

What Gideon Reveals

1. About Self-Image and Service

Judges 6:1-32

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Starting today we are going to spend several weeks in the company of one of my favorite Biblical characters, a judge in the history of Israel by the name of Gideon. His story is found in the book of Judges, chapters six through eight and I believe it to be both instructive and inspirational. The junior department in my home church in Mississippi had two paintings on the walls of our Sunday school room, one was of Daniel in the lion's den and the other of Gideon and his band of 300 descending the hills, torches and trumpets in hand, as they routed the Midianite camp in the valley. I am delighted to be dealing with both of these at the same time, Daniel in Sunday school and Gideon now in worship.

I like the name Gideon, so much so that when we learned that our fourth child was going to be a boy, I suggested to my wife that we name him Gideon. She wanted to name him either David after my brother or Preston after her beloved uncle. So, we compromised and named him David Preston.

A few years later David's adoptive grandparents, Judge Raulston and his wife Ginna gave David a cute golden retriever puppy. I suggested we name him Gideon. Tita thought we should name him Raulston. Again, we compromised and had Raulston for about ten years.

Now to be clear, judges in Israel did not really serve judicial functions as we think of judges today, judges like our friend Jack Raulston. No, they were charismatic leaders who were raised up by God to deliver his people and served military functions primarily. The time of the judges was after the Hebrew people had entered the promised land of Canaan and before there was a king in the land, from the death of Joshua to the anointing of King Saul, approximately 300 years between 1375 and 1050 BCE.

Most of the judges were rather strange characters with whom it is difficult for us to identify. Not so with Gideon. He is a notable exception and as we consider his exploits and escapades, we may just see some familiar traits and find some revealing lessons for our own time and place and calling.

As we begin this adventure with Gideon let me set the stage historically and biblically because it will provide the context for understanding the challenges before Gideon and the nation of Israel. First let me suggest that you remember five words that start with the letter “S” because if you can recall these you will have an outline for every story contained within the book of Judges. These five “S’s” form a repetitive cycle from beginning to end and here they are: Sin, Slavery, Supplication, Salvation and Silence. To show you how this works open in your Bibles to Judges 3:7-11 and I will demonstrate how the cycle works.

⁷*The Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, forgetting the LORD their God, and worshiping the Baals and the Asherahs. (SIN)*

⁸*Therefore the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he sold them into the hand of King Cushan-rishathaim of Aram-naharaim; and the Israelites served Cusban-rishathaim eight years. (SLAVERY)*

⁹*But when the Israelites cried out to the LORD (SUPPLICATION), the LORD raised up a deliverer for the Israelites, who delivered them, Othniel son of Kenaz, Caleb’s younger brother.*

¹⁰*The spirit of the LORD came upon him, and he judged Israel; he went out to war, and the LORD gave King Cushan-rishathaim of Aram into his hand; and his hand prevailed over Cusban-Rishathaim. (SALVATION)*

¹¹*So the land had rest forty years (SILENCE). Then Othniel son of Kenaz died.*

Now look at the next verse, verse 12:

“The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD.”

A new cycle begins with sin. The Gideon cycle follows the same pattern, but it takes three chapters to complete it.

As chapter 6 begins we discover that the people of Israel have once again sinned by being unfaithful to the Lord and are, as to be expected, suffering the consequences. They are living in great fear and under the oppression of the Midianites whom they had been forced to serve. These Midianites were a large nomadic tribe of fierce people who lived in the Arabian Desert. The way they survived was by making periodic raids into the more settled territory around them and at this point they had been concentrating their raids on Israel. Occasionally they were joined in these forays by other nomadic peoples, the Amalakites and the people of the East, who inhabited the Syrian Desert. The Israelites lived in mortal fear of these marauding bands and so they had built dens and caves in the mountains where they fled for refuge whenever the Midianites descended upon their land. Ordinarily the Midianites would arrive during the harvest season and bring with them their own tents and cattle, as was the nomadic custom and they would live off of the land until they had used everything up. One reason the Hebrews felt so helpless in the face of the Midianites can be found in verse 5

because there we read that they possessed a frightening new weapon---camels! This is in fact the first instance in recorded history of an organized camel raid. But you see the camel was the Stealth bomber of its day and there was no known defense against such weaponry, so the Israelites retreated once more into the hills with their tails between their legs hiding out like refugees in their own land.

