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Texts in Context

Preaching the David Story

ROLF A. JACOBSON

THE DAVID STORY: TEXTS WAITING FOR A SERMON

No human being is named more often in the Old Testament than David.¹ David is mentioned more often than Moses, Abraham, or Jacob. Indeed, David's story consumes more than half of 1 Samuel, all of 2 Samuel, and even bleeds over a little into 1 Kings (1 Chron 11–29 also tells the David story). But David's centrality to the Old Testament witness transcends mere statistics. The Old Testament presents David as the model king against whom all other Israelite kings were measured. David was the individual who united the disparate twelve tribes and forged them into a nation. David captured Jerusalem and then moved the ark of the covenant there, making Jerusalem the political and religious ground zero of Israelite religion. And, most significantly for Christians, David received God's promise that one of David's descendants would forever reign as king (2 Sam 7; see also Pss 89 and 132); this promise was the seed from which the rose of messianic hope later bloomed.

In spite of the clarity with which the Old Testament speaks about David, however, the ancient king's story is heard less and less often from Christian pulpits.

¹It is difficult to fix the exact number of references to David, because of variant readings involved with some of the occurrences. But according to Abraham Even-Shoshan (*A New Concordance of the Old Testament*, 2d ed. [Jerusalem: Kiryat Sefer, 1990]), David's name occurs 1023 times. David's name also occurs 59 times in the New Testament. The name of Moses, by comparison, occurs 770 times in the Old Testament; other names appear with far less frequency.

The David story is the longest and most complete biblical treatment of any one human life. This allows the story to speak to many stages of the faith journey. The story is not fully present in the pericopes, but the preacher can choose to use this material in a sermon series to address the spiritual and moral contexts of our age.

A retired pastor admitted to me recently that in over forty years of ministry he had only preached on the David story one time! The question needs to be asked: Why are pastors leaving this rich treasure buried in the field? One reason is surely that the Revised Common Lectionary—in its various forms—pays little attention to the David story. In the three-year lectionary cycle, texts from the David story rarely occur.² Thus, one of the primary virtues of using the lectionary—namely that preachers are exposed to more texts than if they pick their own texts each week—has become in this case a liability. A second reason that these stories are seldom heard in worship is probably that they are long. The story of David and Goliath, for example, is fifty-eight verses long! Unfortunately, few worship leaders have the courage to read such a lengthy passage during worship. A third reason that modern Christians shy away from these stories is that the stories are often violent and seedy. David cuts off Goliath's head, Saul tries to kill David, David commits adultery with Bathsheba and then has Bathsheba's husband Uriah (and Uriah's men) killed, David's son Amnon rapes David's daughter Tamar, Tamar's brother Absalom kills Amnon and later rebels against David, and so on. Comfortable congregations prefer to hear tame sermons about mustard seeds and the lilies of the valley rather than be disturbed by the genuinely human behavior of David and his court.

If the David stories are to be preached, pastors will need to *choose* to preach them rather than wait for the texts to present themselves. The best way for this to happen would be for pastors to decide to preach a sermon series on the story of David. For pastors who do not follow the lectionary or who have the option of a Lenten series available, this task poses no problem. For other pastors, the Old Testament readings could easily be changed for a month or six weeks to create the opportunity for such a series. The length of some of the stories does not pose a genuine hurdle. A congregation's best lectors can be lined up to make the longer readings more palatable, the passages can be broken up with a short hymn or canticle, and other parts of the worship liturgy can be adjusted to allow for the longer reading.

The violent and seedy nature of these stories is in fact an argument *for* preaching them, not against. A church that domesticates the living God of the Bible into a sort of benign manager who rules over a make-believe world is a church that is apparently ready to exchange God, as God truly is, for a lesser god of our own design.³ The bloodshed in these stories disturbs us and it should. Yet our world is indeed a violent place and we confess to follow a God who is at work in this violent world. A

²The Old Testament readings in various denominational traditions differ for many Sundays. In some traditions, such as the Presbyterian or Episcopalian, texts from the David story occur up to twelve times. In other traditions, such as the Lutheran tradition, from which the present author comes, only three texts occur. Moreover, it is sadly the practice in a growing number of congregations to omit the Old Testament reading from the worship service.

