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The National Presbyterian Church

“Gideon: God at Work in an Age of Chaos”

Judges 6:1-6, 12-16, 36-40; 7:1-21

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In our sermons this year, through the fall and onto the spring, we are looking at selected stories of the Bible in chronological order. We’re doing so with the help of an abbreviated Bible called “The Story.” The Story IS the Bible – just not all of it, but selected passages focusing (not surprisingly!) on the stories rather than the rules and regulations or poems.

Today we come to the seventh book in the Bible: The Book of Judges, which tells of events that took place about 11-1200 years or so before Jesus at a time when the whole people of ancient Israel were in peril.

- They’d escaped from slavery in Egypt
- They’d made it through the desert to their new land (under the leadership of Moses)
- They’d conquered the territory and settled in it (under the leadership of Joshua)

BUT so quickly and easily they began to forget that it was by God’s power and love that they did it! Not by their own strength. And instead of following God’s “laws for life” (the Ten Commandments and the laws that flowed from them) they began to follow the morality and religion of the prevailing culture, leading them to come under God’s judgment: which, in their case, meant constant battles with vicious enemies who wanted to wipe them off the face of the earth; enemies who invaded their fields and communities to destroy both their crops and their lives (see Judges 6:1-6).

Some years ago now, my wife, Currie, were in Israel, and went to an archaeological dig, and found ourselves crawling through a small, barely visible hole in a hillside into an underground series of excavated rooms: the kind of refuge mentioned in Judges 6, and the only possible place of safety against the onslaught. The experience was quite sobering!

So it was in this kind of a world – a world of political and religious chaos, confusion and desperation – that God’s people began to pray again (after many years of forgetting to pray!). And God heard their cries for help, and raised up leaders to help his people, and among them,

- a woman by the name of Deborah
- and a strong man by the name of Samson
- And also -- the person I want us to focus on today: a man called Gideon, under whose leadership the powerful enemy were unexpectedly subdued, leading Israel to experience 40 years of peace and prosperity and safety and security.

And so the key questions for today are these:

- What was it in Gideon’s life that led him to become the leader whom God was able to use with such success?
- What was it that God found in his life, or created in his life that made him so useful and effective as a leader of God’s people?

To which immediately, as we read Judges 6 -7, at least one answer springs to mind, and takes the form of the negative: that it certainly was NOT his perfection.

In fact, Gideon fits right in with so many of God's people whose lives and stories are shared in the pages of Scripture: people loved by God, called, used, and blessed by God – so many of them are far from perfect. And the Scripture never hides this. And Gideon fits right in!

In his case his major weakness has to do with belief: his difficulties with belief and with believing – not in God as such, but difficulty believing that God should be his first priority! In other words, he has a problem with the sin of idolatry. In fact, in later life, his wealth becomes a major distraction from God, and he actually uses it create an idol which he worships (see Judges 8:22f).

Of course, we're not likely to do exactly the same as Gideon, at least not so overtly?! (Explicitly making something that we deliberately worship). But the late Presbyterian theologian Jack Rogers hits the nail on the head when he says that idolatry is "the love of any-thing or any-one more than God." Or, our "dependence on any-thing or any-one more than God."

(So come to think of it, I may have an idol right here in my pocket! My cell phone!)

So Gideon is flawed, and one of his flaws is idolatry – and we need to be watchful for this kind of "faithlessness" in our lives too.

But then there's another flaw, a little more down to earth, which is simply that Gideon has a hard time believing God! Once again, not so much that God exists, nor even that God is first, but that God is interested IN HIM! And that God had a specific purpose for his life: a "call" or a "vocation."

(It's important to note that in his case, Gideon had been a farmer, and his call was not to become a "religious person" – a priest, or prophet, or pastor; but to become a warrior and a leader. In other words the "call of God" blurs the lines between the religious and secular; God calls and uses people in both realms).

To be sure, eventually Gideon would have a great confidence in the power and presence of God for him; and eventually the sense of God's call within his life would give him strength to do what others could not do, and he'd be successful. But this was not the case with Gideon at first. At first Gideon struggled with the very idea that God Might call him into his service and this struggle he had, despite the fact that when God came to him and said to him, "I want you to lead the armies of Israel" – God did so through an angel! (Judges 6:12-16).