So, this is the situation in the land as we take up the story of Gideon. The last verse of chapter 5 tells of forty years of silence, rest or peace that the nation enjoyed but once again the Israelites had done what was evil in the sight of the Lord according to verse 1. So the people cry out to the Lord for deliverance according to verse 7 and God responds by sending them a prophet who reminds them that God had already rescued them from the Egyptians but they had continued to worship the gods of the Amorites, the pagan people that dwelt in Canaan along with the Hebrews and worshiped Baal and Asherah. In other words, the Israelites had brought their oppression upon themselves. But once more in his mercy the Lord decides to deliver Israel and determines that Gideon will be the agent for this deliverance.

And so it is that God sends his angel to tell Gideon of the mission he has for him. To get the full import of this exchange between Gideon and the Angel, we have to keep in mind the circumstances I have just described. Gideon is secretly beating out some wheat in the hidden wine press away from the sight of the Midianite invaders, and probably trying to get just enough flour to make some bread to feed his hungry family. But all of a sudden, the Angel of the Lord appears and addresses him in words so incredulous that they seem to Gideon almost a joke. The words of the angel are: "The Lord is with you, you mighty warrior." (v.12) These words include two incredible things and two wonderful lessons for us today.

The first incredible thing the angel says is, "The Lord is with you!" Gideon responds in much the same way as you or I might have. In effect, he says, "You must be insane." You have no idea what you are saying here because we are being harassed and humiliated by a bunch of uncultured, lawless pagans and here I am scrounging around to get enough food to keep my family from starving, and you have the audacity to tell me that the Lord is with me. I certainly don't feel like that God is with me and the circumstances don't seem to bear it out either. He is probably thinking, "If this is what it means for God to be with me then I would rather God be with the Midianites."

Well, we don't actually know what Gideon was thinking and he doesn't respond in exactly the way I have suggested. But he comes close when he says, "But sir, if the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are 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."

I am afraid we often make the same false assumption that Gideon made. We assume also that God is not really with us unless things are going well, unless we are basking in prosperity, health and happiness, unless we are experiencing God's love and power, unless life is going to suit us. Am I wrong? And conversely, don't we often assume with Gideon that if we are taking it on the chin in life, if we know only too well "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune," if we're battling sickness poverty, death, injustice, unhappiness, defeat, and humiliation --- then that can only mean that God has abandoned us, if not to the Midianites then to some other modern day oppressor. And so, we too sit around in our misery and self-pity, feeling rejected by God and others and endure the bondage and humiliation we have brought upon ourselves. We turn our backs on God and do the very things that God has forbidden and then question why we can neither see nor feel God's presence. I love the bumper sticker that says, "If God seems far away, guess who moved!"

I am sure some of you listening to me this morning, if you have the gumption of Gideon, would probably lash out in cynicism or anger if someone said the Lord is with you. You would find that hard to believe because the creditors are on your heels, your marriage is coming apart, you've lost your job or friends have deserted you, or your kids are driving you insane, or you've ruined your reputation, or your health is compromised, and your family doesn't care. There are countless experiences and instances in life which will if we let them, distort our vision and blind us to the actual nearness of God. This is part of Gideon's problem. He must be thinking that the sign of God's presence is prosperity and well-being. This is clear evidence that the "prosperity gospel" is no new heresy. But later a wiser Gideon will come to see the truth. The truth is that the stars shine brightest on the darkest nights and God is never nearer than when all seems hopeless.

Israel's darkest night may seem to have come. Her enemies had swept over her like a flood and taken every possession. Her grain fields had been wasted; her fig trees robbed; her vines and olives stripped bare; her harvest destroyed, and her children may have been reduced to living as fugitives in their own land --- but the Lord God Almighty had not forsaken them. No, they had forsaken God and were living with the consequences of that rebellious decision. It is into this desperate situation that the messenger of God steps in reminding Gideon as I am reminding each of us today --- "The Lord is with you."

