

“Bible Heroes: Gideon”
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Overbrook Presbyterian Church
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First Scripture Reading: Judges 6:1-6

¹The Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord gave them into the hand of Midian seven years. ²The hand of Midian prevailed over Israel; and because of Midian the Israelites provided for themselves hiding places in the mountains, caves and strongholds. ³For whenever the Israelites put in seed, the Midianites and the Amalekites and the people of the East would come up against them. ⁴They would encamp against them and destroy the produce of the land, as far as the neighborhood of Gaza, and leave no sustenance in Israel, and no sheep or ox or donkey. ⁵For they and their livestock would come up, and they would even bring their tents, as thick as locusts; neither they nor their camels could be counted; so they wasted the land as they came in. ⁶Thus Israel was greatly impoverished because of Midian; and the Israelites cried out to the Lord for help.

Second Scripture Reading: Judges 6:11-24, 33-40

¹¹Now the angel of the Lord came and sat under the oak at Ophrah, which belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, as his son Gideon was beating out wheat in the wine press, to hide it from the Midianites. ¹²The angel of the Lord appeared to him and said to him, “The Lord is with you, you mighty warrior.” ¹³Gideon answered him, “But sir, if the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all his wonderful deeds that our ancestors recounted to us, saying, ‘Did not the Lord bring us up from Egypt?’ But now the Lord has cast us off, and given us into the hand of Midian.” ¹⁴Then the Lord turned to him and said, “Go in this might of yours and deliver Israel from the hand of Midian; I hereby commission you.” ¹⁵He responded, “But sir, how can I deliver Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family.” ¹⁶The Lord said to him, “But I will be with you, and you shall strike down the Midianites, every one of them.” ¹⁷Then he said to him, “If now I have found favor with you, then show me a sign that it is you who speak with me. ¹⁸Do not depart from here until I come to you, and bring out my present, and set it before you.” And he said, “I will stay until you return.” ¹⁹So Gideon went into his house and prepared a kid, and unleavened cakes from an ephah of flour; the meat he put in a basket, and the broth he put in a pot, and brought them to him under the oak and presented them. ²⁰The angel of God said to him, “Take the meat and the unleavened cakes, and put them on this rock, and pour out the broth.” And he did so. ²¹Then the angel of the Lord reached out the tip of the staff that was in his hand, and touched the meat and the unleavened cakes; and fire sprang up from the rock and consumed the meat and the unleavened cakes; and the angel of the Lord vanished from his sight. ²²Then Gideon perceived that it was the angel of the Lord; and Gideon said, “Help me, Lord God! For I have seen the angel of the Lord face to face.” ²³But the Lord said to him, “Peace be to you; do not fear, you shall not die.” ²⁴Then 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...

³³Then all the Midianites and the Amalekites and the people of the East came together, and crossing the Jordan they encamped in the Valley of Jezreel. ³⁴But the spirit of the Lord took possession of Gideon; and he sounded the trumpet, and the Abiezrites were called out to follow him. ³⁵He sent messengers throughout all Manasseh, and they too were called out to follow him. He also sent messengers to Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali, and they went up to meet them. ³⁶Then Gideon said to God, “In order to see whether you will deliver Israel by my hand, as you have said, ³⁷I am going to lay 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 deliver Israel by my hand, as you have said.”³⁸ And it was so. 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, “Do not let your anger burn against me, let me speak one more time; let me, please, make trial with the fleece just once more; let it be dry only on the fleece, and on all the ground let there be dew.”⁴⁰ And God did so that night. It was dry on the fleece only, and on all the ground there was dew.



