

God Does Not Save by Sword or Spear
A Sermon on 1 Samuel 17:1-58
Proper 7
June 24, 2018

Introduction

This week we are introduced to David. He was mentioned in last week's text but he didn't do or say anything. David is a towering figure in the Bible. Only Moses and Jesus have as many pages written about them.

Part of the fascination with David is that he is a complex character. He is pious and faithful, but he is also calculating and cold-blooded. Israel sees a lot of itself in David. He is Israel's greatest and most powerful king. Israel looks back on the reign of King David as the glory days. David also carries within him seeds of his own destruction.

Today's text is the most familiar story about David. Michelangelo's David is possibly the best-known work of art in history. It is a sculpture of the young David with a sling on his shoulder. The statue is 15-feet high; it dwarfs Goliath. David is the champion of all the underdogs.

David is admired in part for his piety. David is described throughout Samuel as devoted to God. He is credited with writing many of the Psalms, though that is historically doubtful. David's faith in God is at the center of today's text.

First Move: The Historical David

David is the earliest figure in the Bible that we can confirm in history outside the pages of the Old Testament.

Archaeologists have found inscriptions on two monuments in Syria that refer to the house of David. The monuments have been dated to about 800 BCE, which would be about 100 years after David's reign. This doesn't prove David's historical existence, but it makes it more likely.

We can talk about a historical David. We can't do that for Moses or Abraham; there is nothing outside the Bible to confirm their existence. Steven McKenzie, an Old Testament scholar, has written a book about the historical David. He says that the Bible is still our only direct source of David. "Without the Bible we would barely know David's name."

To put together the most accurate picture of the historical David, we have to read against the grain of the Old Testament. When the Old Testament sounds like it is defending David against something, we look at those texts closely. There may be some truth to the charges, especially when David benefits. A good rule of thumb is that the person who benefits by an event is most likely responsible for the event. Another rule of thumb is the principle of analogy—David probably acted in accordance with customs and motives common to ancient Middle Eastern rulers.

Some of the charges that we can make out in 1 Samuel are that David tried to take the throne away from Saul, David was a deserter, David was an outlaw, David was a Philistine mercenary, and David had something to do with Saul's death. If we assume that there is some merit to these charges, our portrait of David will be less flattering but more realistic.

One of the most well-known images of David is that he was a shepherd. The Bible says that in three different places in last week's text and this week's text. That is more likely a literary creation than a historical reality. Shepherd was a common metaphor for a king in the ancient Middle East.

McKenzie believes that one of the verses in our first reading today is an accurate, historical description of David. One of the men in Saul's court describes David as follows:

I have seen a son of Jesse, the Bethlehemite, who knows how to play. He is a powerful nobleman, a warrior, eloquent, and a handsome man, and Yahweh is with him. 1 Samuel 16:18 [McKenzie's translation].

David was the son of Jesse. Mary's text last week says that Samuel consecrated the elders of Bethlehem, and then he consecrated Jesse. That means that Jesse most likely was also an elder or a leader of Bethlehem.

David knows how to play. Saul wasn't looking for a musician for entertainment. He was hoping to be healed of the evil spirit that was plaguing him. Music was believed to possess magical powers to keep away demons and evil spirits. David was a magician as much as he was a musician. He played the lyre. We don't know what a lyre sounded like, but we have found ancient drawings of them. A lyre was a stringed instrument that looks like a harp you can carry. Lyres were expensive to make and were used mainly by the aristocracy. That does not fit well with the image of a poor shepherd.

David was a powerful nobleman. Jesse would also have been a powerful man. He may have owned many sheep. David may have helped manage the sheep. Think of him more as a sheep rancher than a shepherd.

David was a warrior. Literally, a man of war. David's skill as a warrior was the attribute that made him most useful to Saul. He became Saul's armor bearer. His success in a warrior is glorified in 1 and 2 Samuel. There is a recurring chorus: "Saul killed his thousands, and David his tens of thousands.

