Gideon and God

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Judges 6:11-16

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All right, where are we now, into week eight of THE STORY? We’ve been with Moses to see how God rescued and delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt—about 3,500 years ago, give or take! We’ve been with them through the 40 years of whining, grumbling and wilderness wanderings. Just last week, we followed Joshua and the Israelites across the River Jordan into the Promised Land of Canaan—sweet milk and honey! Today, we come to a 325-year stretch of Israel’s history, the period of the Judges. LET US PRAY…

We thank you, good and faithful God, that You are here, right now and always, to teach, strengthen, to inspire. May these next moments, in Your Living Word, now be for You a tangible sign of our desire to more fully know You, love You, follow You. In and through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Teacher. Amen.

This period of the Judges can be summarized by reading the very last verse of the very last chapter of the Book of Judges (21:25): “In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes.” Throughout Judges the Israelites repeatedly turn their backs on God, choosing to do their own messy things, going their own way, idolizing their own gods. (Read later Paul’s Romans 1:25 to find out how alike (1st Century) we Christians are!)

The Book of Judges covers 12 Judges over six major time periods that essentially followed the same pattern or cycle. The cycle would go like this: the Lord would raise up a “judge,” a righteous, God-fearing, God-honoring person. Then, God would use the Judge to bring the people out of their faithlessness and disobedience, and back into right relationship with the Lord. Here’s one way to think about it—REBEL-REPENT-RETURN, REBEL-REPENT-RETURN. Six cycles like this, through 12-15 generations, over 325 years!

This morning, our “man of the hour” is Judge Gideon, the fifth of Israel’s 12 Judges, who was the Judge during the fourth cycle of six just described. He’s not as well-known as Moses or King David (coming in a couple weeks!). We sing a “catchy” song about Joshua, “Joshua fought the battle of Jericho.” But there’s no catchy song about Gideon. There’s a Bible named after him, found in hotel rooms! Or, if we know Gideon at all, it’s because of that wet and then dry patch of lamb’s wool (fleece)
which Gideon used to make sure God was with him before going into battle.

We first meet Gideon in our Scripture today at Judges 6:11-16. There is this “theophany” (literally an “angel of God sighting”). Here you see the Lord commissioning Gideon, and Gideon pushing back, and then God reassuring Gideon:

_The angel of the Lord came and sat down under the oak in Ophrah that belonged to Joash the Abeizrite, where his son Gideon was threshing wheat in a winepress to keep it from the Midianites. When the angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon, he said, “The Lord is with you, mighty warrior.” “Pardon me, my lord,” Gideon replied, “but if the Lord is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all his wonders that our ancestors told us about when they said, ‘Did not the Lord bring us up out of Egypt?’ But now, the Lord has abandoned us and given us into the hand of Midian.” The Lord turned to him and said, “Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian’s hand. Am I not sending you?” “Pardon me, my lord,” Gideon replied, “but how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, * and I am the least in my family?” The Lord answered, “I will be with you, and you will strike down all the Midianites, leaving none alive.” _

Gideon is minding his own business when the “angel of the Lord” comes to him and says, "The Lord is with you, mighty warrior." The Lord then directly calls out to Gideon and “commissions” him to rally the men of Israel to mount a “Holy War” (as Pete suggested last week) against the Midianites. You get the sense that Gideon is anything but a “mighty warrior.” Timid, afraid, cowering, yes, but not a “mighty man of valor”. Gideon is actually hiding; he’s threshing wheat in a makeshift grainery, providing some food for his family. He’s down in the bottom of a winepress hiding from the invading Midianites. Midianites? These guys were desert-dwelling, camel-riding, ruthless pirates, really, who especially at harvest time would sweep across the Jordan into Canaan and help themselves to all the food and livestock they wanted.

About Gideon and God. They’ve got this beautiful, candid, straight-up relationship with each other. Their interactions are honest with give-and-take (reminiscent of Moses and God). In all his anxiety, Gideon is constantly needing assurances (six times in the two-chapter story!). You heard the first two: a real live face-to-face encounter with the angel of the
Lord, and then a direct Word from the Lord Himself. I don’t know about you, but I’d be “good to go” for God at this point! Gideon needs to hear God’s sure promise, “I am with you.”