Sermon: “Bible Heroes: Gideon”

The Promised Land looms large in the Hebrew story. For a people who have been at different times nomads and slaves, a land to call their own was a defining dream. In Genesis, God calls Abraham to leave his family and his home and “go to a land that I will show you.”¹ A home is promised in Palestine; an abundant, verdant land that is said to be “flowing with milk and honey,” and that promise is reiterated to Abraham’s son Isaac and his grandson Jacob, and to generations of Abraham’s descendants.²

The whole point of the Exodus is to bring those descendants out of Slavery and hardship in Egypt into this land of promise. In Deuteronomy, Moses describes it as a gift from God:

“...a land with fine, large cities that you did not build, houses filled with all sorts of goods that you did not fill, [deep wells] that you did not [dig], vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant...”³

Years later, *after* the land has been taken and the Israelites have been living there a while, Joshua, the man who assumed the mantle of leadership after Moses died, says that God has indeed fulfilled this promise:

“[The Lord] gave you a land on which you had not labored, and towns that you had not built, and you live in them; you eat the fruit of vineyards and olive [groves] that you did not plant.”⁴

God kept God’s promise. That is a central theme of the Old Testament. Now, this description of the land may be an overly rosy memory of how things were “back in the good ole days,” but there is no doubt, the Israelites inherited a land that was vibrant and rich, where fields grow and water flows and where life could be good for the people of God.

And that good life had been secured by Joshua and the faithful people of *his* generation who defeated the residents of the land who were there before. Tribes and groups of people who are listed in those Bible passages most of you fear being called on to read in church; “the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites...”⁵

But by the time Gideon was a young man, things had changed drastically.

In the early verses of Chapter 6 that Steve Wedell just read for us, we learn that the people have done evil in the sight of the Lord, and so God has allowed them to fall at the hand of the Midianites. The people of

¹ Genesis 12:1, NRSV

² Deuteronomy 11:8-9, NRSV

³ Deuteronomy 6:10-11, NRSV

⁴ Joshua 24:13, NRSV

⁵ Joshua 24:11, NRSV

Midian, the Amalekites, and other people from the East have begun coming into Israel on a regular basis to take whatever they want - especially around harvest time. So, the Israelites have gone into hiding, living in caves and strongholds. And whatever they produce, they hide because these foreign invaders will just come and take it for themselves.

Think of the movie *The Magnificent Seven*, when the bandit Calvera and his men sweep into the village and rob the poor farmers of their harvests.⁶

We learn that these outsiders descend like locusts and their numbers are too large to count. It is a far cry from the land of milk and honey the children of Abraham were promised back in Exodus. Just how bad things have gotten is made clear by the details given at our introduction to Gideon. He is “beating out wheat in the winepress, to hide it from the Midianites.”

When wheat is harvested, it is usually taken to the Threshing Floor. You may remember the threshing floor as the place where Ruth goes to meet her future husband Boaz. It is an open area, usually on a hill, where oxen turn mill stones to break the husks or “chaff” from the wheat. The open sides of the structure and its position up on a hill allow for the breeze to flow through and blow away the lighter chaff, leaving just the wheat kernels on the floor.⁷

By contrast, a winepress is a vat dug into the ground. It has high sides to contain the grapes and the wine that is squeezed from them.⁸ Work typically performed out in the open, Gideon is literally doing in a hole in the ground because he is afraid of the Midianites coming to take his harvest.

So as surprised as Gideon may be at the sudden appearance of the Angel of the Lord, he is more surprised by the Angel’s greeting: “The Lord is with you.” This comment seems to Gideon, to be flatly contradicted by the evidence at hand. “If the Lord is with us,” he begins, “Then why has all this happened to us?” Gideon knows the hardships of living under Midian oppression. He has seen neighbors killed; the produce of the land and the fruit of his own labor stolen. And he is powerless to do anything to stop it.

Worse, he remembers the great stories his parents and grandparents always told about how good God had been to the people in years past; the parting of the Red Sea, and providing manna in the desert and the day the people first ate from the fat of the land. But he doesn’t see anything like that now and he feels abandoned by God. You can almost hear the sarcasm and derision in his voice: The Lord is with us?!? Ha! “The Lord has cast us off, and given us [to the Midianites].”

