

Judges: When All Hell Breaks Loose

“The LORD Is with You: Calling and Trust”

Judges 6:1-2, 6-32, 36:40

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We've been looking at the Old Testament book of Judges this Fall. The book of Judges lays out the story of God's people after they come into the land of promise and the story is cyclical. There is a pattern we've seen already. Because the Israelites failed to take all of the land, and let some of the idols and worship of the Canaanites remain, they become intertwined with their gods and worship... they fall into sin, again, and again. Then they become oppressed by other peoples... they cry out for help... *and God raises up a redeemer, a judge to save. This is the cycle.*

A few weeks ago, we looked at Ehud the judge. He restores the people, and we're told afterwards the land was at rest for 80 years... Last week after Deborah, we're told afterwards the land was at peace and rest for only 40 years...before we come to the time of Gideon. *So, not only is there a cycle...* but it appears that the cycle is more like a downward spiral. Things are getting worse... the trajectory is downward. The amount of time between the redemption of Israel, and their falling back into sin and oppression is getting shorter and shorter... and each time of oppression is getting worse and worse, and more bleak and desperate.

So, where does the story take us today? Well, 40 years after the time of Deborah and Barak, chapter 6 opens with those dreaded words, *“the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, and the LORD gave them into the hand of Midian seven years.”*

The Midianites were a race of semi-nomadic people from the desert to the South of Judah... from the Syrian desert. Scholars tell us interestingly too, that the Midianites were most likely the first race of people that used Camels in military warfare- a type of secret weapon that was novel and new. The Midianites overwhelmed the Israelites in the land of promise, the land of milk and honey... Remember, this land is meant to be cultivated, and when it is cultivated properly it is like the Garden of Eden in what it can produce and bless the people with. But, Midian's interest is not necessarily power, but instead, to suck the land completely dry... Raids upon Raids of Midianites would sweep over the land, and they so abused the land and stole the food and provisions of Israel, that the Israelites were left in poverty. This once beautiful and fruitful land... was now left abused and barren.

We're told that when the Israelites would plant or harvest food, the Midianites would sweep in, set up camps in the land, and eat all of the food, *“they would come like locusts.”* Israel's crops, livestock, and fruits would be ravaged, and they would be left with long, hard, lean winters.

And fearful that if they had anything the Midianites would come and take it... the Israelites were forced to leave where they were and seek refuge in the hills and mountains, in dens and caves... Israel is left in poverty. Virtually homeless within their homeland.

However, this is where the need of the people leads them into even deeper problems, because they begin to turn to the idols of the land, the idols of Baal, the fertility gods, to bring life and fruitfulness to the land and the people...

It seems to be part of the human condition...our sin... that our idolatry is often born out of our need. We search for answers to the problems of our lives and more often than not, we seek answers from places outside of God. The people are poor and hungry and displaced and so they're turning to the gods of Baal, and when they were brought this low....

Finally, look at v. 6 – *“And Israel was brought very low because of Midian. And the people of Israel cried out to help to the LORD.”*

And so, God raises up a new redeemer. A new judge. A man named Gideon. So far through the book of Judges, Gideon might be the most familiar Bible name to us... that is most likely due to the story we're going to read next week being taught to children in Sunday schools for years and years and years. HOWEVER... we're getting used to the fact now I hope, that the book of Judges doesn't seem to be a book for Children's Sunday school! I remember someone saying, if you want awkward... just try reading the book of Judges together around the family dinner table. The questions will come fast! I was once in a young adult's bible study that was called, *“The Stories you Never heard in Sunday School.”* And a lot of them came from the book of Judges!!

Part of Gideon's story is often told in Sunday school... but not all of it. Gideon is not quite the faithful leader we may think one should be. In fact, he's full of doubt and skepticism. He's cynical. He's cowardly. And most of all... *this problem of Idolatry that the people of Israel always have... is the problem that Gideon can never quite shake either.* And so, today and next week we see again the subject and problem of idols and idolatry... like we see throughout much of the book of Judges, and much of the Old Testament, and like we see in the New Testament when we think about our selfish and inordinate desires. Our over-desires....