³I am reminded of Søren Kierkegaard's insight: "The greatest danger to Christianity is, I contend, not heresies, heterodoxies, not atheists, not profane secularism—no, but the kind of orthodoxy which is cordial, drivel, mediocrity served up sweet. There is nothing that so insidiously displaces the majestic as cordiality." See *The Journals of Søren Kierkegaard*, trans. and ed. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967) 3:178–179.

church that fails to take this issue on is a church that is not confessing God with the full dynamism and range of the biblical witness.

THE DAVID STORY

One important feature of these stories is that “the David story” is the Bible’s longest and fullest account of an individual human life. (I am not counting the story of Jesus, because the church confesses that Jesus was more than merely human). The biblical text relates events about David from the time of his youth (1 Sam 16–17), through his tumultuous rise to the throne (1 Sam 18–2 Sam 5), to his various triumphs and failures as king (2 Sam 6–24), until his death (1 Kings 1–2). We hear more individual stories about David that cover a broader span of his life than any other figure in the Bible. Thus, when preaching the David story, pastors can consider not only the individual stories about David, but also they can consider

“the preacher who tackles the David narrative will have at hand a rich source of texts to help address the entire life cycle”

the larger narrative as a whole. One virtue of this broader narrative is that it speaks to the modern believer’s full, lifetime experience of faith. The David narrative speaks to the early stages of faith and the sense of calling, future, and purpose. The narrative speaks to the long middle stages of the faith journey, exploring the highs and lows of accomplishment, trial, tragedy, boredom, and comfort. The narrative speaks to the long-term consequences of a person’s actions and choices (note, for example, how David’s refusal to take disciplinary action after Amnon rapes Tamar eventually leads to Amnon’s murder by Absalom and later to Absalom’s rebellion and death). The narrative also speaks to the later stages of the faith journey, when complacency sets in and death draws near. Thus, the preacher who tackles the David narrative will have at hand a rich source of texts to help address the entire life cycle.

The preacher who chooses to preach on the David narrative will also need to decide which of the many stories about David to choose. The David cycle is pressed down and overflowing with great texts waiting to be preached. Among those stories that would speak powerfully to modern congregations are the following:

- the anointing of David (1 Sam 16:1–13)
- David and Goliath (1 Sam 17:1–58)
- Saul, Jonathan, and David (1 Sam 18:1–9; 19:1–7)
- David, Nabal, and Abigail (1 Sam 25:2–42)
- David and Saul in the cave (1 Sam 26:1–25)
- David serves the Philistines (1 Sam 27:1–28:3; 29:1–11)
- David brings the ark to Jerusalem (2 Sam 6:1–23)
- God promises David a dynasty (2 Sam 7:1–17)

- David, Bathsheba, Uriah, and Nathan (2 Sam 11:1–12:15)
- the rape of Tamar and murder of Amnon (2 Sam 13:1–39)
- Absalom’s rebellion and death (2 Sam 14:25–15:31; 18:1–18, 33)
- David’s death (1 Kings 1:1–2:12)

All of these stories, and others, are worth taking the time to wrestle with, understand, and preach. The preacher will need to make the lamentable choice to pass over some stories in order to treat others; the author of this article faces the same choice. Because this issue of *Word & World* includes an expository article on God’s promise to David in 2 Sam 7 and because the story of David, Bathsheba, Uriah, and Nathan is both well known and one of the texts that occurs in the lectionary, I will not treat those here. Any sermon series on David would have to include those stories, however. For reasons of space, I have chosen to treat here only two stories as examples of how the witness of these texts might address us in our context. The stories I chose are the first two on the list: the stories of David’s anointing by Samuel and of David and Goliath.

