

David chose “five smooth stones from the stream.” I know why the stones came from the stream. Stream stones are smooth and round. They would fit nicely into David’s sling and they would fly straight and true toward their target. Each stone was probably about the size of a baseball, and a skilled slinger could hurl each one at close to 100 miles per hour. So, I know why David chose his stones from the stream, but I still don’t know why five?

As an experienced snowball fighter, I know that the more ammunition you have the better. It’s always a good idea to go into a snowball fight with a stockpile of frozen ammo because there isn’t time in the thick of battle to make new ones. So, maybe David chose five smooth stones so that he would have enough missiles to rain down on Goliath if the first one missed. But I don’t think so. Realistically, David would not have time to reload. He’d have to be standing relatively close to Goliath to hit him with any accuracy, leaving him only precious seconds to reload before the colossal warrior reached him. This isn’t a case of more ammo being better.

What’s more, David argued before Saul that *the LORD who delivered me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine* (v. 37). Unless David’s faith was faulty (which I doubt) or God’s aim was poor (which I highly doubt) David would not need more than one smooth stone to defeat Goliath. If David truly put his trust in the all-powerful God of Israel, one stone should have done the job done.

Instead David chose five smooth stones from the stream. And he only used one, hitting Goliath squarely in the forehead and knocking the giant stone, cold dead. Or, to use more traditional Biblical language, with one stone David smote Goliath good!

So, now I want to know, what did David do with the other four stones? Did he take them home as souvenirs? Did he drop them on the dusty desert ground and forget them? Did he give them to King Saul as trophies of war? Did he keep them in his bag and pull them out to regale his friends of his daring exploits? The Bible is strangely silent on this point. The writer gives no account of the other four stones. On this one detail, we are seemingly left in the dark.

But not really. The clues are all there; we just have to read between the lines and read more of David’s story. When David reaches the Israelite camp, Saul’s kingship is in trouble. Just one chapter earlier (1 Samuel 16), God chose David to be Saul’s successor. Saul has lost God’s favor, he’s weak and afraid, and God’s people are in real danger of becoming slaves to the Philistines. The Philistines, Israel’s traditional enemy, are making the most of the situation. Pitting their most formidable warrior against any warrior Israel dares to throw against him, the Philistines are confident of victory.

Goliath taunts the Israelites daily until David volunteers to face him. Showing his courage over and against Saul’s cowardice, David stands ready to meet Goliath’s challenge and to save God’s people with God’s help. But neither Saul nor Goliath think the young shepherd boy is up to the challenge. Saul loads David down with so much armor that David is unable to move. Shedding the useless royal garb, David takes his sling and his God into battle. Seeing him advance, Goliath is insulted. He mocks David and curses David’s God. But David prevails, Goliath dies, and the Philistines run away.

And there we find the important detail that explains the need for the other stones: the Philistines run away! They live to fight another day. The victorious Israelites do not make the Philistines their slaves. Sure, they pursued and slaughtered many of them, but a few survive and they will come back to haunt Israel in the future.

David acts nobly and courageously on this occasion, as befits a rising king, but his victory is incomplete because some of the Philistines live. Later, as a much older king, David would face the Philistine threat again.

*The Philistines went to war again with Israel, and David went down together with his servants. They fought against the Philistines, and David grew weary. **Ishbi-benob**, one of the descendants of the giants, whose spear weighed three hundred shekels of bronze, and who was fitted out with new weapons, said he would kill David. But Abishai son of Zeruiah came to his aid, and attacked the Philistine and killed him. Then David’s men swore to him, ‘You shall not go out with us to battle any longer, so that you do not quench the lamp of Israel.’*

*After this a battle took place with the Philistines, at Gob; then Sibbecai the Hushathite killed **Saph**, who was one of the descendants of the giants. Then there was another battle with the Philistines at Gob; and Elhanan son of Jaare-oregim, the Bethlehemite, killed **Goliath** the Gittite, the shaft of whose spear was like a weaver’s beam. There was again war at Gath, where there was **a man of great size**, who had six fingers on each hand, and six toes on each foot, twenty-four in number; he too was descended from the giants. When he taunted Israel, Jonathan son of David’s brother Shimei, killed him. **These four were descended from the giants in Gath; they fell by the hands of David and his servants.** [2 Samuel 21:15-22]*

On the day David killed Goliath, four other giants stood in the Philistine ranks. Goliath had four brothers! That’s why David needed five smooth stones: one for Goliath and one for each of

the brothers. With this final defeat, the Philistines ceased to be a threat to God’s people Israel. With God’s help and five smooth stones, David conquered Israel’s greatest enemy once and for all.

When God set David against Goliath with only a sling and five smooth stones, God had, in fact, already prepared David for the final defeat of the Philistines. God, whose vision far exceeds our own, saw that the Philistines would one day rise again, and so God prepared David for that future battle too, by having him draw five smooth stones from the stream.

Our God plans ahead. Sometimes way, way in advance. David chose five smooth stones at the beginning of his kingship to defeat an enemy that loomed large at the end of his kingship. In the same way, God prepared from the beginning of time to send Jesus Christ to be our salvation. Knowing that we would stumble and fall, and knowing that we would be unable to right ourselves, God prepared for our rescue before we even knew we needed rescuing. For as the Apostle Paul said to Timothy, *[God] has saved us and called us to a holy life - not because of anything we have done but because of [God’s] own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time* (2 Timothy 1:9).

Before the beginning of time...before human beings even existed...before Adam and Eve disobeyed God in the garden...before you or I ever needed God’s grace...God prepared for our redemption and salvation through Jesus. With his life, death, and resurrection Jesus defeated our greatest enemies. Sin and death no longer plague us, like the giant Philistines plagued the Israelites in David’s day.

God, with infinite love and mercy, set in motion our deliverance before the creation of the world. As we gather for communion today, we remember that David, Goliath, Jesus, and even we are part of God’s great plan for the salvation of the world. We give thanks that God is great and God is good, and we do thank God for this food. All praise and honor to our God, who plans ahead!

Five Smooth Stones

Sunday, August 10, 2014

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

1 Samuel 17:1-11, 32-51

I am a detail person. I like my “I’s” dotted and my “T’s” crossed. I don’t like loose ends. And when I don’t know something – which is often – or when someone poses a question, I can’t rest until I’ve found the answer. Some of the Scripture writers were detail people, too. Many of the Bible’s stories are brimming with details that give us clues to God’s plan.

The story of David and Goliath is no exception. In 1 Samuel 17 we learn lots of interesting details. For example: we have a detailed description of Goliath’s massive size (9 feet tall) and the weight of his impressive armor. We also have details on David’s family of origin: his father, Jesse, is of the tribe of Judah and living in Bethlehem with his sons. We also glean some things about warfare in ancient Israel: we know that David is sent with food to the Israelite camp because families supported the troops with food from home, and we know that single combat often decided a battle with the losing army becoming the slaves of the victorious army.

But there’s always been one small detail that I could never quite figure out. One niggling little phrase that’s bothered me for years: *Then [David] took his staff in his hand, chose five smooth stones from the stream, put them in the pouch of his shepherd’s bag and, with his sling in his hand, approached the Philistine* (v. 40).

David chose “five smooth stones from the stream.” He deliberately counted them out. But why five? Why not four stones? Or six stones? Or twelve stones? Or twenty-five stones? What’s so significant about five smooth stones from a riverbed? Or am I obsessing (which is possible) over a meaningless detail? Then again, are there really any insignificant or meaningless details in the Bible? The writer was careful to include the number of stones in his narrative, so there must be a deeper meaning we’re meant to understand.