So, today we look at the beginning of Gideon's story, this doubting nobody... *And really it speaks to how we as followers of Jesus can remain faithful in an uncertain and unbelieving world...* I want us to see it in three points, or under three headings...

1. *Receiving the Call*, 2. *Unpacking the Call*, 3. *Trusting the Call*.

First, 1. Receiving the Call – *v. 11 Now the angel of the Lord came and sat under the terebinth at Ophrah, which belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, while his son Gideon was beating out wheat in the winepress to hide it from the Midianites. 12 And the angel of the Lord appeared to him and said to him, “The Lord is with you, O mighty man of valor.”*

This is what we refer to as a “call narrative...” And it's very similar to other call narratives in the Bible... Like the call of Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah... And even like Mary, the mother of Jesus in

Luke 1. The purposes of God come and interrupt the life of seemingly ordinary people. The angel of the Lord visits Gideon... But Gideon's response is really interesting, and it's very different than many of the other call narratives in the Bible due to Gideon's response--
Look at v. 13 And Gideon said to him, "Please, my lord, if the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all his wonderful deeds that our fathers recounted to us, saying, 'Did not the Lord bring us up from Egypt?' But now the Lord has forsaken us and given us into the hand of Midian."

The angel of the Lord says... God is with you. And Gideon says... *"Look... you want me to believe the Lord is with us?? With me? Have you looked around?? Do you know what's happening in the world? No, no, no... the Lord is not with us... the Lord has forsaken us."*

Gideon has actually come to doubt whether or not the Lord is actually with the people. So, Gideon is revealing himself to be one who is not super spiritual and given to the ways of YHWH.

But Gideon is also being revealed here by the writer, to be a bit of a coward... What is he doing? He's beating out the wheat in the winepress, not the threshing floor... in order to hide it from the Midianites... He's afraid to winnow the wheat in the open air, where the breeze catches the grain and separates it from the chaff... He is afraid that if he does that, he'll be visible to the enemy... So, he's crouching down... trying to thresh in the winepress... Which is interesting, because the angel of the Lord calls him, What? A mighty man of valor!! Yet, he's unwilling perhaps to face the Midianites head on... Doesn't seem to be the thing a mighty man of valor would do!

And it seems that Gideon has a sense of his shortcomings... He's a doubter... he's cowardly... So, he pushes back with another objection... *Don't you know who I am? Where I come from? I'm like the smallest dude, from the smallest tribe... My clan is the weakest... and what he would have meant was that his clan was the least economically speaking... Socially low.* The problem is... Gideon, with his doubts about YHWH... at this point, doesn't even realize who he is speaking with. Who he is disputing! Gideon is disputing the angel of the Lord!! And from other places in the scriptures, as well as here, we can be pretty confident that this is what we call a theonomy... a physical manifestation of the presence of God... the 2nd person of the trinity, God the Son himself... And the Angel of the LORD says, *"Gideon, am I not the one sending you? I will be with you. The LORD will be with you."* (PAUSE)

One of the most comforting things a believer can come to know... That you and I can come to believe with our whole hearts, is that even throughout doubts, our skepticism and cynicism... behind it all, is the certainty of God. God is certain about you. About me. *"Am I not the one sending you? I am with you."* I'm going with you.

Most people know about the passion of Martin Luther King Jr... Charles Marsh who is a wonderful historian, in his book *Welcoming Justice*, describes one of King's profound encounters with Jesus. Marsh writes, "[In January 1956, Martin Luther King Jr.] returned home around midnight after a long day of organizational meetings. His wife and young

daughter were already in bed, and King was eager to join them. But a threatening call—the kind of call he was getting as many as 30 to 40 times a day—interrupted his attempt to get some much-needed rest. When he tried to go back to bed, he could not shake the menacing voice that kept repeating the hateful words in his head. King got up, made a pot of coffee, and sat down at his kitchen table. With his head buried in his hands, he cried out to God. There in his kitchen in the middle of the night, when he had come to the end of strength, King met the living Christ in an experience that would carry him through the remainder of his life. "I heard the voice of Jesus saying still to fight on," King later recalled. "He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone ... He promised never to leave me, no never alone." In the stillness of the Alabama night, the voice of Jesus proved more convincing than the threatening voice of the anonymous caller. The voice of Jesus gave him the courage to press through the tumultuous year of 1956 to the victorious end of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. More than that, it gave him a vision for ministry that would drive him for the rest of his life.

