

THE POWER AUTHORITY

⁴¹The Philistine came on and drew near to David, with his shield-bearer in front of him. ⁴²When the Philistine looked and saw David, he disdained him, for he was only a youth, ruddy and handsome in appearance. ⁴³The Philistine said to David, "Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks?" And the Philistine cursed David by his gods. ⁴⁴The Philistine said to David, "Come to me, and I will give your flesh to the birds of the air and to the wild animals of the field." ⁴⁵But David said to the Philistine, "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. ⁴⁶This very day the LORD will deliver you into my hand, and I will strike you down and cut off your head; and I will give the dead bodies of the Philistine army this very day to the birds of the air and to the wild animals of the earth, so that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, ⁴⁷and 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." ⁴⁸When the Philistine drew nearer to meet David, David ran quickly toward the battle line to meet the Philistine. ⁴⁹David put his hand in his bag, took out a stone, slung it, and struck the Philistine on his forehead; the stone sank into his forehead, and he fell face down on the ground.

(I Samuel 17:41-49, NRSV)

It was a classic David and Goliath story if there ever was one. During late May and early June 1989 somehow, for a few weeks anyway, a powerful democratic voice spoke out in the voices of thousands of students and demonstrators crowded into Beijing's Tiananmen Square. Ironically, the people had initially gathered to mourn the death of a communist, Hu Yaobang, in April. Hu had become a hero to some in the pro-democracy movement because as head of the Communist Party, he'd tried to help families unjustly purged during the Cultural Revolution. Likewise he apologized for China's occupation of Tibet and proposed policy changes. Finally, Hu took a soft stand on the small-scale student democracy demonstrations in 1986. His leniency led to his removal from power by the Communist Party in 1987 (www.tibet.ca/wtnarchive/1999/4/13_7).

So the crowds began to gather in Tiananmen Square to mourn Hu's death, a man who had given them a ray of hope. Eventually the crowds grew, hunger strikes started and the world began to take notice. The crowd demanded rights that Americans take for granted—freedom of speech and the freedom to determine one's own livelihood. Some artists in the crowd created a statue named the Goddess of Democracy, no doubt inspired by our own Statue of Liberty. Smaller protests broke out all over China including Shanghai. All of the protests were crushed, but none more brutally than in Tiananmen Square (www.cnd.org/China89/intro).

Although we all hoped for the best, the ultimate conclusion was never in doubt. And yet there is that one photograph that will always be in my memory of the solitary, unarmed man staring down a column of advancing tanks. Nevertheless, the well-armed Goliath-like government army would have the last word. This crowd of David-like

young, idealists never stood a chance, but many of us underestimated how bloody the end would be. They advanced from several directions, the government's People's Liberation Army, to oppress and cut down the people gathered in hopes of freedom. This was no Boston Massacre, with five Americans killed and six wounded

(www.earlyamerica.com/review/winter96/massacre). It's interesting that we know more details about what happened in 1770 than we do about something in 1989. The sad truth is that we don't know for sure how many were killed. While the foreign media estimated 50-70 deaths, the American Secretary of State estimated 180-500 deaths, as well as thousands of injuries, including American reporters who were beaten by the Chinese army

(www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB16/documents/index.html#12-29).

Today, some 14 years after the fact there is still no democracy in China. Although aspects of a market economy have been introduced, we're forced to admit that Goliath, the gigantic government with their People's Liberation Army won. Young David was cut down the moment the troops began firing. On the other hand, perhaps it's not over. Perhaps Goliath won the first few rounds, but the fight for freedom continues. One Chinese dissident wrote, "Some say that after the student protests of 1989 and the massacre at Tiananmen Square in 1989, democracy and freedom in China died. I do not believe this to be so, only have some patience and you will see what happens in a generation or two; wait and witness the backbone people can show when they are fighting for their freedom... 'Dictators always look good until the last minutes'"

(www.rjgeib.com/thoughts/china/china).

And so the hopes for freedom and democracy live on in the hearts of many Chinese citizens, as well as in places as close as Cuba. In 18th century America, Patriots dreamed of freedom and democracy. The Boston Massacre of 1770 was neither the beginning nor the end of the colonists' dreams for independence from Great Britain, the success of which we will celebrate this Friday on July 4th. The Boston Massacre became a spark that eventually flamed into American freedom. Those early patriots were David-like with their rag-tag Continental Army. England's Red Coats resembled Goliath with their superior training, guns, and ships. Against the odds the Continental Army, with the help of France, finally prevailed on October 19, 1781 when Cornwallis' army surrendered at Yorktown, Virginia (www.ushistory.org/march/timeline). "Tradition has it that as the British lay down their arms, their army band played an old Scottish tune adapted to the nursery rhyme, 'The World Turned Upside Down'" (memory.loc.gov/ammem/gwhtml/1781).

Today's scripture lesson from I Samuel describes another day the world turned upside down, the day a young shepherd boy armed only with a slingshot brought down a giant fitted with battle armor. David was not the first Israelite to face Goliath in battle, but he was the last. Other Hebrew warriors preceded David to the battlefield, only to be annihilated by the Philistine giant. All of the previous Israelites faced Goliath wearing the best armor and carrying the best arms their army could provide. But it wasn't enough. They did not have the power to defeat the enemy. David on the other hand approached the battle from a spiritual perspective, refusing King Saul's personal armor. He didn't try to be somebody that he wasn't and relied on the gifts God had given him: a slingshot, some stones, and his experience in protecting his sheep. David did not face

Goliath alone. He confronted the giant bravely full of God's power and backed by God's authority.