David was eloquent. Literally, clever of word. David was politically savvy. He was successful at attracting people to follow him. He consolidated his realm by making treaties with neighboring peoples. His political and diplomatic skill as much as his military strength helped him build a kingdom and keep it together.

Yahweh is with him. David's attitude toward God is also shown as one of trust and obedience. That is not a quality that is historically verifiable. It is the most important thing about David from the author's perspective.

Second Move: David's Faith in God

David and Goliath is a story about a military threat to Israel. The Philistines have emerged as a threat on Israel's western border. They are part of the Sea People who emigrated to the southern coast of Palestine, in the area that we know today as the Gaza Strip. The Philistines are known as great warriors. They are technologically advanced. They have mastered iron works and have fashioned armor and shields and swords.

The Israelites and the Philistines have gathered for war. The armies are situated on hills that face each other. There is a valley in between the armies.

Goliath is described as a champion in NRSV. Everett Fox translates it as a Man of the Space Between. Goliath challenges Israel to a duel of gladiators in the space in between. This apparently was a common practice, but armies rarely gave up if their gladiator was defeated.

Goliath's name appears only one time in this text. He is otherwise described as the Philistine. 2 Samuel 21, at the end of the David story, says that Elhanan struck down Goliath. Today's text may be a legend about a fight between David and an unnamed Philistine warrior.

The Philistine is described as being six cubits and a span in the Masoretic text. That would be 9 feet 9 inches tall. The Greek Septuagint says he is four cubits and a span: 6 foot 9. That is tall enough to be formidable but not folktale size.

The text is more impressed with his armor than his height. The Philistine wears a coat of mail that weighs 125 pounds and carries a spear that has a 15-pound weight

at the end of it. Imagine trying to pick up and throw a spear with a bowling ball at the end of it. The Philistine is equipped with the highest technology of his age.

The Philistine taunts the Israelites for 40 days. “Today I defy the ranks of Israel! Give me a man, that we may fight together.”

This was exactly the situation that the people of Israel wanted a king for, to protect them from foreign armies and lead them in battle. The lectionary skips the texts about Saul. He is described as a tall man; he stands head and shoulders above everyone else. He seems to be the most likely man in Israel to be a match for Goliath. Yet Saul was fearful, along with all of Israel, when he heard the words of Goliath.

Then David makes his entrance. He is described as the youngest of Jesse’s sons. His oldest three brothers are already in Saul’s army. David has been keeping the sheep and comes to the front lines to bring bread and cheese to his brothers and their commander.

This story seems to come from another source than our first reading that describes David as Saul’s armor bearer. There are two or three sources in today’s text. It doesn’t bother the author that there are inconsistencies. Ancient people thought that it was important to preserve all the sources—it made the story richer and susceptible to multiple interpretations.

David’s first words in the Bible are, “What shall be done for the man who kills this Philistine?” He has just heard the Israelites say that the king will greatly enrich the man who kills him, and will give him his daughter and exempt him from taxation. David seems calculating. He wants to confirm what is to be gained by doing battle with the Philistine.

David then has two speeches, one to Saul and one to Goliath. The speeches demonstrate that he is eloquent, clever of word, and that Yahweh is with him.

Saul assumes that Israel can be delivered only by military might, that it can survive only by being like the other nations. David refuses to be like Saul or the nations. David’s speech is designed to show Saul that his resources are practical and spiritual. David speaks of his life as a shepherd and how he killed lions and bears by relying on God for deliverance. David says that the same God will deliver him from the hand of the Philistine. Israel’s army are paralyzed with fear. They do not trust in God to deliver them as David does.

Then we have a comic interlude. Saul clothes David with his own armor and helmet and gives him a sword. David can’t even walk with the armor on.

This is where David’s cleverness comes in. He knows that he cannot defeat Goliath on his own terms. He takes a staff, a sling and five smooth stones into battle. David plays to his strength, mobility. Goliath is heavily equipped and must draw his

opponent near to kill him. David stays away; he stings like a butterfly, floats like a bee.

