

Sermon, 15 March 2026, Church of Scotland Geneva

Text 1: 1 Samuel 17: 41-54 (taken from New International Version):

The Philistine Goliath started walking toward David, with his shield bearer walking in front of him. He kept coming closer, and when he got a good look at David, he was filled with scorn for him because he was just a nice, good-looking boy. He said to David, "What's that stick for? Do you think I'm a dog?" And he called down curses from his god on David. "Come on," he challenged David, "and I will give your body to the birds and animals to eat."

David answered, "You are coming against me with sword, spear, and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty, the God of the Israelite armies, which you have defied. This very day the Lord will put you in my power; I will defeat you and cut off your head. And I will give the bodies of the Philistine soldiers to the birds and animals to eat. Then the whole world will know that Israel has a God, and everyone here will see that the Lord does not need swords or spears to save his people. He is victorious in battle, and he will put all of you in our power."

Goliath started walking toward David again, and David ran quickly toward the Philistine battle line to fight him. He reached into his bag and took out a stone, which he slung at Goliath. It hit him on the forehead and broke his skull, and Goliath fell face downward on the ground. And so, without a sword, David defeated and killed Goliath with a sling and a stone! He ran to him, stood over him, took Goliath's sword out of its sheath, and cut off his head and killed him.

When the Philistines saw that their hero was dead, they ran away. The men of Israel and Judah shouted and ran after them, pursuing them all the way to Gath and to the gates of Ekron. The Philistines fell wounded all along the road that leads to Shaaraim, as far as Gath and Ekron. When the Israelites came back from pursuing the Philistines, they looted their camp. David got Goliath's head and took it to Jerusalem, but he kept Goliath's weapons in his own tent.

Text 2: Matthew 17: 14-21 (taken from New International Version):

When they returned to the crowd, a man came to Jesus, knelt before him, and said, "Sir, have mercy on my son! He is an epileptic and has such terrible attacks that he often falls in the fire or into water. I brought him to your disciples, but they could not heal him."

Jesus answered, "How unbelieving and wrong you people are! How long must I stay with you? How long do I have to put up with you? Bring the boy here to me!" Jesus gave a command to the demon, and it went out of the boy, and at that very moment he was healed.

Then the disciples came to Jesus in private and asked him, "Why couldn't we drive the demon out?"

"It was because you do not have enough faith," answered Jesus. "I assure you that if you have faith as big as a mustard seed, you can say to this hill, 'Go from here to there!' and it will go. You could do anything!"

Do we believe in something which matters ? Or are we all just a bit stupid ? There are enough people who would say that we are. They would quite happily tell us and anyone else who cares to listen that what we describe as faith is just an excuse to believe in something which we can't prove. Some might even claim that we're simply lazy. We don't stop to consider the facts, we don't look at what anyone with half a brain can see, and we certainly don't try to make a logical argument out of them. Apparently.

There are some more generous takes on it. Some will respect Christians down through the ages for when they have suffered and even died for their faith. Nonetheless, that doesn't seem to prove anything. It just generates a degree of pity for people who would be that taken in. Or, at best, it puts Christianity on a par with nationalism, political ideologies or even philosophies such as humanism, for whose values some people have died throughout history.

So what do we believe in ? Is it no more than a glorified fairy tale ? We all know the stories of Little Red Riding Hood, Snow White or Hanzel and Gretel. But

you'd be hard pushed to find anyone who thinks they represent historical fact. Certainly, I doubt that anybody here believes in those fairy stories. So why do we believe enough in what the Bible teaches us to make it, if we do as Jesus taught, the basis of how we live ?

Well, first of all we need a dose of humility. It's certainly true that we believe in something we can't see or prove scientifically but that doesn't mean it's not there. It would only mean that it's not there if we could be entirely certain that what we term science and knowledge were absolute and complete. However, are we so sure of ourselves that we know that ? They say that if there are other life forms out there in the universe at the range of the stars we can see – and I stress, those we can see, not any further – then if they can see this planet just now, they'll think that the French Revolution is going on at the moment. That's the length of time it would take light to travel to those stars. So what makes us so supremely confident that something can't exist unless we can experience it by seeing it, hearing it or feeling it ?

This was where Goliath, the Philistine warrior, was fatally mistaken. He was taller, stronger and more fearsome than any, other warrior in the Philistine or Israelite armies. You could see that. Everyone could see that. They could also see how David was no more than a young shepherd boy. If you took the facts at face value, if you considered them from the perspective of ourselves at the centre, then it was logically impossible that David was doing anything in challenging Goliath other than writing his own suicide note.

