovered that the prolific writer and biblical scholar Eugene Peterson (whom many of you would recognize for writing the paraphrase of the message) wrote a touching book on pastoral work entitled the "Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work." Yet, as it turned out as I remembered it, and looked it up, that while I had read it in my graduate school days, it was in fact not about these particular five stones of scripture, but 5 stones of pastoral work derived from the reading of 5 different Biblical books. Sometimes our memory extrapolates details to build meaning even when it isn't there.

Yet, I was not deterred. You see this week was a bit unusual for me. This past week I spent Monday-Friday in Atlanta Georgia, on spiritual retreat. Now some of you are familiar with this rhythm that happens with many young pastors in our denominations. Because this congregation devoted a large sum on money in the early years of it to get it started. I've spent the past 5 years, and 7 different retreats participating in the pathway of Bethany Fellows.

It is a transformative ministry associated with our big D disciples, run by Broadway's own pastor emeritus the Rev. Kim Gage Ryan. Within the program I learned to develop a spiritual rhythm to my life. Each retreat we do things that you might expect, like check-in and long sessions of prayer for one another. We hear stories of and sometimes visit with flourishing congregations and pastors in that particular city to hear best practices. We even spend 24 hours in silence together, that is yes, from worship after breakfast Wednesday to just before breakfast Thursday, 24 solid hours of silence. After silence, I've had the pleasure of meeting with an ongoing small group where they have helped me reflect on where it is God is at work with my ministry and this congregation. And we even get to celebrate, eating good food and enjoying a drink together on Thursday night. And it was bitter-sweet as I officially graduated out of the Bethany circle during this retreat.

So I had both extra time to walk with, and a lot of wisdom surrounding me, as I prepared this text. This trip was particularly special because we got to spend some time with the pastoral leadership of the Historic Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, where the Martin Luther King, Jr was Co-pastor with his father. Where he preached some of his sermons, where he spoke words aloud that I've read hundreds of times. It was a real joy because I got to stand in that historic pulpit. And you know what? It was certainly holy ground, it was a special moment.

But you know what I noticed. Three microphone holes. There was the main one that would have held the old style microphone that King might have used when he delivered his resounding justice laden sermons. And yet, there right beside it, was two other holes, one for a cord to come up from under the pulpit, with a spot to attach a lecturn mic and one on the opposite side from a day where someone had clearly thought the other side was the best place to hold a microphone.

Standing there between a holy spot of historic proportions and a movable pulpit with 3 different microphone holes made me think, back to my grand question that I began with at the beginning of the week, about the five stones. And do you know what I realized?

Sometimes, friends, five smooth stones are just that, five smooth stones. It took standing in an intimidating awe-inspiring place, listening as the words of Dr. King himself echo through the sanctuary as they played his final sermon on being a Drum Major for Justice for us. It struck me. Sometimes a microphone hole is just a microphone hole, sometimes five smooth stones are just five smooth stones.

Which is when I realized that I might be more like those Israelite troops who cowered in their foxholes day after day when Goliath and his shield bearer sallied forth with the daily insult, so too do I often hang back and shake my head over this or that cultural movement, political proposal, or twitter tirade, wishing someone would do something but manifesting precious little confidence that much can be done. Or, worse, someone does try to do something, wishing to fight some kind of battle, but then do so on the world's terms, exchanging the cross of Christ for the culture-war equivalent of machine guns and hand grenades.

Which brought me back around to the fantastic work of Eugene Peterson who in his other fine book that actually mentions David and Goliath, "*Leap over a Wall*," he states that the image in the David & Goliath story that most arrests his attention is the one of young David kneeling down by the brook to gather up his five smooth stones. You see, it isn't the five stones themselves, but the moment in which it was happening and the action that was being taken.

Peterson thinks, and I agree, that the whole David saga is finally about becoming human, about awakening to the reality of a God-infused world. David begins to show just this awakening to reality in this scene.

As Peterson puts it, "*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 . . . The only person fully in touch with reality that day was David. The only fully human person in the Valley of Elah that day was David. Reality is made up of mostly what we can't see. Humanness is mostly a matter of what never gets reported in the newspapers. 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”¹

So friends, pay attention to those details that the Holy Spirit calls to your attention, and yet don't be so focused on the details that you might miss that work to be done. To be the one that can see the world as God-infused, that can be the most human person in the room, the one in touch with reality, the one who learns to trust in the Lord, even in the midst of battle, chaos, and impossible odds.

Can we say Amen? Amen.

¹ Eugene Peterson, *Leap over a Wall*, Harper-Collins, 1997, pp. 44-45