David gives another remarkable speech to Goliath, telling him, as he did to Saul earlier, that he is confident that Yahweh will deliver him. He says that he will kill Goliath and feed him to the birds of the air and the wild animals of the earth,

so that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, and that all [these armies] may know that the Lord does not save by sword and spear; for the battle is the Lord's and he will give you into our hand.

We hear similar words throughout Israel's history. Moses delivered the slaves from Egypt and Joshua conquered the Promised Land so that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel. The empires of the world see Israel as an insignificant little country but their God is more powerful than all the other Gods. That is the hope that nourished Israel. David personifies tiny Israel, resisting the great empires.

Third Move: The Power of Truth

This story has lots of violence, and I left a lot of it out. 1 and 2 Samuel have a lot of violence. Israel's greatest king is a warrior. Two weeks ago I preached on a text about holy war.

How do we find good news in these texts? Do we reject them because we don't like the theology? We prefer a God of non violence. How do we deal with violent texts and a God who seems to use violence?

We can interpret the texts with a process hermeneutic, a way of interpreting the Bible that arises from process theology. Ronald Farmer, a New Testament scholar, describes a process hermeneutic as paying special attention to those texts that are inconsistent with our worldview. The goal is to hold a text that is foreign to our sensibilities in contrast with our own beliefs. We hope that this tension will produce a novel pattern that is large enough to include both the foreign and the familiar in a harmonious contrast. We are not abandoning our old beliefs. We are open to new propositions that expand our perspective. Our theology is trivial if we reject texts that don't seem to conform to it.

The first step is understanding what the text meant to the people it was originally written for. We can never recover that entirely—it is a distant world that is strange to us.

The stories about the rise of David, which run from 1 Samuel 16 through 2 Samuel 5, are some of the oldest stories in the Old Testament. These stories have

been gathered by one or more editors who lived several centuries later, but the purpose of these stories, according to Kyle McCarter, one of the leading scholars of 1 and 2 Samuel, is to show the legitimacy of David's succession to Saul as the rightful king of all Israel. Israel was establishing itself as an independent kingdom, and the historical David was a warrior, he vanquished the internal and external threats to the fledgling kingdom.

In the oldest stories in the Bible, people sometimes encountered God. The Bible describes conversations between God and Abraham, God and Moses, God and prophets like Samuel. These people really believed that they were encountering God, and the original listeners of these stories would have believed that, too.

People believed that outside powers were in control of their lives. When the authors of the Old Testament looked back at the history of Israel, they believed that God was at work in the life of their greatest king, that God was the power behind the throne, directing the events of history. Saul was tormented by an evil spirit that came from God. David was victorious in battle over the heavily-armed Philistine because God delivered him without sword or spear.

I don't believe that God told David to slaughter Goliath and cut off his head. That was common practice among warriors in those days.

The good news in this text is that David gets his confidence and his strength from God. He trusts that God will deliver him from difficult situations. God will give us the resources we need to face our problems, if only we turn to God and ask for help. To do that, we have to be open to God and look for guidance from God.

The contrast in this story is between the faith of David and the lack of faith of Saul and the entire army of Israel. They can think only of imitating, poorly, the oppressive powers they confront. David shows us there is another power at work in the world, a power that liberates the oppressed, that brings down the mighty from their thrones.

There is a power of truth that subverts oppression. Truth lies not in technology or in self-serving power. The truth in this story is that God is opposed to arrogant and self-serving power and its violence. We are saved not by sword and spear but by trust in God. God gives us hope there is a way into the future when there seems to be no way.

Conclusion

In our lifetimes, we have seen the Berlin Wall fall. We have seen apartheid end in South Africa. We are in the midst of an immigration and refugee crisis across the world that has given rise to oppressive forces of nativism. Partisan gridlock appears

to be a permanent feature of our politics. Many people have lost hope that hatred and ugliness will prevail.

Our hope lies in the same God that overcame sword and spear with five smooth stones. That same God can redeem the principalities and powers with truth instead of violence. The truth is that God runs through all people and all things, that God can heal the divisions between people. The mission of the church is to bring that truth to the world.

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