

"FIVE SMOOTH STONES FOR GOD-ALIVE"

1 Samuel 17

August 19, 2018

The Philistines drew up their troops for battle. The Philistines were on one hill, the Israelites on the opposing hill, with the valley between them.

A giant nearly ten feet tall stepped out from the Philistine line into the open, Goliath from Gath. He had a bronze helmet on his head and was dressed in armor—126 pounds of it! He wore bronze shin guards and carried a bronze sword. His spear was like a fence rail—the spear tip alone weighed over fifteen pounds. His shield bearer walked ahead of him.

Goliath stood there and called out to the Israelite troops, "Why bother using your whole army? Am I not Philistine enough for you? And you're all committed to Saul, aren't you? So, pick your best fighter and pit him against me. If he gets the upper hand and kills me, the Philistines will all become your slaves. But if I get the upper hand and kill him, you'll all become our slaves and serve us. I challenge the troops of Israel this day. Give me a man. Let us fight it out together!"

When Saul and his troops heard the Philistine's challenge, they were terrified and lost all hope.

Each morning and evening for forty days, Goliath took his stand and made his speech.

[There was a young man at that time, David of Bethlehem, son of Jesse. His three oldest brothers were fighting for Saul in the Israelite Army, but David, the youngest, split his time between running supplies to Saul and tending to his father's sheep at home. One day his father sent him to Saul's army with food and grain supplies.]

David left his bundles of food in the care of a sentry, ran to the troops who were deployed, and greeted his brothers. While they were talking together, the Philistine champion, Goliath of Gath, stepped out from the front lines of the Philistines, and gave his usual challenge. David

heard him. The Israelites, to a man, fell back the moment they saw the giant—totally frightened.

[David was not afraid. Instead, he was angry that the Philistine giant was taunting the armies of God-Alive.] The things David was saying were picked up and reported to Saul, who then sent for him.

"Master," said David, "don't give up hope. I'm ready to go and fight this Philistine."

Saul answered David, "You can't go and fight this Philistine. You're too young and inexperienced—and he's been at this fighting business since before you were born."

David said, "I've been a shepherd, tending sheep for my father. Whenever a lion or bear came and took a lamb from the flock, I'd go after it, knock it down, and rescue the lamb. If it turned on me, I'd grab it by the throat, wring its neck, and kill it. Lion or bear, it made no difference—I killed it. And I'll do the same to this Philistine pig who is taunting the troops of God-Alive. GOD, who delivered me from the teeth of the lion and the claws of the bear, will deliver me from this Philistine."

Saul said, "Go. And GOD help you!"

Then Saul outfitted David as a soldier in armor. He put his bronze helmet on his head and belted his sword on him over the armor. David tried to walk but he could hardly budge. David told Saul, "I can't even move with all this armor on me. I'm not used to this." And he took it all off.

Then David took his shepherd's staff, selected five smooth stones from the brook, and put them in the pocket of his shepherd's pack, and with his sling in his hand approached Goliath.

As the Philistine paced back and forth, his shield bearer in front of him, he noticed David. He took one look down on him and sneered—a mere youngster, apple-cheeked and peach-fuzzed.

The Philistine ridiculed David. "Am I a dog that you come after me with a stick?" And he cursed him by his gods. "Come on," said the Philistine. "I'll make roadkill of you for the buzzards. I'll turn you into a tasty morsel for the field mice."

David answered, "You come at me with sword and spear and battle-ax. I come at you in the name of GOD-of-the-Angel-Armies, the God of Israel's troops, whom you curse and mock. This very day GOD is handing you over to me. I'm about to kill you, cut off your head, and serve up your body and the bodies of your Philistine buddies to the crows and coyotes. The whole earth will know that there's an extraordinary God in Israel. And everyone gathered here will learn that GOD doesn't save by means of sword or spear. The battle belongs to GOD—he's handing you to us on a platter!"

That roused the Philistine, and he started toward David. David took off from the front line, running toward the Philistine. David reached into his pocket for a stone, slung it, and hit the Philistine hard in the forehead, embedding the stone deeply. The Philistine crashed, face-down in the dirt.

That's how David beat the Philistine—with a sling and a stone. He hit him and killed him. No sword for David!

Then David ran up to the Philistine and stood over him, pulled the giant's sword from its sheath, and finished the job by cutting off his head. When the Philistines saw that their great champion was dead, they scattered, running for their lives.

