

No Bullies in the Kingdom

Who doesn't know the story of David and Goliath?

Who doesn't love the underdog?

Who doesn't root for the fresh-faced shepherd boy to triumph over the mean old giant?

You would have to be a mean-spirited person to want Goliath to win. There he is, several feet taller than anyone else. Lots of fighting experience, a known champion. Dressed in the finest armor of the day, from head to toe, armed with a bronze javelin, a heavy iron spear, and a sword. But as if that's not enough, he also has his own bodyguard, someone who carries a shield in front of him. He has more advantages, more power, more fame, more prestige on the battlefield than any adversary. For 40 days he taunts the smaller, less well-equipped Israelite army. He knows how to make everyone tremble—so he does it.

He's a classic bully, accustomed to using his superior strength to repeatedly intimidate and dominate those with less power.

The story of David and Goliath reminds us that bullying is a behavior that's been around for at least 3000 years. The difference between bullying and just plain meanness is the presence of an imbalance of power. Goliath is mean, but he also has way more physical power. One gets the impression that he's done this before.

He's the first one we meet in this story, and then we meet his opponent David. David is a shepherd boy, the youngest of eight sons. Just in from the hills where he was tending his sheep, he's small and has no experience in battle. With the enthusiasm of youth, he wants to say "hi" to his big brothers, and so he happens to hear the challenge of the giant. Naively, he says he'll fight the bully. But the king's armor is way too heavy for him. He isn't big enough to carry the king's sword. His only protection is his trust in God, which is deep. His only weapons are his courage, a sling, and five smooth stones. The stage is set for David to be slaughtered, and for his people to be ridiculed for sending him to fight against the Philistine giant. They are about to become a nation of slaves once again.

But in one of the world's greatest upsets, a classic Biblical tale of the reversal of fortunes, the underdog triumphs over the bully. The small and clever boy slips past the bodyguard, slings a single stone, and defeats the heavily armored, nasty old giant of a bully. The last is first, the weak overcomes the strong, the poor dominates the rich, and the power of the God who overturns the ways of the world is demonstrated to all. "The Lord does not save by sword and spear," says David, "for the battle is the Lord's." (v. 47)

For 3000 years, this story has been told to let people know that this is how God works. God's way was shown long before David, when powerless slaves in Egypt overcame a powerful Pharaoh. God chose the weak over the strong. Psalm 9 includes a common refrain, "The Lord is a stronghold for the oppressed." Mary affirmed the same when she sang, "God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly." (Luke 1:52) Jesus taught it over and over, saying "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth," (Matt 5:5) and "Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." (Matt 18:4) The apostle Paul explained God's way to the Corinthians, writing

“God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong.” (1 Cor 1:27) In the 16th century, John Calvin spoke of God as the “protector and patron of the poor,” the one who hears their cries and “feels himself injured in their persons.” (Matthew Tuininga, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/why-calvin-had-good-news-for-the-poor/>) And in the 20th century, liberation theologians called this “God’s preferential option for the poor,” a phrase which has become foundational to Catholic social teaching. The Biblical message is clear: if we want to be aligned with God, we will align ourselves with the needs of the weakest, most vulnerable, most needy among us. We will line up with David, not Goliath; the Hebrew people, not Pharaoh; Jesus, not the Romans or the religious leaders of his day.

Now to be fair, this story about David stands in contrast with some of the stories about what David did when he became king, when he gained power himself. There is a tradition in the Bible which idealizes David, and there is another stream which tells the honest truth, that he was a man with some major fault lines. Yet this story is consistent with the consistent message of the Bible. The bullies of the world, who abuse their power for personal gain at the expense of others, do not win in the end, for God is more powerful and God is looking out for the weak. This story about David, like all other stories in the Bible, is also a story about God.

Perhaps you were taught that there is a difference between the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament. That’s a false dichotomy. The Bible is a complex book from start to finish, and its oldest materials depict God as a multi-faceted and inscrutable, not reducible to one dimension. David tells us, “The Lord does not save by sword and spear,” and ever after humankind has wrestled with the question, “Then how does God save?” For the human mind has difficulty conceiving of living without weapons to defeat enemies and save ourselves. We have trouble imagining a world where we are not developing new technologies of violence, staying ahead in the power game, and meeting the bullies with our own bully power. The living God who is with David against Goliath shows us a different way, a way we have come to associate with Jesus.

For the seeds of Jesus’ teaching and preaching were sowed in the Hebrew scriptures, where God shows the people the way Jesus repeatedly calls “the kingdom of God.” Two weeks ago I shared the concept of reframing the traditional “kingdom” language by dropping the “g” to consider the “kin-dom of God.” Little did I know that this concept would be the theme of the General Assembly’s Bible study this past week. I guess I wasn’t paying very close attention. The original promoter of the coined word, “Kin-dom,” was Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, a Cuban-American feminist theologian, a *mujerista* theologian. Drawing on the Latin heritage which emphasizes the importance of family, Isasi-Diaz wrote, “The word kin-dom makes it clear that when the fullness of God becomes a day-to-day reality in the world at large, we will all be sisters and brothers—kin to each other” (quoted by Verna Elias, <https://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/obj/s4/f2/dsk3/ftp05/MQ62723.pdf>) In the Kin-dom of God, justice and peace are realized, strengths are shared, resources are shared, love is shared and all are lifted up by the recognition that we are all related. There is no place for bullies in the Kin-dom of God. In the Kin-dom, all understand and trust that “The Lord does not save by sword and spear.” There are no separate tribes, no Philistines and Israelites in the Kin-dom, for all are one.

And in the Kin-dom of God, which is present among us as Christ is present among us, today’s tribes also become irrelevant. When we live as Kin-dom people, as Christ calls us to do, we see each other through God’s eyes.

This past Wednesday was World Refugee Day. Episcopal priest Victor Kazanjian, who is executive director of United Religions Initiative, wrote a poem for the occasion.

You,
you who appear so different from me
in background, belief, culture and language,
when I gaze upon your face,
when I look into your eyes,
when I see the rise and fall of your breath,
I see God.
I feel God.
I experience God
in you
and not just a partial reflection of my God,
but the Divine spirit of all life.
For you are I
and we are one.

My sisters and brothers, you who are revealed by Christ as my kin, the implications for our world today are many. Migrants at our border? Seek to see all people as God sees them, God who is protector and patron of the poor. Family separations? Jesus called children the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, and said that those who do the will of his Father are his brothers and sisters, his family. The arms race? Or guns in our schools? Goliath's armor and weaponry were defeated not by more powerful weapons but by a boy with faith in God. God uses what is weak in the world to shame the strong. To say "we are family" is to claim the hope of the Kin-dom, that it will be on earth as it is in heaven.

May we all have such courageous faith, to face down the bullies and give witness to our loving, saving God.