In many ways, we all receive this call... God may not be calling us to lead his people into battle... He might not be calling us to be the next MLK...

But he IS calling all of us into a type of life in which unlike Gideon, we are fully aware of God's presence with us... and through our doubts and skepticism, we come to fully receive the kind of life that God is calling us into. For us... a life of faithfulness to him, amidst a world that is ever changing... trying to drain us of our resources and strength leads us to-

Second... 2. Unpacking the Call.

Gideon is really uncertain of what to do in the moment, and so he does the only thing that comes to mind... and it's a good thing to do... he makes a feast for the angel... a sacrificial offering if you will... And during this preparation which probably took a good bit of time, he realizes... it dawns on him that he is dealing with the Angel of the Lord. He now knows who it is... and he's overwhelmed with fear, because he remembers... you can't see the Lord and live! I'm doomed...

But the angel answers him in v. 23 – *"23 But the Lord said to him, "Peace be to you. Do not fear; you shall not die."24 Then Gideon built an altar there to the Lord and called it, The Lord Is Peace. To this day it still stands at Ophrah, which belongs to the Abiezrites....*

If Gideon is going to receive the call, to lead the Israelites against their oppressors. If he's going to do something about the enemy... He first must do something else... God gives him a specific task... and the task is much closer to home than Gideon or us as the reader might think...

In fact, it's actually IN Gideon's home...

The angel says, *"Um... Gideon... You have all these idols in your house... You have an altar to Baal right over there... there is an Asherah pole. You have to get rid of all of that... cut it all down... and burn a bull with it as an offering...."* In other words, Gideon, you're going to be my man, I'm going to be with you... But you and your family's hands are stained like everyone else's with idol worship... Before He can set out to take on the enemy that is outside, he has to take on the enemy that is inside... And so he leads a team of 10 of his father's men... and they get to work... But again, Gideon shows a bit of cowardice... He does it under the cover of darkness

because he knows that if the townspeople see, they will be angry... and in the end, that's exactly what happens.

The next day, the townspeople wake up, they see what's been done and they burn with anger... Who's done this!?? And they hear it was Gideon... So, they yell out at Joash, Gideon's father and say, "*bring out that son of yours, so we can kill him.*" That directly... And Joash's defense of Gideon is very strange, and shows just how deep and problematic the situation and spiritual state of Israel says...

Joash basically comes out and says... Listen, Let Baal take care of himself... Let him contend for himself. His altar has been torn down; he can defend himself... Here is Gideon's father, an Israelite, basically saying, "Hey, let's just let Baal and YHWH duke this out..." He doesn't understand the depth of Israel's problem. Their spiritual life and practices have become so syncretistic... let's just roll the dice and see what happens... And look what v. 32 says, *"³² Therefore on that day Gideon was called Jerubbaal, that is to say, "Let Baal contend against him," because he broke down his altar.*

And, from this point on... Gideon becomes a very confusing character.

It's as if he has two names... Gideon. And Jerubbaal...

A man of YHWH, and a man of Baal. And it's this duality that the people of Israel have been dealing with throughout the book of Judges... and it's the duality that Gideon will live with throughout his story... And frankly, it's the duality that we live with... People of God, children of God... but wrestling with the idols of this world...

Whether we realize it or not, our lives are filled with this constant battle, these desires of the flesh, our over-desires that pit the idols of this world up and against the God...

And so, just like Gideon is tasked to unpack the idols of his own house...