Amused at the prospect of fighting a shepherd boy, Goliath taunted David saying, "Am I a dog, that you have come to with sticks?" Then in the name of his gods, Goliath cursed David and said, "Come to me and I will give your flesh to the birds of the air and to the wild animals of the field." At this point I must say that I really can't identify with David. I don't think of myself as a coward. But whenever faced with something physically threatening, I have a talent for finding plenty of excuses to keep my distance. David on the other hand trusted God and killed the giant.

Is this story God's way of telling us that we must place ourselves in harm's way? That we must get out there and literally fight? While force is sometimes a necessity, I don't think that the physical battle is the story's point. I think the point is that we all face evil in our world, and that no matter the consequences, we are called to answer it with love.

What do we do and how do we respond when confronted with the Goliaths of the world today? What forces do we battle in our world, our country, and our towns? None of us like to think of ourselves as cowardly, and yet it's easy to remain uninvolved. Some of us feel we're too busy. Some of us feel it's a hopeless cause—that we can't make a difference anyway. These little lies that we tell ourselves, the lies that say what we do isn't really that important, are where we lose the battle before it begins. As long as we're convinced we can't make a difference, we can't. But when the flame of hope is fanned by the wind of faith I believe we can change the world, or at least our little corner of it.

Sometimes it's the little things, like refusing to pass on hurtful gossip, or not laughing at a racist joke. Whenever we're willing to face social awkwardness or rejection in order to stand up for what's right, we're standing up to Goliath.

At other times it's the big things in life, like how we choose to use our lives. I'll always remember the summer of 1989 because that's when I did an internship at Bread for the World in Washington, DC. I was one year away from seminary graduation and I decided to spend the summer working on the problem that troubled me more than any other, world hunger. Despite the depressing statistics, I knew I had to do something. I couldn't eliminate the problem, but I felt called to do my part. I believe that this is all God asks of us: not dramatic endings to all the world's problems, but a willingness to do our part.

Quite honestly hunger activists are about as well armed as David was before Goliath. Nevertheless, they get up every morning determined to cast another stone in the faith that it will make a difference. And the truth is that it does. Back in the 1980's 40,000 people died every day from hunger and diseases related to malnutrition. But people of goodwill throughout the world did not give up and today the statistics are still heartbreaking, but progress is being made. In 2003 the numbers have dropped and

presently 30,000 people die every day. As tragic as that statistic remains, at least we can celebrate that more than 3 and a half million people will live this year that would have died 15 years ago. With all of the resources God has given us, we can make a difference. Every time our church sends food to soup kitchens, money to hunger organizations, and livestock to impoverished communities, we are standing up to Goliath. We're saying we don't care about the odds. What we care about is following God's way.

There were some depressing statistics in Friday's *Newsday* about Long Island's rising homeless population, which currently numbers about 1,800; approximately 40% are children (*Newsday*, 6/27/03, p. A7). Homelessness is one of those problems that's so old and so big, that not many people can muster up excitement about it anymore. But in the same paper, there was also an amazing story about a homeless boy named Louis Daniels. Daniels' family has been homeless off and on since 1995, having been evicted from their apartment and bounced around from homeless shelters to fleabag motels. Despite the long odds, Louis Daniels worked hard and recently graduated from Longwood High School in Middle Island. In the fall he will enter Yale University with a full scholarship. Talk about David defeating Goliath. Here's a young man without a decent place to sleep, a quiet place to study, or a steady source of good meals. Here's a young man who could never afford special tutoring or elite study aids. And as if the teen years aren't plagued with enough insecurities, throw in the stigma of being homeless. If he had listened to Goliath, he would have believed that homeless kids don't have a shot, especially at the big time. But through his determination and hard work, he earned a trip to the Ivy League. What an inspiration. What a reminder of why our church continues to support our Adventures in Learning program—so that children with similar disadvantages might reach their potential as well. Louis Daniels didn't do it on his own. He had encouragement from teachers and administrators, as well as his family. We too can offer encouragement to kids by becoming mentors or by working in literacy programs. We can reach out in love no matter what the odds. Yes the Goliaths of our world can be intimidating, but God goes with us as we gather our stones and prepare our slingshots.

Jesus could have looked at the human race, thrown up his arms and said, "What's the point? Most of them will never get it and those who do are too few and far between." But he didn't. Instead Jesus taught and healed, listened and loved all who crossed his path. And when the Goliaths of this world eventually executed him it seemed that all was lost. His disciples grieved his death and then ran for the hills. But the power of God is ultimately greater than the power of Goliath as the disciples learned when they entered the empty tomb. With this faith in our hearts, let's do all we can to help educate the children and house the homeless, feed the hungry and heal the sick, encourage the hopeless and stand in solidarity with those still longing for freedom and democracy. AMEN.

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PASTORAL PRAYER

Eternal God, we thank you for our country and the many blessings we enjoy—freedom and justice, opportunity and privilege. We are painfully aware, O God, of the many places around our world where children go hungry because their parents are penniless, where the elderly starve because of famine, where young people are imprisoned for speaking their minds. Help us commit our lives to following Christ who offered food to the hungry, water to the thirsty, and compassion to the suffering. Use us, our lives and resources, to transform this world of yours, that our sisters and brothers might know plenty instead of want, and democracy instead of oppression. Guide our leaders to rearrange our national priorities that those people who are the most vulnerable will be the top priority. We pray through the compassionate and loving name of Jesus. AMEN.