Now, let’s stop for a moment to talk about just who Gideon is speaking with because the language does get a little muddy. When we hear the words “Angel of the Lord,” we think white robes, halos, and wings. The word “Angel” in Hebrew means “messenger.” In Genesis, it is the Angel of the Lord who stops Abraham from sacrificing his son Isaac,⁹ and in Exodus, it is the Angel of the Lord who speaks to Moses

⁶ *The Magnificent Seven*. Dir. John Sturges. By William Roberts. Perf. Yul Brynner, Steve McQueen, Eli Wallach. The Mirisch Company/United Artists, 1960. Film.

⁷ Drinkard, Joel F. Jr. "Threshing Floor." *New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*. Vol. 5, S-Z. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2009. 588. Print. NIB Dictionary pg. 588

⁸ Ross, J.F. "Wine." *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*. Vol. 4, R-Z. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1990. 849-852. Print.

⁹ Genesis 22:11, NRSV

from the burning bush.¹⁰ But in both cases, as in this one, the term “Angel of the Lord” doesn’t refer to a messenger or an envoy sent by God. This is *actually* God.¹¹

That’s why the language changes and in verse 14, God is suddenly speaking, and it’s why when this episode is over, Gideon panics at the realization that he has just seen God face-to-face, which, it was believed, no human could endure and live to tell the tale. But at this point, Gideon is still not sure who he’s talking to, which may explain his boldness.

When God says “The Lord is with you,” Gideon disagrees. But he misunderstands what God is saying. God is with *you*, Gideon. The people have turned from God, and are experiencing the consequences of their poor choices, but God is with *you*, “Mighty Warrior.”

I’m sure that God heard Gideon’s sarcastic answer with a smile. Because no sooner has Gideon described the plight of his people than God says to Gideon “and *you* are the one I am sending to deliver my people from the unholy mess that you have just described.” That’s a loose translation of the Hebrew, but you get the point.

If Gideon was scared before, he is downright terrified now. Maybe threshing wheat in a hole in the ground isn’t so bad after all. As is often the case, Gideon asks for a sign that he is really talking to whom he thinks he is talking. Gideon runs to prepare a meal for his guest. Considering how long it must take to butcher a goat and cook it, this had to have taken some time. But he eventually comes back with roasted meat, broth, and freshly baked bread. God touches the tip of a staff to the food and it is all consumed in fire and then God disappears.

I’d say that’s a pretty good sign.

But here comes the best part of the story: Gideon *still isn’t sure*. Gideon does find his courage and rallies the other tribes of Israel to join him in fighting against the Midianites. But just before it is time to go to war, Gideon proposes to God... a test. One that will reassure Gideon that it is *really* God who is talking to him and that going to war *really* is what God wants him to do. Or more likely, that Gideon misunderstood and therefore *doesn’t* have to go to war.

Never mind that whole “Do not put the Lord your God to the test”¹² thing, this is the old, OLD Testament. They rolled differently back then. But ask for a sign Gideon does. And God complies.

First, Gideon asks to place a bundle of wool (a fleece), on the threshing floor overnight and in the morning, if the fleece is wet with dew and the ground around it is dry, he will know that God has sent him. In the morning, he finds the fleece wet and the floor dry. But to be fair, that’s what you would expect to happen.

Because the stone threshing floor is warmer than the cool night air, we should not be surprised to find that the dew has evaporated leaving the floor around the wet fleece dry.¹³ Think about when the grass in

¹⁰ Exodus 3:2, NRSV

¹¹ McNutt, Paula M. "Notes on Judges 2:1." *The New Interpreter's Study Bible New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha*. Ed. Walter J. Harrelson. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2003. 348. Print.

¹² Deuteronomy 6:16, NRSV

¹³ Olson, Dennis T. "The Book of Judges." *The New Interpreter's Bible: Volume 2*. Ed. Leander E. Keck. Nashville: Abingdon, 1998. 802. Print.

your front lawn is wet first thing in the morning, while your sidewalk or driveway are usually dry. The truly astounding thing would be the opposite.