THE ANOINTING OF DAVID⁴

As noted above, David is mentioned more times in the Old Testament than any other human being. The very first time that the reader meets David is in 1 Sam 16. A brief word on the way this story fits in with the larger story line of the Old Testament is necessary, both for this article and, more importantly, for any congregation to whom this text is being preached. Given the level of biblical illiteracy in today’s congregations, preachers may often need to rehearse briefly the basic story of the Old Testament for their hearers—from the exodus, through the wilderness, the settlement of the land, and the period of the judges, to the people’s request for a king and Samuel’s anointing of Saul as Israel’s first king. When the anointing of David is seen within this canonical context, one of the primary messages of the story is brought into stark relief: that God is again *providing* for the welfare of the people, just as God had previously provided deliverance from Pharaoh; manna, water, and the law in the wilderness; a land during the settlement; and guidance and leadership during the period of the judges. At the start of 1 Sam 16, God says to Samuel: “I have provided for myself a king among [Jesse’s] sons.” The Hebrew word that is translated here as “provided” literally means “to see” (רָאָה); as in English, Hebrew uses “to see” idiomatically with the sense of “to provide,” as in “I have seen to it.”⁵ This Hebrew word is the key to this story. Its occurrence at the start of the story signals to the reader that God has “seen” the people’s need even before they are aware of it. As God had done in the past, God was venturing out ahead of

⁴As is well known, the term “anointing” is a translation of the verbal form of the Hebrew root רָאָה, from which the term Hebrew title “Messiah” and the Greek title “Christ” are also derived. To be anointed here is to be chosen as the future king or “anointed one.” Later, after the Old Testament period, as Israel began to look for God to send the perfect king, the word began to take on the meaning with which most people are now familiar.

⁵See Bruce Birch, “The First and Second Books of Samuel: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998) 2:1097–1100.

the people to provide for their communal welfare when they were as yet unaware that they had a need for God's actions.

This "providing" dimension of the story seems an apt one for our modern context on at least two levels. First, it is often the case that we cannot feel God's guidance or presence. We may not sense what God is doing in our midst or how God is leading us. Even the great prophet Samuel did not know what God was doing. This story, as with so much of the Old Testament, affirms that God's "providence" operates beyond the spectrum in which our sight operates, but even so we remain within God's view. Second, note that God's eye is on the flock and not just the individual sparrow. In our age we tend to individualize so many of the messages of the Bible. There are virtues to that tendency, but also limitations. Here it is important to note that it is the *community of faith* that is under God's care. Neither Saul nor David's older brothers might have understood the way in which God was providing for Israel to be a good way, but God's eyes were on the people as a whole and not only the individuals.

"the only important thing about David in this passage has to do with what God did, not with what David did"

Another major feature of this story has to do with God's initiative. Even before Israel knew that it needed a new king, even before the prophet Samuel asked for a new king, God took the reins to direct Israel's path. As is the normal case in the Bible, it was God's initiative toward human beings that was crucial, not human initiative toward God. As has been mentioned, this story marks the first encounter that the reader has with David. But note that David does not do anything! He does not speak, he does not act, we do not even hear what he thinks about this anointing. We are simply told that *God* saw David, *God* told Samuel to anoint David, and *God's* spirit came upon David. The only important thing about David in this passage has to do with what God did, not with what David did. Again, this is a powerful message in our day: in the context of our Western focus on the freedom and agency of the individual, the message of God's gracious initiative stands forth in sharp relief.

The central drama in 1 Sam 16 is a much loved story. Jesse brought each of his first six sons before Samuel to see which son would be anointed as king. When the eldest son Eliab, who was tall and fair, passed before Samuel, the prophet thought, "Surely the LORD's anointed is now before the LORD." God's response has echoed down through the ages: "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the LORD does not see as mortals see: they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart" (v. 7). Jesse then paraded Abinadab and Shammah in front of Samuel, but each time God said, "Neither has the LORD chosen this one." Jesse brought four more sons forward, but none of them was chosen either. There was one more son, but he was the youngest

and of such little account that Jesse had left him out in the field tending the sheep. There is rich irony in this oversight. In the ancient Near East, the shepherd was a symbol of the king. Ancient audiences would have been touched by the irony that the one who was thought too insignificant to be considered for the role of king was actually fulfilling his future vocation: shepherding the flock. When David was brought forth, the Lord said, “Rise and anoint him; for this is the one.”

