

## 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, Year C

12 June 2016

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*Judges 2:11-23*

This morning starts a few weeks of working our way through the book of Judges. I'm not going to ask for a show of hands, but odds are this falls into the "lesser read of the books of the Bible" category. Or at least it did for me before preparing to preach on it. Judges doesn't give us those familiar stories of Adam & Eve, Noah, or Moses. Again, I won't ask for a show of hands, but ask yourself if you could name any

of the characters we meet in the Book of Judges. And Judge Judy does not count.

It may be that the title seems to turn people off. It can't help but sound judge-y. And we don't typically like to be judged. We don't mind judging others, for the most part, but being judged, not the most comfortable thing.

The book of Judges is about loyalty, among other things. And it is about a pattern.

Judges is the 7th book of the Bible. It

recounts the Israelites as they are just coming out of 40 years in the wilderness and moving into the promised land. And right in the second chapter, what is really still part of the prologue before we meet any of the actual judges, we read an overview of the pattern that the people of God have, I mean had way back when. As you'll quickly see, this is nothing but an account of history; it is absolutely not a pattern that has played over and over again among God's people.

Judges happens after God has delivered the Israelites from slavery and cared for them as they traveled

the desert for 40 years, literally providing for them manna from heaven. There were other gifts too, such as water from a rock, maybe some commandments as well, like 10 or 12 of them I think.

And God has brought the Israelites into the land, even though it was already occupied. Depending on which account you read, they either had several days of band camp and marching practice around Jericho and then blew the wall down, or they walked in and made the previous inhabitants their servants. Either way, it's a pretty good

deal, at least for the Israelites.

But it doesn't take long before things go south. They have barely settled into Jericho when they start forgetting about the God who took them out of Egypt, and start worshipping the Canaanite gods Ba'al and Astarte. There are a few different interpretations of who Ba'al was, but the most common is that he was a god of rain, thunder, and lightning. He also moonlighted as a god of war. Astarte was a fertility goddess who also happened to assist her worshippers in battle.

In an Agricultural society, especially one

in which you have just taken over and are trying to populate and farm the land, I can see how the god of rain and goddess of fertility would be useful, especially if they could also help you win battles against the people who had the land to begin with.

But the point is that the Israelites very quickly let worship of God fall to second place, focusing their energy instead on worship of deities that promised to offer practical, tangible benefits in their daily lives. Rain, children, victory in battle.

So I started reflecting on the gods that I worship, the ones

that creep in ahead of God because I imagine they can make my life easier, better. Of course money is an obvious one. I don't need rain to grow food as much as I need money to buy it. And of course that money comes in handy for other things I need as well – new tech gadgets, nice vacations, maybe a new car.

Every time I go to the grocery store, standing in the checkout line, there's that sign with three LED numbers showing the current lottery prizes. The Powerball was up to \$141 million last time I was there. And while I'm waiting for the clerk to ring up

my broccoli and chicken and Sarah's Tofurkey, I do math in my head. Half the money would go to taxes, sure, but that's still \$70 million.

Drawing off 4% a year means around \$2.8 million a year. And I feel like I could eek by in marginal comfort on that amount.

Now, I've never bought a ticket. Not even once. But I can find it very easy to get lost in day dreams of having more than enough money to get by. Money is a seductive thing.

But I think what really tempts me about money is the security it can offer. Never having to worry about if I have

enough to pay for groceries, pay the mortgage, pay the bills. Security is another one of those gods I find myself worshipping.

Wealth and security. Yeah, I find myself worshipping those gods, but thankfully that's way better than the Israelites who worshiped Ba'al and Astarte, deities who promised to provide...wealth and security.

At least we haven't personified our gods with catchy names like the Israelites. So we've got that going for us.

And I know that you all are so much better than this, that you all don't ever worship

things like wealth or security and always trust in God to provide. So I'm just talking about me here.

But I find that I am so often tempted to invest my energy, to invest my worship, in gods that let me depend on me. Wealth means I can buy what I need and not have to depend on others to help meet my needs. Security means I can stubbornly insist on doing what I want, doing things my way, using force if necessary. That's so much easier than having to work with people, compromise, admit to my mistakes, or forego my own

comfort for someone else's.

God promises the Israelites, "I will provide for you. I will care for you." When all of my energy goes into taking care of myself, then I become my very own God, don't I?

I don't know what gods you worship. Ba'al. Astarte. Wealth. Security. Beanie Babies. Whatever your combination of gods is, they can be a powerful temptation.

Against that temptation stands the God of the Universe, the God who promises to provide. The God who values community over security, the God who loves all God's

children. Judges is all about the battles between God and the lesser gods we worship. May God give us the wisdom to know the difference. Amen.