Each week at the end of the Children's Sermon, our little Davids pray to God-Alive. They know what is in their shepherd's pack. Our kids have learned their five smooth stones: Self-Respect, Kindness, Love, Bravery, and God-With-Them. When they pray together, "We are wonderful, we are kind, we are brave, and we are loved-yay, God!" they are leaving the dais here equipped to go out into the world and face their Goliaths.

The youngsters of this church know the prayer. I wonder how it informs them during the week? One mother here wrote me this:

It's not necessarily something we have talked about consistently at home directly but it's definitely the message we give when they are struggling. Now that school is back in I think it's especially important to remind them to rely on this message during the week.

To add to that... my child's Confirmation Mentor sent her a card this week just telling her that she is excited to be on her confirmation journey with her and wishing her luck for the first few days of school. In the card the mentor wrote the prayer. I was so touched by the card and felt it was SO important that my kids get to hear this message from other adults in their life... so they really start to feel/believe it too!

Going back to school or starting at a new school I imagine can seem like facing a whole field of advancing Philistines. The kids have to learn new teachers, new floorplans, and new schedules. Some have to make new friends, learn where to sit and where not to sit in the lunchroom, and how to be smart in class without being too smart. Chris and I saw a little girl Friday wearing a T-Shirt that said, "Smart is the new cool." I only wish that were so.

Many of you parents are probably a bit anxious at the beginning of the school year, sending to children off to who-know-what in the vastness that is formal education. When you greet them at day's end and either drive them home or walk them home from the school bus or act all nonchalant at home as they walk home themselves for the first time, I know you listen intently, but not too obviously, as they tell you what happened in their school life that day.

Did it go alright? Were their friends friendly to them, or was this to be the day when friends turned into your child's own personal Goliath? Was this the day that your child was called on in class and was supported for what they had to say or was this the day that they were called "stupid" by classmates or "too smart" by still others? Was this the day that your child said "no" to cigarettes, drugs, or sexual pressure, or was this the day they gave in and you may not know about it?

Yes, this is the day the Philistines march against the armies of God-Alive, and your David-child is facing off against all the giants that threaten to disarm and dismantle them. EXCEPT.

Except, your child has the shepherd's pack that they can carry around with them. A post-it note stuck in a purse. A reminder written inside a notebook or textbook, a secret symbol place inside a lunch box, or a text sent to a student before a particularly hard class or before an exam.

These are the five smooth stones that can remind your child or grandchild or neighbor's child down the street of their worth, their strength, their calling, and their relationship with God-Alive.

You are Wonderful. You are Kind. You are Brave. You are Loved. Shout "Yay!" for God in your life, my beloved one. Goliath doesn't stand a chance against God's will and your determination.

I think we all like to feel like David in the story. We align ourselves with the righteous hero. Perhaps we daydream about being able to stand up to our manager when he makes a gender joke, or she makes a racial slur. Perhaps we agonize over how to help a sibling with a drinking problem or a really good friend with an addiction to pornography. Sure, maybe we are the ones to see how to bring needed spiritual or organizational growth about in our church but cannot find the courage to run for Church Council or to step up to lead a ministry team.

We have our Goliaths, too. They are all around us. Do we have a shepherd's pack of our own? Five smooth stones? What would they be? It's easy for us to tell these kids, "You are wonderful," but do we believe it of ourselves even as it echoes in our ears as we say it back to them? It's perhaps the hardest spiritual discipline of all—self-love. We are too slow, we are too dumb, and we have too many wrinkles and rolls in places they should not be. We are not clever enough, not loveable enough, and not good enough for God, much less for ourselves.

We tell the children, "You are kind," and that's all well enough and good, but are we kind in our own relationships? Is our first impulse to react to a snarky comment with kindness or with a defensive comeback? Can we overlook, as Jesus teaches us, the speck in the eye of our neighbor and do we see the log blocking our own clear vision?

We encourage the children, "You are brave." They are our American Ninja Warriors, scaling impossible walls, swinging through jungles of obstacles, racing against time to reach the red buzzer of success. They are braver than brave, but don't even talk to me about getting up to face *my* giants—it isn't happening', folks. No way.

We assure our youngsters, "You are loved." And they are. When they tentatively come out of their pews to come up for Children's Time, I am reminded of Glenda, the Good Witch of the North coaxing the little Munchkins to "Come out, come out, wherever you are." It's so precious! When the children's sermon is over and it's time for them to go downstairs to Faith Formation class, they tear out of here, running down the aisle, ready to be God-Alive to their classmates and teachers. We love them. Yay, God! Yay, God-Alive and our little Davids!