This brief narrative drama—beautiful in its use of irony, suspense, and reversal of expectations—plays upon the contrast between seeing and hearing. The chapter’s key word “see” (רָאָה) is again in play, especially in v. 7, where it occurs five times.⁶ The problem is that Samuel is relying on his human sense of vision, which will not do for the work of God. Back in 1 Sam 9:19, Samuel had even referred to himself as a “seer,” literally a “see-er” (רֹאֵה). But as 1 Sam 16:3 emphasizes, Samuel’s job was not so much to see as to listen: “you shall anoint for me the one whom I name (אָנַחְתִּי) to you.” As the above summary of the story indicates, the text uses this same verb “say/name” (אָנַחְתִּי) in each case when Eliab, Abinadab, Shammah, and David are presented. The message is rather clear. When dealing with matters of God’s actions and will, human sight is an inadequate tool. The human sense of hearing—if we are listening to God—is preferable. Once again, this dimension of the text fits well with our context. We rely for almost everything on our sight, but it often proves untrustworthy. Advertisers know that the quickest way to get their fingers into our wallets is through our eyes, thus we are besieged night and day with images in commercials, on billboards, and in magazines. We also tend to pick our leaders—pastors, elders, bishops, politicians, principals, and so on—based on our society’s norms about appearance. Individuals are constantly abused with messages that they do not look the right way, dress the right way, or present themselves the right way. There may be no more timely and gracious word to offer people than this: “The LORD does not see as mortals see: they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.”

DAVID AND GOLIATH

The story of David and Goliath may be the most well known of all the David stories, but it is rarely if ever the text for a sermon. As noted above, the violence of the story is almost certainly a major reason why preachers choose not to preach on it. But this makes for a deeply ironic situation: everyone knows this violent story (especially children), but because many pastors do not preach on the text, the violence is allowed to remain in everyone’s mind without ever being addressed. The violence in this story may be especially troubling to some, because it is through violence that David establishes himself as a force in Saul’s court and because the Old

⁶The Hebrew root רָאָה lies behind the English noun “appearance” the first time it occurs in the verse, both occurrences of the verb “to see,” and the last two occurrences of the verb “to look.” The first time that “look” occurs, the Hebrew verb בָּטַח is used, perhaps to highlight the difference between Samuel’s vision and the Lord’s. The second occurrence of “appearance” in the verse is the translation of a Hebrew idiom, which might be rigidly translated “mortals see with their eyes, the LORD sees with the heart.”

Testament seems to endorse this violence. Only by taking this story head-on can preachers address the problematic way in which this passage seems to endorse societal violence. Another important reason why preachers should preach this story has to do with the way in which it has been domesticated into a morality tale about the “little guy” overcoming the “big guy.” Whenever there is a mighty upset in athletics, this story provides the framework in which the sports journalists invite us to understand the result. Even the Christian video series *Veggie Tales* turns the message of this story into a story about how “little guys can do big things, too.” The myth of the rugged individual who draws on secret stores of courage to overcome powerful obstacles is woven into the very fabric of our society (think of the last ten Hollywood movies that you have seen!). By preaching this text, pastors can start to free the story of David’s battle with Goliath from our cultural context and begin to challenge the cultural myth of the rugged individual.

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If this story should not be understood as one about a lone individual overcoming a giant obstacle, then how should we understand it? A clue can be found in the way in which the key term “defy” (Hebrew: **דָּפַי**) occurs throughout the narrative. The term occurs six times in 1 Sam 17 (vv. 10, 25, 26 [twice], 36, and 45).⁷ The first occurrence of the term is when Goliath, the Philistine champion, stepped forward and announced, “Today I *defy* the ranks of Israel!” (v. 10). Our modern social and linguistic context does not contain any word or even any idea that would allow us to translate the soul-shaking power of Goliath’s challenge. The word does not merely mean “to challenge” or “to dare.” In the social context of ancient Israel, the term implied something far more serious, indeed, something world-threatening. The term occurs regularly in the psalms of lament, where the various psalmists present the “insults”/“taunts”/“reproaches” of their oppressors as reason enough for God to act on their behalf (e.g., Pss 44:13; 69:9; 79:12; 89:51; etc.). In these contexts, it is clear that the taunts of the enemies are not merely insults, but are assertions by the psalmist’s enemies that the psalmist’s God has no power to save the psalmist. The term also occurs several times in 2 Kings 19, where the leader of the Assyrian army that besieged Jerusalem (ca. 701 B.C.E.) taunted the residents of the city by asserting that their God would not be able to save the city. From these contexts and others it is clear that the term referred to a challenge asserting that the god of the one being challenged was a false god.⁸

⁷In v. 26, the NRSV uses “reproach” to translate the nominal form of the word. In the other instances, the use of “defy” signals the occurrence of the word.

