

June 20, Ordinary 12B (1 Samuel 17:1a, 4-11, 19-23, 32-49)

## **Saul would have provided better odds against Goliath. But God might not have favored him in the matchup.**

by [Matthew Johnson](#) in the [June 3, 2021](#) issue

I got my first black eye in fourth grade. It was a left-handed uppercut, delivered by a classmate named JD during an indoor recess period on a day when the weather was deemed too grim for outdoor play.

When his knuckles hit my right orbital bone, it made a popping noise like the one you hear inside your head when you first try to speak with a dry mouth. It felt much worse than it sounded, swelling my face and impairing my vision so quickly that my retaliatory strike was limited to a flail and grapple before a teacher pulled us apart.

I should have seen it coming. It was only my second year at North Elementary, but the *ordo studiosus* wasn't all that unique. Bigger was better, and JD was small—specifically, short. And he didn't like the way this made others perceive him.

He yelled at the new kindergarten teacher when she tried to corral him into her classroom on the first day of third grade. At the beginning of baseball season, when the PE teacher thought it would be fun to tell the class about baseball player Eddie Gaedel—the smallest person to ever play in the majors—JD heard the snickering. And when the music teacher played the oft-requested “Short People” by Randy Newman for sing-along time, JD would scowl while others giggled.

As we walked to the administrative office on opposite sides of the teacher, his large hands guiding us there by the scruff, I was overcome with a tremendous confusion. I was one of the newest kids there and someone who didn't have an established circle, so I thought of myself as more kindred to JD than the others. I weighed in at less than 80 pounds and had pointy elbows and ribs you could count from across the room. The day before, we played together outside, and I thought we were friends. If I had seen it coming, I figured his punch would have landed somewhere else.

Yet, as insignificant as I thought I was, I still wasn't as small as JD. It is an easy mistake to make, but simply being a fan of the underdog does not make you an underdog.

People of faith love feeling solidarity with the little ones, and there is a good reason for this. The stories told in scripture show, repeatedly, how God favors the young, the odd, and the small. The pattern is almost predictable: the nobody-wanderer inherits the covenant, the second-born receives the blessings, the castoff saves a generation, the speech-impaired rallies the masses, and the underestimated lefty leads a coup d'état. So, in that canon, Samuel's account of David's rise to power—a shepherd boy who sends an entire army into retreat with one stone—was destined to be a hit.

Saul, with his battlefield experience, would have provided better odds against the giant. But he seems to lack the time or the interest. He's the king: bigger than some mockingly contrived blood sport, and not at all whom God favors in such a matchup. Instead, Saul will face a demise far less epic, one that he is already tumbling toward before Goliath shouts his challenge.

David tries to play it big, talking up his prowess against foes Felidae and Ursidae, but the story itself rebukes such a claim almost immediately when we are made to picture the boy buried like a lump under the king's armor. No, David isn't big. Instead, he's presented here as the archetype for everything that those who are devoted to God should be. He trusts in power that is beyond him, in a power that finds favor in him to spite those who would deify themselves.

But the impact of David's slaying of Goliath can't simply end when the giant hits the ground. It is the echo of an established ethos—and a warning about what the fate of God's people might be if they fail to remain humble and true to God.

David will giant-size himself, and the kings who follow him seem to do so exponentially. When they get too big—too confident in their own wisdom, too self-reliant, or too conceited—their kingdoms are reduced to nothing. The grand does not fare well until it is once again small and able to honor God.

The day of the punch, my assailant and I spent most of the day in the office. It would be much later before I saw what had become of my eye, but based on the horror on the faces of those who walked in, I had a pretty good idea. Their repulsion was far more humiliating than the punch itself.

The principal kept us waiting for a while before she called us in. She said very little as she looked through our files and annotated a few pages in them with a furious scratching of her pen. And, after outlining our punishment for fighting, she ended with an admonishment: "You are fourth graders. You should be bigger than this."

Being bigger is precisely what I fear now. As a participant in a story where God continuously uses small things to make a sacred point, big things make the best targets.