I, mean: I'd like an angel!! Wouldn't you!? I've prayed before:

"Lord, just send me an angel and I'll know exactly what to do."

Right? I mean that would make things patently clear. "Lord, just send a real live angel like you did in the past and I will know your will perfectly."

But not so with Gideon! With Gideon, an angel actually comes, BUT even then, he still had doubts and fears about God's will; he still wasn't convinced that this call was real, that he was the one – "God's person" – to lead God's people.

And so, as we read Judges 6: 36-40, Gideon turns to God and has the gall to demand of God another sign to confirm the call! As if an angel is not enough, Gideon asks for another sign to assure him that he has been called by God to take the lead in ancient Israel.

“Lord – here’s a sheep’s fleece. If I leave it out overnight, I’ll know your will if the fleece is wet from the dew and the ground is dry.”

And then he tries it yet one more time – the next night – with a little hesitation, Gideon says to God,

‘Do not let your anger burn against me. Let me speak one more time. Let me please make trial with the fleece just once more. This time let it be dry only on the fleece and on the ground -- dew.’

And that’s what happened. And this time: Gideon got the message! – but what’s most amazing is that for this to happen, God stooped down to Gideon’s level, to Gideon’s imperfection; God accommodated himself to Gideon’s weakness, and still embraced him and extended to him his call.

Be careful: that does not mean that we can do that all the time (check out Zechariah in Luke 1:18-20), and keep putting God to the test. BUT what it certainly does mean and point to is the incredible Good News that GOD doesn’t wait for us to be perfect before God sets his love us; before God calls us to embrace his purpose for our lives.

Time and again, God overlooks the weaknesses in our faith, and pursues us anyway AND WE CALL THIS GRACE: a life-changing belief that God reaches out to us -- despite our sin and weakness, before we do anything for God. And brings us into his family as a gift!! Gives to our lives a specific call as a gift, a specific vocation – not just to live life the way we want, but to find meaning and the deepest possible fulfilment, in serving God the way God wants. The grace is in both God acceptance and present in our lives, AND in his call to live a life of purpose.

John Calvin our theological father, puts it like this (Calvin Institutes, Bk3 Ch10 §6)

The Lord bids each one of us in all life’s action to look to his (or her) calling. For God knows with what great restlessness human nature flames, how its ambition longs to embrace various things at once

If we know that the Lord’s calling is, in everything, the beginning and foundation of well doing, then even the magistrate will discharge his functions more willingly; the head of the household will confine himself to his duty; each one will bear and swallow the discomforts, vexations, weariness, and anxieties in his/her way of life, when he/she has been persuaded that the burden was laid upon him by God.

From this will arise also a singular consolation that no task will be so sordid and base – provided you obey your calling in it – that it will not shine and be reckoned very precious in God’s sight.

So God says to you and me, as he did implicitly to Gideon, “You’re the one I love. Your greatest joy will always lie in finding MY purpose for you.

SO seek it out! Pray to discern it! Ask a friend: they may be the angel you need! And never forget that God is looking, as with Gideon, for the willing, and not the perfect. Though, also like Gideon, we too can sometime forget this, or struggle to believe it

Sometimes our struggle is **internal**: we feel so bad about ourselves.

So we say: “Who? Me? God use me? Not likely! Ever!”

In fact – in Gideon’s case (Judges 6:15), he pointed out to God that he was the youngest in a very small and insignificant family; so this “call thing” must be some kind of mistake!

And sometimes we can miss God’s call, when we do this: because we allow the voice of this internal struggle to win the day.

So sometimes the struggle is internal

Though often it can also be external.

We spend our time and attention looking at others who seem to have it all together: confidence, good looks, great job, great family, no problems. And so we say “surely they’re the ones God is interested in: not me”

And this can become a real problem, especially in an age of social media, where gazing at others and focusing on images may be linked not just to pornography, but with a growing – and sometimes debilitating obsession, that can become “godless” or the opposite, “idolatrous,” that believes that other people’s lives and news, are so much more interesting, ideal and important than ours. And once again, we miss the call because of this wrongly directed interest.