⁸See Patrick D. Miller, “Psalms and Inscriptions,” in *Congress Volume: Vienna 1980*, ed. J. A. Emerton (Leiden: Brill, 1981) 326–328.

When this understanding of the word is applied to the story of David and Goliath, parts of the story emerge in a different light. Goliath understood himself to be challenging Israel; in v. 25, the Israelites echoed this understanding when they said, “Surely he has come up to defy Israel.” Only the small and insignificant David saw beyond the surface to grasp the heart of the matter: “For who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy *the armies of the living God?*” (v. 26; see also vv. 36, 45). David knew that Goliath was not merely insulting Israel, he was denying the power and presence of the living God. By calling Goliath “this uncircumcised Philistine,” moreover, David was placing Goliath’s challenge in a covenantal context. Circumcision was the sign of God’s covenant with Israel. David understood Goliath’s challenge to involve not merely flesh and blood armies, but the God of Abraham, who had promised Abraham that his descendants would be both blessed and a blessing. Seen in this light, the story of David and Goliath may be interpreted as a story about faith in the living God who makes and keeps covenants with human beings—even when keeping the covenant seems unlikely or impossible.

The many details of the story—Goliath’s great stature,⁹ the refusal of the Israelite soldiers to face him, David’s diminutive stature and his decision not to wear heavy armor, David’s choice of a sling and five smooth stones as his weapon, Saul’s blessing to David that “the LORD be with you,” Goliath’s incredulity when he saw David, and Goliath’s cursing of David by his own gods—serve to underscore David’s faith in the God of the covenant. David knew that the real issue in the confrontation between Goliath and Israel was the issue of faith in the living God. Goliath denied God’s presence and power. Saul, David’s brothers, and the rest of the Israelites lacked faith in God’s presence and power. David was the only one who exhibited faith. He expressed this faith most clearly in the answer he offered to Goliath’s taunts: “You come to me with sword and spear and javelin; but I come to you in the name of the LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied” (v. 45). The real weapon that David bore was neither sling nor stone, but the covenantal name of God. David concluded his speech with this confession of faith: “This very day¹⁰ the LORD will deliver you into my hand....so that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel and that all this assembly 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” (v. 47). Victory does not come through inner courage, or crafty wiles, or faith in our own power. Victory indeed does not come from earthly weapons or skills. Victory comes from the Lord and only from the Lord. Notice that both “all the earth” and also “this assembly” are to learn that there is a God in Israel, one who does not deliver by means of sword or spear. Israel—just as

⁹P. Kyle McCarter has shown that Goliath’s height, which is often placed at over ten feet, was actually reported as about 6’9” by the original text (*I Samuel*, Anchor Bible 8 [Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1980] 286–291).

¹⁰Notice how Goliath’s original challenge that “*today* I defy Israel” is matched by David’s confession that “this very day” the Lord would deliver Israel from the Philistines.

much as the Philistines—must learn that it has a living God in Israel. Israel—just as much as the outsiders—must learn what it means to follow this God.

A final comment about the violence of the story is necessary. One Christian tactic in dealing with the violence of certain parts of the Old Testament has been to speak of the “judging God” of the Old Testament as compared with the “merciful God” of the New Testament. This approach fails to see both that there is mercy throughout the Old Testament as well as judgment and violence in the New Testament. More important, this approach can take on an anti-Semitic tone, implying that Jews worship a violent God of judgment. In a post-holocaust world, all Christians must be alert to the possible anti-Semitic overtones of such an interpretive stance. Christians need to deal with the violent parts of the Old Testament on their own terms, not via a dangerous and false division between the two Testaments. As for this story, it can be pointed out that the text is explicit that “the LORD does not save by sword and spear.” This does not mean, of course, that God is absent from human wars and battles. The church confesses that God is with us in all circumstances. Note that the text also affirms that “the battle is the LORD’s.” This does not mean that God is a God of war, but rather that some battles are the Lord’s and others are not. This text turns the question of right and wrong back upon us. We are enjoined to remember that sword and spear are not the way of our God. We are further enjoined always to be alert to the possibility that the war that we may seek for our own goals and purposes may not be the Lord’s battle. ⊕

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