Gideon asks for “signs” to reassure him that God is going to do what God says He’s going to do. There’s the sign the Lord provides—burnt toast and charbroiled meat on the rocks, well done! (vv.17-24). There’s the piece of drenched fleece and then the piece of dried-out fleece (6:39). I love how God listens to Gideon’s insecurities, and how God understands. I love how God provides the signs to show that God can be trusted. And I love how God tests Gideon. “What is this man made of?” God wonders; “How obedient, how devoted is he?” So the Lord asks Gideon to destroy an altar made to the false god of Baal. God asks Gideon to build (in its place) a true altar to worship the one Living, Holy Lord. Gideon obeys and he shows his passion for purity and holiness amidst a culture run amuck by defying and forgetting God.

What a rich relationship between Gideon and God. Appealing, compelling? Perhaps Christ’s Spirit is inviting you by way of The Story to desire this same kind of relationship with God? What we see and learn about ourselves here in the Gideon story is this: Gideon’s life, not at all perfect, is an honest life with God, for God. His is a life of timidity to trust to triumph (and he also messes up again).

By the way, if you haven’t, you’ve got to read Gideon and God’s final triumph scene. God pushes Gideon to his limits of confidence and trust. God orders Gideon to radically “downsize” his army of about 32,000 to just 300. Holy cow! Only 300? Mind you, these Israelite fighters are pretty weak and poorly-armed. I mean they’ve got a body and an engine like a 1971 Ford Pinto or the 1978 AMC Pacer. Anyway, Gideon brings his rag-tag army of 300 together (carrying a few stones, knives, and noisy musical instruments), and he puts them up against 20,000 Midianite mad-men. God is such a show-off! God loves these odds just to show off His might and power. For Gideon and God, it’s a total rout, an utter smoting/smiting of the enemy. From Timidity to Trusting to Triumph. It’s a great story for us, for our lives!

But here’s the deal, God wants nothing more than for us to see God. Most of all, in this story, God wants nothing more than to reveal Himself to us in order to speak powerfully into our stories, our lives. In other
words, in this story what do you see about God that can speak to your life, your circumstances, fears, hesitations, longings? Let me lift up four things about God.

First, the Lord is purposeful with us. If you are feeling as if your life is aimless, even useless; if you are in the grip of the endless, monotonous routines; if you are in need of re-direction, seek God’s purposes! But be fair warned: desiring, seeking, really praying for God’s purposes to be revealed and given to you may include things that might be really hard, challenging, difficult. But trust this, God promises to be with you, as God is with Gideon.

Second, the Lord is patient with us. When fears and insecurities weigh us down; when we’ve got feet of lead, or that nauseous pit in the stomach, God does and will step in with divine forbearance. Consider God’s patience, “long-suffering during those 325 years of rebellion, to repentance, to a rescued return to God. How patient is God with us! The disciple/apostle Peter talks about Christ’s patience, who for as long as it takes, waits for all humanity to be rescued and redeemed, upon Christ’s return (2 Peter 3:8-10, 14-15).

Third, the Lord does not tire of reassuring us. Gideon receives constant assurances from God. The God who gave breath and life to Gideon, the God who knows Gideon inside and out (all his weaknesses and his strengths) cares thoroughly for GIDEON. God is tender with us. God is gentle with us. It might not be fleece or an angel’s visit that God uses, but God does and will reassure us: A verse from Scripture at just the right time; a line from a song that quiets our hearts; a word from a friend ~ or even a stranger ~ that lifts our countenance, that builds us up. God doesn’t tire of reassuring us.

Finally, we can’t avoid seeing this about God. It’s there in the opening chapters of Genesis and right here in Judges this morning. Fourth, the Lord is Holy; the Lord is set apart, and the Lord hates sin. The Israelites are constantly doing what they think is right in their own eyes (not God’s). It’s a hard pill to swallow, and we, too, find ourselves in the cycle of rebelling and repenting and returning to God. Yet, through it all, God is constantly drawing us home to Himself, warming us by the Spirit to come back to God, and to worship God and God alone.
Here’s the kicker. Ultimately God sends His own Son. Speaking of the Judges, in John’s Gospel Jesus declares that the Father has given to His Son “all authority to execute judgment upon us.” (John 5:22-29). Jesus the Christ becomes the perfect, righteous Judge who withdraws the justice we all deserve. Instead, Jesus Christ pours out mercy (loving-kindness) upon us. Instead, Jesus covers us in grace upon grace upon grace. Just as God was with Gideon, is there anyone else who you would rather have with you? Guilty as we are, is there anyone else who has already and forever paid the price? Is there anyone but Jesus who has already taken the judgment upon Himself for you? Jesus promises to be with you, by His and because of His mercy, grace, His love for you.