In order for us to practice a life of faithfulness in an uncertain and unbelieving world, we are going to have to unpack the idols of our own house. In other words, how could we... as Christians in 2019, here in Hollywood... How could we ever begin to worry about the world around us, the enemies at the gates, the problems of society, if we ourselves...

Do not first address the idols and sins of our own hearts?

That is the spiritual posture the follower of Jesus is meant to take... We receive the call of God like Gideon does... and then we get to work unpacking the idols of our lives... working out at the call...

The temptation that many of us face, and the temptation Gideon faced... Was to run off and tell the world, tell our enemies that God is coming! God is coming to fix it all and fix you up good! All the while, we have Asherah pole's in our back yards... I don't know what your Asherah pole is... Our culture and society have Asherah pole's all over the place... Sometimes we call them family, sport, Apple... sometimes they look like stadiums, and cable news networks... sometimes they're inexplicably kids soccer fields, and then sometimes they're our bank accounts and vacation photos on Facebook.

You see, the deepest sin that lies beneath every sin in our life...
 is the very same thought the Serpent brought into the garden of Eden...
 You know, there can be SOMETHING else other than God.
 It doesn't have to be JUST him. And that was enough for us...
 And because we became enamored with the something else...
 We feel like we can never quite trust God, and take him at his word...
 And that's exactly what happens with Gideon...

Gideon does the work... He cleans out the idols.... He steps into His call... God lifts him up and the people of Israel start to follow behind him... he's gathering an army... but even with all that... an encounter with God himself, the angel of the Lord... Gideon seems to not be quite sure of all this... he can't quite trust the call. His doubt still remains... And there's no other way to say it, but he puts God to the test.... Gideon receives the call, unpacks the call, but now finally, he has to trust the call. And for us, remaining faithful in an unbelieving world will mean...

Lastly 3. Trusting the Call - To use CS Lewis' term... Gideon puts God in the Dock... he puts him on trial if you will... v. 36 - ³⁶ *Then Gideon said to God, "If you will save Israel by my hand, as you have said,³⁷ behold, I am laying a fleece of wool on the threshing floor. If there is dew on the fleece alone, and it is dry on all the ground, then I shall know that you will save Israel by my hand, as you have said." ³⁸ *And it was so. ----* God very patiently, and graciously... answers Gideon's request. He certainly didn't have to. But, he does... And then, as the reader... we hear it coming and we want to stop Gideon, but we can't and he does it AGAIN!! No, don't ask again!!_v. 39 *When he rose early next morning and squeezed the fleece, he wrung enough dew from the fleece to fill a bowl with water.* ³⁹ *Then Gideon said to God, "Let not your anger burn against me; let me speak just once more. Please let me test just once more with the fleece. Please let it be dry on the fleece only, and on all the ground let there be dew."*⁴⁰ *And God did so that night; and it was dry on the fleece only, and on all the ground there was dew.**

So, what do we make of this scene with the Fleece? Some people have thought, maybe this is the way we deal with God... God, I need a sign. I'm gonna leave this here... you tell me yes or no? *We certainly would like that in our own human thinking, wouldn't we?* God, if you could just tell me if this is the right decision. If this is the right house to buy. The right school to go to. The right person to marry... We want that very transactional, quid pro quo type of religion... *It's the religion of Baal... If you can just do this for me, God... I'll do this for you, I'll leave this here... thank you very much.*

Throughout the scriptures... Dew, the water that covers the ground on a new morning... was a sign of blessing... We read it from Psalm 133 in our Call to Worship this morning... Many commentators say, the dew on the fleece is a sign for God blessing his covenant people... God will BLESS his people... And Gideon sees it! But he can't stop there! His doubt persists... and he thinks to himself, you know, it'd be a lot harder if everything was covered in dew around the fleece, but not the fleece.

