

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

When David steps out to challenge Goliath, he shifts from the acted upon to the actor.

by [Brad Roth](#) in the [June 2024](#) issue

When David steps out to challenge Goliath, he's fighting for the people of God but also claiming his faith and vocation. Until that point in the narrative, David had been more the acted upon than the actor. He's the kid brother that father Jesse forgets to call in from tending the sheep (1 Sam. 16:11). He's at the front lines because his father sent him to take lunch to his brothers and deliver cheese for the soldiers (17:18). At the beginning of his story, everyone is summoning David: Jesse, Saul, even Goliath. When David himself finally speaks, his first words in the narrative are a question: "What shall be done for the man who kills this Philistine and takes away the reproach from Israel?" (17:26).

The scriptures give us a picture of a young person moving from being enmeshed within his family and community, asking questions and figuring out what his place and role are, to becoming himself and discovering his vocation. When David makes the decision not to fight in Saul's armor, it's really just the latest in a string of reversals in the story. He's not merely the baby brother or the cheese deliverer. He's more than the sweet harpist at the back of the room whom Saul forgets (16:18-23; 17:55). God has looked at David's heart, Samuel has anointed him as king, and the Spirit of the Lord has come mightily upon him (16:7, 13). Something turns in David, and he steps out.

The defining moment comes when David tells Saul, "Your servant will go out and fight." The Philistine's terms were "sword and spear and javelin," but young David comes out "in the name of the Lord of hosts." Humanly speaking, it is an impossible trial, one man a "warrior from his youth," the other merely a youth. Goliath's armor likely weighs more than David, who goes out to face him without a sword. Even after David has slain the giant, Saul still calls him a "stripling" (17:56). Yet it is the moment David steps forward that the course shifts in his story and he begins to become his own person and see the faintly traced path that will lead to the kingship.

David takes up his sling and picks his five smooth stones and claims his faith and vocation as his own.

That's how it felt for me. Finding my vocation was about finding my faith. I was the earnest oldest child, growing up in a Christian family and church community. Christian faith made up the wallpaper of my life's most basic assumptions. Bible, church, hymns, baptism. What else could I do?

I came to the living Lord Jesus because of that faith framework, not in spite of it. But I didn't completely own my faith until later, somewhere in that blur between stripling youth and the hint of adulthood. That was also when a vocation to ministry began to stir. My baptism worked on me: becoming a disciple, being washed in the threefold name, learning obedience to everything that Jesus teaches, experiencing his presence (Matt. 28:18-20). I thought: I could do this. In some way, I *must* do this. And I stepped out. I pressed "on to make it my own" (Phil. 3:12).

David, much later in his life, would look back and reflect: "Who am I, O Lord God, and what is my house, that you have brought me thus far?" (1 Chron. 17:16). I feel that too: an amazement at all God's goodness, all the simplest gifts that he has given me. But I also sense the fear and trembling in David's prayer: Who am I to dare to act, to speak, to lead, to step forward? Who do we think we are, getting up in front of a crowd of people hungry for a word and speaking? By what authority?

The question has the power to point us toward a humble kind of reverence. We don't own what has come before us. The calling is beyond our strength and resources. We're stepping into an unscripted kind of life. Yet we can do this. In some ways we must do this. And at some point, it will dawn on us that the God who "does not save by sword and spear" is willing to throw us in front of Goliath with only a sling and a staff and a few stones. Or lead us to the cross.

Which is of course where this is all headed. There is another who will step forward in history, a David deeper still, descended of David's line, who will defeat the enemy of God not with the usual weapons of war, or even the unusual ones of sling and smooth stones, but with his own blood shed over the stone of Golgotha.