But do we believe it for ourselves as we sit here in church listening and praying and singing about how God loves us? I hope so, but I suspect sometimes that the answer is no. It's no because it seems sometimes that God doesn't even *hear* our most desperate, our most ardent prayers, much less answer them. It's no because we have done some *really bad things* in our lives and we don't feel like we *deserve* to be loved. It's no because no matter how hard we try, we are not good enough, we are not Christian enough, we are not righteous enough, we are terribly and irreversibly flawed, sinners all in need of

God's grace. Forget about getting high up enough on the holiness ladder to be worthy of God's unconditional love, it isn't *happening*.

Ahhh, our Goliaths, they live right up here in our heads. They are practiced, skilled at insulting us, taunting us, belittling us, and scaring us right back down the hill to the safety of our defense mechanisms.

I remember seeing a cartoon on a snow day at my elementary school. "Charles" is a cartoon about a boy of the 60s with a chubby face, glasses, and just a wisp of hair on his head. Charles is minding his own business, but his parents off screen, in turns, yell at him over and over again, "Charles, you're never going to amount to anything!" I remember that carton to this day.

Our film tonight is about three underachievers, young boys who met up often in the school Principal's office for being late to class, unprepared, unpopular, and not likely to amount to anything. These are three friends, the young men of Clint Eastwood's creative genius film, *The 15:17 to Paris*. Eastwood, as both Director and Producer of the film, made a bold move in casting the roles for this true-life story. Fate has the life-long American friends three years ago this very Wednesday on a train from Amsterdam to Paris when a terrorist starts shooting people on board. Eastwood tried out many an actor to play these roles, but then decided the men and the couple involved intimately in the actual event should all play themselves in the movie.

These three American heroes were once three eight-year-old boys who played together, who were given the constant message that they would never amount to anything, and who today have in their possession Medals of Honor, Medals of Valor, and a Purple Heart. No one told them growing up that they were wonderful, or kind, or brave, or particularly loved. Instead, they were told they were wrecking their parent's lives. One was told he "had to go live with his father" in another state because he was judged to be out of control by the Christian School Headmaster. One never could fit in schools where he saw no other kids of his race there. And one never seemed to be able to achieve any of the goals he set for himself. They were all known as losers, outcasts, delinquents.

They faced their Goliaths on a daily basis. They had their smooth stones, too. Spencer Stone relied on a solid faith in God and on the power of prayer to get through his challenges, including just after the terrorist attack. Alek Skarlatos relied on his cool demeanor and his knowledge of firearms when Goliath stepped into the aisle of the train. The school principal said of Anthony Sadler to Spencer and Alek, "Stay away from that kid. Charmer, but he'll get you into trouble in a heartbeat." In fact, Anthony knew his two friends so well that when the time of crisis faced the three, they all moved as one, meeting the terror and staring it down. As he tells Mr. Eastwood about that fateful day, "We all knew we had the right people there. Our first 22

or 23 years together were coming to a point there, at that time." Spencer had a premonition that on that trip "we were being catapulted towards something, a greater purpose." Anthony remembered that conversation with Spencer. He thinks it gave them strength and resolve, as though this was meant to happen to them and with them.

Because Spencer, Anthony, and Alek were not told as youngsters by the adults in their life that they were wonderful, that they were kind, brave, or loved, they found their worthiness within their threesome. It became their five smooth stones for God-Alive at just the right moment for the other 551 passengers on the high-speed train that day.

That cartoon I told you about, the one about Charles who would "never amount to anything?" The cartoon moves through the frames with the off-screen negative parental messages raining down on the poor kid. He just stays quiet, and we see that he is building some contraption. It gets bigger and bigger as we now see his parents on screen, arms crossed in front of them, looking disapprovingly at their son. They continue to berate him, pounding away without rest at his ego, telling him that he will never get anywhere in life. There are no positive messages for Charles, no assurances that he is wonderful, kind, brave, or loved. Finally, in the last frame, his monstrous

contraption is all put together. There are pipes connected everywhere and a ladder inside it.

We hear Charles' mother say one last time, with extra added exasperation, "Honestly, Charles, I don't know why you've spent all this time building this machine." His father echoes her disappointment, saying judgmentally once again, "You're never going to amount to anything!"

Finally, Charles breaks a slight grin while looking up at us, the curious audience. He slowly and methodically climbs the ladder, looking out between the pipes all connected together, pausing every now and again for effect. He gets to the top, reaches a red button, and pushes it. Poof! His parents disappear!

I loved that cartoon. I couldn't wait for the next snow day.

Five smooth stones for God-Alive. What's in your shepherd's pack?

Amen.