The second message from the angel that is equally ludicrous to Gideon is that he addresses Gideon as "you mighty warrior." Now if it seemed ridiculous to Gideon that the Lord was with him in the midst of his and his nations troubles, how much more absurd did it seem that the Lord would refer to him as a "mighty warrior?" Maybe Gideon thought the angel was mocking him. No doubt he was thinking to himself: "Here I am frightened to death, hiding like a common criminal, foraging like a rat for my children's supper. Call me a forsaken coward but certainly not a mighty warrior. Whom are you kidding here?"

To be sure, Gideon does not see himself as a mighty warrior in any sense of that expression. A few verses later, as he seeks to avoid his call, he will confess that he comes from the weakest family in the smallest tribe of Manassa and that he is the runt of the litter! “Why me?” he must be thinking. “Who am I to deliver Israel?”

So, we see now that Gideon was not only blind to the presence of God but also to the power of God. Gideon had not the vision to see what the Lord could accomplish through a willing vessel. Gideon looked in the mirror and saw only the man that he was, but when God looked at Gideon, he saw the man that he might yet become by his grace. Who tells you who you are? The person in the mirror looking back at you or the one who created you and knows what you’re capable of? Does your self-image contain a divine dimension?

Friends, there is a great deal of difference between genuine humility and self-abasement. It is as wrong to think too little of ourselves as it is to think too much. The truth is that we human beings are creatures fashioned in the very image of God and capable of responding to God’s grace. Unlike animals who can only be what nature allows them to be by design and instinct, women and men are free by God’s grace to become more and to do more. We can rise above any false limits of heredity or environment and become agents of the divine force behind the universe. That is to say, when God lives in us and through us there is no limit to what we can accomplish. The great Scottish poet Bobbie Burns was sitting in church one day when he spied a louse on a lady’s bonnet, and he penned those immortal words which said:

“Oh wad some power the giftie gie us
To see oursels as others see us!
It wad fae monie a blunder free us,
an’ foolish notion.”

Well perhaps! If we could see ourselves as others see us maybe, we would be spared the risk of thinking too highly of ourselves and we could avoid many blunders. But on the other hand, if we had the grace to see ourselves as the Lord God sees us, then perhaps we could be spared the equally disastrous fate of thinking too little of ourselves and us missing out on all that God could do in us and through us.

God saw Gideon as a mighty warrior and when Gideon came to accept God’s estimate of who he was, he became what the angel declared. He went forth in the strength of the Lord. He took an axe in hand and chopped down and destroyed the idols of his people and almost dared them to do something about it. He knew that this was the source of Israel’s troubles and the cause of her oppression. And in the weeks to come we will discover how he took a small band of soldiers and completely routed the Midianite oppressors.

My friends, what is God calling you to be or to do as an individual? What is God calling us to do as a church to be and to do? Are we living within the restraints of our own imagination or are we seeing ourselves as God sees us? Any one of us as an individual and all of us as a community of faith are capable of doing for more than we may ever have dreamed. We can help tear down the idols of our own culture and begin freeing people from the shackles created by their own rebellion, stupidity and sin. We can do this not because we are great but because we have a great God. As Paul put it, "We who have this spiritual treasure are like common clay pots, in order to show that the supreme power belongs to God and not to us. (II Cor. 4:7.)

Is God calling you to be a mighty warrior? Maybe through serving in one of the many ministries of this church? Maybe serving with Hot Dish & Hope, or teaching in Sunday school, or singing in the choir, or participating in any of our outreach projects? Have you deluded yourself by saying you haven't the ability or the time? This is no false modesty on your part but rather denial that the presence and power of God is capable of working through you.

My friends, if we are tempted to think that God has abandoned us or that there is nothing that we can do in God's service, then we should open again to Judges 6. Because here we find a disheartened man who had never fought a battle, never faced an enemy, who had no special training at all who was called and equipped to be a mighty warrior. His only strength was the knowledge that God is with him, not because he particularly felt God's presence but because God had told him he was with him. And with that knowledge and its accompanying strength, Gideon would save the people of Israel. So, as I draw this message to a close and as we continue to look for people to carry out the mission and work of this church, I would like to say to you: "The Lord is with you, you mighty warrior."

Prayer: Gracious God, give us the grace to see ourselves as you see us and to become the people in the church that we potentially are. So, indwell us by your presence and your power that we shall be a light to the nations and a joy to our Redeemer. Amen.