Which is what Gideon then asks for. Having received the answer he was looking for, Gideon presses on for further confirmation. Now God... please don't get mad... but would You be willing to confirm this for me just one more time? Could You, just, maybe, let the fleece be dry this time and the ground around it be wet?

And in a remarkable show of patience, God grants the request for another test. And in the morning, contrary to what one would expect, given the mechanics of evaporation and condensation, the fleece is dry and the stone floor around it is wet. And Gideon's way forward is now clear. There can't be a question any more.

What I always find interesting about this story is that of all the people in the history of the Hebrews, the ones we read about in scripture are the exceptional ones; the ones who were called by God into leadership roles, the ones through whom God did amazing things, and the ones who actually had face-to-face encounters with God. If you're reading about them in the Bible, then these people were extremely significant in the history and memory of the Hebrews.

And while we see them as exemplary and almost super-human in their righteousness and faith (that's what we were taught in Sunday School after all), when we read their stories, more often than not these people show themselves to be flawed and frankly, very human.

Gideon is no different. We speak of faith, as though our model from the heroes and sheroes of the Bible were unwavering dedication and unquestioning allegiance. Yet in the story of Gideon we find one who is not just uncertain, he is uncertain in the face of overwhelming evidence and a face-to-face encounter with God.

So, if Gideon had doubts, if Gideon wanted more confirmation, if Gideon was uncertain about what God would have him do next, then I think it's okay for you and I to have doubts; for you and I to yearn for confirmation; it's okay for you and I to be uncertain, too.

Of course, we're not being called to lead an Army into battle against a Bronze age foreign nemesis. If that's what you're hearing today, there's good reason for your doubts. But we *are* being led to do some unbelievable things.

Jesus taught that we are to love our neighbors,¹⁴ even the ones who are unlovable.¹⁵ Jesus told the rich young man to sell all that he owned and give the money to the poor and then follow him.¹⁶ Jesus ate with people that the community had labeled sinners.¹⁷ Jesus took time with people the world saw as undesirable.¹⁸ Jesus healed people the religious community saw as unclean and unworthy.¹⁹

¹⁴ Mark 12:28-31, NRSV

¹⁵ Matthew 5:43-48, NRSV

¹⁶ Mark 10:17-22, NRSV

¹⁷ Luke 5:27-32, NRSV

¹⁸ Luke 19:1-10, NRSV

¹⁹ Mark 5:24-34, NRSV

Jesus teaches us to meet human need: to give water to the thirsty, to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and imprisoned,²⁰ not because *we* get something out of the deal, but because *they* do. Jesus teaches us to turn the other cheek²¹ and to forgive others who have sinned against us.²²

Being religious is easy. Loving Jesus, being thankful to God for what God has done for us, those are easy things to do. But being religious is not the same thing as being a disciple and being a disciple is hard. It was hard for the heroes and sheroes of the Bible, and it's going to be hard for you and me.

But at some point, you have to trust that what God calls us to be; the way Jesus teaches us to live, really is the best; that peace is better than war, that listening is better than yelling, that working together is better than fighting, that being selfless is better than being selfish, that sharing with those who have none is better than storing up far beyond what we could ever need. We have to trust Jesus that love is better than fear, that reaching out to the stranger is better than building walls, that concern for others trumps our own comfort and convenience.

Being a disciple is hard. And it comes with doubt. If that were not true, we wouldn't call it faith, we'd call it certainty. I know that's an unsatisfying ending. I know it raises as many questions as it answers. But that's sort of what it means to be a Christian. Faith is not an end-product to be consumed and enjoyed. Faith is a guide for a long and sometimes perilous journey toward the land of promise.

Gideon came to understand that truth. I pray that we will, too.

To God be all glory, honor, power and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

²⁰ Matthew 25:31-40, NRSV

²¹ Matthew 5:38-42, NRSV

²² Matthew 18:21-35, NRSV