In fact, when it comes to this external distraction from God’s call, the truth is that you never know what is going on in other people’s lives; you never know what is going on behind closed doors; the appearance of perfection can mask a thousand weaknesses, and pains and sorrows, and burdens and insecurities, that no one sees on the outside which was something that Gideon discovered on a remarkable night when he and a small group from the army of Israel won their greatest military victory in decades.

For Gideon and his men, it was the enemy – the Midianites and Amalekites – who seemed so perfect – so “altogether,” so advanced and strong and sophisticated and invulnerable.

Our passage in Judges 6-7 mentions their camels on a couple of occasions, and indicates that they were numerous. The reference seems innocuous, but you need to think of camels as the equivalent of sophisticated tanks: the key weapon of the day to run roughshod over everything and every-one. In other words, the enemy had the “hi-tech”! And besides, the Israelites were outnumbered by them at least 4 to 1.

But God knew better God knew that appearances were deceptive, and that the enemy was far weaker than they looked. And that with just the right rumor, fear could spread like wild-fire through their camp, and bring them to their knees. Which is exactly what happened:

LISTEN to Judges 7 from The Message (MSG)

Gideon got up early the next morning, all his troops right there with him. They set up camp at Harod’s Spring. The camp of Midian was in the plain, north of them near the Hill of Moreh.

²⁻³God said to Gideon, “You have too large an army with you. I can’t turn Midian over to them like this—they’ll take all the credit, saying, ‘I did it all myself,’ and forget about me. Make a public announcement: ‘Anyone afraid, anyone who has any qualms at all, may leave Mount Gilead now and go home.’” Twenty-two companies headed for home. Ten companies were left.

⁴God said to Gideon: “There are still too many. Take them down to the stream and I’ll make a final cut.

⁷God said to Gideon: “I’ll use the three hundred men who lapped at the stream to save you and give Midian into your hands. All the rest may go home.”

⁸After Gideon took all their provisions and trumpets, he sent all the Israelites home. He took up his position with the three hundred. The camp of Midian stretched out below him in the valley.

⁹⁻¹²That night, God told Gideon: “Get up and go down to the camp. I’ve given it to you. If you have any doubts about going down, go down with Purah your armor bearer; when you hear what they’re saying, you’ll be bold and confident.” He and his armor bearer Purah went down near the place where sentries were posted. Midian and Amalek, all the easterners, were spread out on the plain like a swarm of locusts. And their camels! Past counting, like grains of sand on the seashore!

¹³Gideon arrived just in time to hear a man tell his friend a dream. He said, “I had this dream: A loaf of barley bread tumbled into the Midianite camp. It came to the tent and hit it so hard it collapsed. The tent fell!”

¹⁴His friend said, “This has to be the sword of Gideon son of Joash, the Israelite! God has turned Midian—the whole camp!—over to him.”

¹⁵When Gideon heard the telling of the dream and its interpretation, he went to his knees before God in prayer.

[This was his life-changing “ahaa” moment, when he internalized the truth that with God, all things were possible]

Then he went back to the Israelite camp and said, “Get up and get going! God has just given us the Midianite army!”

¹⁹⁻²²Gideon split the men into three companies of a hundred men, and Gideon went with one of the groups to the edge of the camp at the beginning of the middle watch, just after the sentries had been posted.

They blew the trumpets, at the same time smashing the jars they carried.

All three companies blew the trumpets and broke the jars.

They held the torches in their left hands and the trumpets in their right hands, ready to blow, and shouted, “A sword for God and for Gideon!”

They were stationed all around the camp, each man at his post.

The whole Midianite camp jumped to its feet, yelled, and fled.

When the three hundred blew the trumpets, God aimed each Midianite’s sword against his companion, all over the camp.

So, in a twinkling of an eye, the appearance of power and perfection were gone, and little old Gideon, the youngest of his insignificant clan, comes out on top!

My friends, how wonderful to know that God chooses us by grace that God does not wait for us to be perfect. AND that in his grace, God chooses us for a purpose: God has a call for every single one of us

- not just for others
- but for me and you!

Believe this – the Good news of the Gospel! Seek his call for your life, and find life that is life indeed!

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