

10th Sunday after Pentecost, Year C

24 July 2016

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Judges 9:1-6, 22-26

Politics, I guess, has always been a dirty business. I remember seeing political cartoons in history class that depicted Gilded Age politicians whacking one another with canes and stomping on one another's comically tall top hats. There were catchy jingles about candidates, rumors of their shortcomings, outlandishly unbelievable claims about their various deficiencies.

And then we read Judges chapter 9. However bad we may think this, or any election in

our lifetime, at least in this country, may be, I doubt any of them would give Abimelech a run for his money.

Abimelech is the son of Gideon. You remember Gideon—that admirable, reluctant leader we read about two weeks ago. Well, Abimelech is his son. One of his sons. To be more precise, one of Gideon's illegitimate sons.

Gideon had 70 sons by his wives. But Abimelech was his son by a concubine. Now it was not uncommon for children to be borne by

concubines in the ancient middle east. And in truth it doesn't matter much that Abimelech was illegitimate in a Victorian sense. That wasn't an issue on its own in Abimelech's time. But what does matter is that being the son born by a concubine and not one of the 70 born to Gideon's wives, Abimelech was, at best, 71st in line to be king.

But Abimelech wanted that crown. He wanted to be king. He was desperate to be king. Unlike his father Gideon who had a healthy dose of humility when it came to his call to lead, Abimelech pursued the crown with unparalleled ambition. So he takes things

into his own hands and gives history a nudge. He goes to meet with his mother's family, and persuades them to support him in his bid for the throne.

I wonder if they knew what they were getting into?

The text makes it sound like a political rallying of the troops to get behind their candidate. "Who would you rather have rule over you?" You can almost hear the crowd of family and friends start to chant, "Abimelech 2016! We're building a bridge to the 12th century BC!" That one lacks something as far as political slogans go, perhaps. But you get the point. Up until now, Abimelech is ambitious

and ready to make his play for the crown.

Then things turn ugly.

His kinsmen, riled up in the moment, give Abimelech 70 pieces of silver to hire assassins, and they go as a posse to his household. There they kill all but one of his seventy brothers.

The text sanitizes this scene a bit and honestly that is probably a good thing. The scene must have been gruesome.

Sixty-nine men sacrificed, according to the text, on that makeshift altar stone.

And Abimelech's hands covered in their blood. He may have hired out the deed, paid others with a bag of silver to do his dirty

work just as Pilate's soldiers hired theirs out to Judas for 30 silver pieces. But there was no denying the blood was on Abimelech's hands.

And that is how the kingship of Abimelech begins. Drenched in the blood of his brothers and built on a foundation of violence and depravity.

Once he took the throne, we don't know much about his rule. It is not described in detail in the text, and it isn't chronicled in detail elsewhere in the Bible. But what we do know is that his reign was short.

Three years. Three short years.

To put that into context, Abimelech reigned

just 16 days for each man he killed to get the job in the first place.

According to the text, the event which leads to his downfall is God stirring up discontent with the people of Shechem. These are the same people who gave Abimelech the money to hire the assassins that cleared the path to the throne in the first place. Their change of allegiance is the *event* which leads to Abimelech's downfall, but it is not the *reason* for it.

The *reason* God stirs up the Shechemites against the king is because of the violence done to his brothers. Their blood, the text says, came back on Abimelech.

Perhaps compared to stories like this, our political culture looks like a pillow fight.

But Abimelech fell because his reign was built on violence, greed, and boundless ambition. And the blood soaked foundation of his rule eventually crumbled under his feet.

As a cautionary tale for political candidates, I am not sure how much help this story is. Whatever you think of the candidates for either party, neither seems as depraved as Abimelech. I daresay either one looks halfway decent in comparison.

So what can we possibly take away from this bloody narrative?

What, besides an abiding desire to never read it again, that is?

While it might not be terribly useful as a cautionary tale for political candidates, it does, I think, have an important lesson for our political culture, and particularly for we citizens who live within this culture.

And I think that lesson, that reminder, is to be mindful of the foundation on which you build.

Abimelech built his reign on a foundation of blood and violence and, in the end, his reign met its end in blood and violence.

Do you ever feel like the foundations of our political rhetoric need

to be changed? The language of hate and scapegoating that we are so quick to hurl at those across the aisle?

The deep, deep divisions in our political culture are not the fault of any one candidate or party. They are built into the foundation.

I wish I could say that I know the answer to fixing our political culture, but I don't. I don't know how to fix it and, frankly, I don't really know where to start.

Not the most inspiring thought for a Sunday morning, I know.

One of my preaching professors said that you should always be able to point to the good news in a text

and until you do, your sermon is incomplete.

I have to confess that I don't find a lot of good news in this story.

But thankfully, these words are not the last word.

Abimelech made a mess of things, but that isn't where the story ends. It's where Abimelech's story ends, but it is *not* where Israel's story ends. God was not finished with the people of Israel.

A thousand years after Abimelech's cautionary tale came to an end, Jesus again reminded his followers how important the foundation upon which we build our lives and our community is. A wise man builds his house on rock, and

when the rain fell and the floods came and the winds blew and beat on that house, it did not fall. Because it was built on a solid foundation.

Abimelech's foundation was built on treachery and blood. And it crumbled beneath his feet.

May we, on the other hand, work to build our foundation on Christ, remembering that just as God was not finished with the people of Israel, neither is God finished with us. And that, to me, is good news.

Amen.