But as David said, "Everyone here will see that the Lord does not need swords or spears to save his people. He is victorious in battle, and he will put all of you in our power."

So here's the question. Did David simply believe in nonsense and then just get incredibly lucky ? Or did David believe in something real ?

It's not a comfortable question. If asked, most, if not all, of us here would say that we believe in God. However, if we were asked to face Goliath and told to rely on our faith because God does not need military superiority to win a victory, how certain would we be ?

That said, I don't want to discourage anybody. Everybody's faith has limits. Jesus told His Disciples upfront that they could not heal the epileptic boy with a demon inside him. "It was because you do not have enough faith," He said. It did not make Jesus very happy. Quite the opposite as the story today is one of the few, recorded instances of Jesus almost losing His temper. But He continued to teach and heal while His Disciples stayed with Him. They might not have been quite up to the job at that point, but they would go on to found the Church we still know today.

Let's return to David. To answer the question above, no, David did not simply believe in nonsense. He did not just get lucky. His later career as king and soldier would demonstrate very well that David was no idiot. In fact, he knew what he was doing with his slingshot but that was not what he believed in. He believed that God had sent him to carry out His will and that this would be done. What he believed in was his place in the greater scheme of God's Creation and what he was being called to do.

That is what real faith is. It's not a belief in a fairy story, in a hypothesis, in somebody's imagination. It's a belief in something which is very real. It's a belief in something which is just as real as anything else. Perhaps you can't see it, touch it, hear it, taste it or smell it? So what? Are you the ultimate judge of what constitutes reality and what doesn't? Since when was reality all about you?

Goliath believed very much in what he could see. He could tell very well that strength, as he defined it, was greatest on his side and could not be equalled on the Israelite side. But it was not all about him. It was not even all about David. David killed Goliath but the greater defeat of the Philistines needed the Israelite army to get up and attack after David had demonstrated that God was indeed on their side. At no point did David claim to be the be-all and end-all. Goliath challenged him from his point of view as the greatest warrior on the battlefield. David responded, "I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty".

We can't believe in the power of God if our starting point is a world where we set the standards. Jesus did not expect His Disciples to heal anybody with their own, inherent abilities. They didn't have them. What He told them was, "I assure you that if you have faith as big as a mustard seed, you can say to this hill, 'Go from here to there!' and it will go. You could do anything!"

Why ? Because He was asking them to go out and be God's agents in the world. They needed a faith which was a belief in the very real power of God. That is why we can't have real faith if our outlook is too self-centred for us to recognize that there is more to existence than us.

We see very often just now a world where might is considered right and nothing matters unless you can define it and own it. Faith in something you can't prove through strength is the pathetic refuge of those too weak to be able to help themselves. Those trying to help others, those who say that there may be more to life than just what we can throw at it ourselves, are believers in what can only be pure nonsense. But such a view leads to a very narrow outlook. If we are all that matters, if we are the gold standard, then what do we stand to achieve ? What can we do of any value since nothing matters more than us and who we already are ? Ironically enough, it's when we acknowledge that there is a God, Who is infinitely greater than we are, but to Whom we matter enough to give His own Son, that we start to understand that there's a lot more which we might well achieve. What we need is to believe in a world which we're only part of but where we can do so much more by playing our part with others and with God.

So if we're struggling with our faith, if we're finding it hard to believe, we can start by praying to God and telling Him that no, we don't understand and we can't see how we are supposed to make a difference. However, we also know that we are not called to make a difference on our own. We are called to have faith in something much greater. We want to believe. We want to know what that is. We can tell God that we are ready to act, not because we know what to expect, but because we believe that there is something to expect. If we are ready to serve, then we can be ready to find it.

And there is much to find. David used his seemingly insignificant abilities and enabled the Israelites to achieve a victory which nobody could have imagined until that point. They were desperate enough to give a mere shepherd-boy a chance. Yet they won. Jesus told His Disciples, that with the tiniest amount of faith, "You could do anything !"

There is a lot out there to discover, a lot to find and a lot to do. Our faith will let us down if we simply ask how we are supposed to manage all this. The faith we need is the faith that there is more, much more, at work but God is calling us to have that faith the size of a mustard seed so that we can play our role in it. We don't have to

believe that we will save the world. We just need to believe that God is calling us to do what we can with what we have and that if we do, the results may well be more than we could imagine.