

8th Sunday after Pentecost, Year C

10 July 2016

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Judges 6:1-14

As you've heard me mention, this series on Judges came from my colleague group, the Heretics, this past spring. In our ongoing quest to work through biblical texts we hadn't all preached on 50 times already, someone suggested the book of Judges. So we started going through each claiming a judge whose story we would research and present to the group. When we got around to Gideon, I did not raise my hand, mostly because I

couldn't think of anything about Gideon except for the group that goes around handing out Bibles and something about a trumpet.

As it turns out, that first association would have served me pretty well in thinking about Gideon the judge.

In case you aren't familiar with the story of the Gideons, it started in autumn 1898 when John Nicholson went to stay in the Central Hotel at Boscobel, Wisconsin, for the night. The hotel was crowded, and he ended up sharing a double room with a

man named Samuel Hill. During their time of prayer, they felt called to form an organization of Christian business travelers. They happened to have read the story of the strange and faithful old judge, Gideon, during their devotion, and decided to name their organization after him.

Gideon's story begins as does pretty much every other judge's. The people strayed from God, then God sends a foreign army, in this case the Midianites, to teach them a lesson. Once they've learned their lesson, God raises up a judge to save them and lead them along the right path.

This time, God raises up a leader for them in Gideon. But unlike the other judges we've met so far, Gideon doesn't accept this commission without some hesitancy. He questions the angel about why God would allow the Midianites to have such control over God's people in the first place. And I think Gideon's honesty, in part, what makes Gideon's story attractive to me.

The messenger of God recognizes Gideon's character and commissions him to defeat the Midianites and Amalakites. But Gideon is still hesitant. He is the youngest son in a small and weak clan. How, he asks,

would he be able to accomplish what God expects of him?

Sound familiar? It should. We encountered the same trepidation in Moses, and we will again with David and many of the prophets who follow. God's people are in a mess. God calls on an unlikely character to address the mess. Of course that pattern was 3000 years ago, and certainly not one we still play up today.

With a big presidential election approaching, it seems like many of those who have thrown their hat in the ring see themselves as a modern-day Gideon, just without the accompanying reluctance to

lead. *"Our country is in a mess, and I believe I am the one God is calling on to make things right."*

But unlike Trump, Clinton, Cruz, Sanders, or any of the others, Gideon did not want that responsibility. But the messenger of God who comes to him is persistent. Finally, Gideon accepts the mantle of responsibility, and the rest of his story plays out like the rest of the judges. Gideon cooperates with God, and God leads the Israelites to victory. Lots of bloodshed. And then under Gideon's leadership, the people enjoy a time of security in the land.

But reflecting on Gideon's story in particular, I got to thinking about times in my own life when I have read stories in the Bible, stories just like Gideon's story, with a deep sense of righteous superiority. Convincing myself, figuratively at least, that those of us on the side of God and Gideon are entitled to slay anyone in our path in God's name to get what we believe we are entitled to because God says so. We can certainly leave here this morning remembering how Gideon was less than courageous and faithful, but learned to trust in God and gained

courage and faithfulness as his story unfolds.

However, I want to invite us to be cautious as we read stories such as Gideon, be cautious with only one version of the story, especially if it's the only version of the story we've ever heard or thought about. I do not say that to diminish the story of Gideon or how it might encourage us in our own faith lives to overcome reluctance and follow God. But on the other hand, we need not look too long to discover where individuals and communities of faith bring about sad consequences by attempting to literally cut and paste what is going

on in Judges into today's world without committing ourselves to the demanding work of interpretation.

Old Testament scholar Terrance Fretheim highlights a very simple formula at work in Judges that is often ignored: "Obedience to God is a condition of land possession. Disobedience to God's Torah is a sure way to lose the land. Land belongs to God. One of my favorite Old Testament professors from seminary, Walter Brueggemann, puts it this way: "Folk tales are for a community of hearers to celebrate their own identity, to remember when stronger powers were

defeated, and to reiterate the starchy warning that violation of God will risk the land."

In other words, Gideon's story, among other things, serves as a reminder about the connection between God and the land God entrusts to people. Having plenty of land to be responsible for is not our nation's great challenge. We have plenty of land ~ land enough to live on, land enough to provide food and opportunity ~ but the amount of land we have is not our issue. Our issue, partly the way I see it, has to do with how we steward the land entrusted to us, including how we care for the people

who are on the land with us AND remembering whose land it really is after all. It takes courage to claim that all the land belongs to God's. All of it! God rules over all the land, not us. We are just God's designated overseers, and we are all accountable to God for how we treat the land and how we treat those who inhabit it alongside of us.

Gideon's story requires some caution, lest we set out to filet our neighbors all in the name of God! This is not a story to justify our own desire to trounce our own enemies in God's name. But we can celebrate Gideon's willingness to

follow God's calling, even when he felt ill equipped for the task. We can remember that land is a blessing, and part of that blessing entails treating the land and those who dwell therein justly. And perhaps, like Gideon founders John Nicholson and Sam Hill 120 years ago, we can remember that following God is best and most faithfully done in community with one another.

Thanks be to God.
Amen.