And in God's GREAT patience and mercy... God decides to answer this request... And in some ways, the story of the Fleece mimics Gideon's story and the entire story of the book of Judges. There will be times when God's covenant people will be blessed... And they will be restored and live in peace in the land... And then there will be times when the dew will rest not on the fleece, but on the ground around the fleece... the blessings will be on the surrounding peoples, but not on the people of Israel. And that's exactly what happens in Gideon's story, and in the rest of Judges, and throughout the rest of the history of Israel.

Why does Gideon do this? Where does the doubt come from? Why does he need MORE from God? Another miracle? Why can't he seem to trust the call of God? To trust God himself. Because he's lived so long with his faith mixed up. YHWH, Baal... that he cannot quite trust the call of God. And we might not need to have the dots connected for us too much here... If we're not careful, when our lives for too long, teeter between the idols of this world, and God himself... over time, we will also struggle to trust the call of God in our lives... The doubts will rise up... the fear and anger will manifest... all because we cannot trust the call of God, that he is with us... that he has accepted and received us... All because we cannot fully unpack the calling of God, by ridding ourselves of our own Asherah poles... our own idols.

Interestingly, did you notice the location of the fleece scene?

Do you notice where it happens? V. 37 – on the threshing floor.

The threshing floor was where Gideon was meant to be winnowing the wheat, but he was hiding in the winepress... Throughout the scriptures... the threshing floor was a place of covenant.

God is constantly inviting His people to the threshing floor... Into a covenant relationship, a marriage with him... and yet, again, and again, they leave him- they prostitute themselves with other gods... The threshing floor is where Gideon should be exerting his leadership and calling... and yet, he turns it into a place of doubt and fear, instead of a place of worship and trust.

But, the beauty of the book of Judges and the beauty of the gospel, is that Gideon is pointing us to see one who is to come... who, like him, is nothing in the eyes of the world, who comes from a town forgotten and despised. But instead of doubting... instead of being cynical, or skeptical... Jesus Christ receives the call... he unpacks the call in his sinless life, his teaching, his ministry... and he trusts the call of God by going all the way to the cross... Jesus Christ becomes the threshing floor in which a new covenant between God and his people, the church, the bride of Christ is initiated... Instead of the threshing floor being a place of doubt and fear, in Christ, He turns the threshing floor of our hearts into a place of trust and security. From there... From HIM... We are sent out to be faithful people in an unbelieving world, who live a constant, daily life of receiving the call, unpacking it time and time again, and trusting it.

When our daughter Jane was born and we received her diagnosis of Down syndrome, we instantly knew that everything was going to be different from then on. In many ways, it's a before and after situation... And the scripture that quickly came to my mind was 2 Tim 1:7, *"for God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control."*

In many ways, right then... we received a calling... not a special calling. We're not special people... Jane is not an angel sent from heaven, like so many people want to say about people with down syndrome... But, like every other parent... we received a calling to not give in to timidity, or fear... but to live with a love, and the power of Jesus. And then life begins... and you live a life unpacking the reality of this new calling... and that has exposed my heart, and our own idols and Asherah poles... the idols of my expectations and desires... the things I think I deserve in this life... all of them have been laid bare in this new calling... And what we now live with is a life of constant receiving, trusting that God is good, that he is in control... and that everything is going to be OK.

We've been so thrilled the last few months because not only have you all welcomed us so warmly, but Jane has been welcomed into a general Ed-Kindergarten classroom... We had our first parent teacher conference this past week... and she is thriving... the other children love her. They look out for her. Her teachers love her, her therapists love her... They told us that one day she was walking down the hall, and an older girl in the fourth grade who also has Down syndrome, pointed to Jane and said, "Look, look... she looks like me."

Friends, the work of unpacking our lives to trust the calling of God is ongoing... but there is fruit in the process. And the work in your life of receiving God's call... unpacking the idols of our lives... and trusting that God is moving you into a place not of spiritual poverty, but into a place of spiritual blessing and fruitfulness is the work of the gospel in you, and so trust it...

Let the story of Gideon and the Israelites show you... You do not need a fleece, and a sign... You have the sign of this table... the bread and the wine of Jesus Christ, live a life trusting this calling, and Everything will be OK.

Let's Pray.