

Gideon the Reluctant

Judges 6:12-15 The angel of the LORD appeared to him and said to him, "The LORD is with you, you mighty warrior." ¹³ Gideon 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." ¹⁴ Then 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." ¹⁵ He responded, "But sir, how can I deliver Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family."

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Today's text is from the book of Judges. It's an odd name for the book since the folks called judges don't seem to have any judicial duties. It turns out that the ancient root of the word translated as judge could also mean ruler. That's what the judges in this book do – they govern, they rule, and some of them are leaders in military conflicts.

The period when judges ruled over Israel is after the Hebrews are released from slavery in Egypt and come to live in the land of Canaan under the leadership of Joshua. And this period is before they were ruled by kings beginning with King Saul and followed by King David. Under Joshua, the people had promised three times that they would be ruled by God. But, the book of Judges tells us how they repeatedly took up the worship of the local gods of the various tribes who were in the land before the Hebrews arrived. As the Hebrews settled in the land of Canaan, the region came to be known as the land of Israel and the people came to be called Israelites.

The book of Judges deals with some foundational issues for the people as they begin to evolve from a very tribal organization toward something that might be called a nation. Who will they worship – the God of their ancestor Abraham, the God who rescued them from bondage in Egypt, or the gods already worshipped by their neighbors in their new homeland, - or perhaps they could worship both? A related question was who would rule over them – God and leaders who were God's anointed, or were they going to be ruled by men who weren't messengers of God's will?

In the book of Judges, there's a repetitive cycle. The people violate the first commandment, they worship other gods, and they suffer the consequences of their sin. God hears their suffering and sends a deliverer, a judge, who delivers them and then there is peace and rest in the land. Each account reads a bit like liturgy. Each story begins with "The Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the Lord." Each one ends with "and the land had rest for 40 years" or twenty years or eighty years in two cases. Over and over and over, the Israelites turn away from God ----- and over and over and over God forgives and redeems.

"The sovereignty or power of Israel's God does not consist of sheer force or enforcement. If it did, God either should have been more successful in whipping Israel into shape, or God should have simply punished Israel incessantly. Instead, however, Israel's God in the book of Judges and throughout the Bible simply cannot and will not be unfaithful to [a habitually] unfaithful people. In short, God's sovereignty takes the form of steadfast love. Israel's God is essentially gracious and merciful."¹

"Even those who persist in doing 'evil,' even those who have brought oppression upon themselves, will be the beneficiaries of God's saving activity. Thus, the pattern in the book of Judges portrays a God who cannot help but be gracious."² It is no wonder that in Psalm 145:8 the psalmist sings with great joy, "The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love."

The book of Judges is certainly not one of the most sermonized texts in the Bible. If one complies with the lectionary, there is only one passage from the book of Judges during the whole three year cycle. The book deserves more attention than that. In Judges we read about Deborah, an early female leader, and about Samson, the long-haired man who was strong in body but weak in temptation. And we read about

Gideon, a very reluctant leader, an unpromising candidate for leadership in a time of trouble. The association that tries to put a Bible in every hotel room is named after Gideon in the book of Judges.

Maybe you heard about Gideon in Sunday school as a child. Gideon tore down his father's altar to Baal. More likely, you may have heard that with 300 men Gideon slew the Midianite army of 135,000 men. That would be inaccurate and misses an important point. On the night of the battle, Gideon and his band of three hundred did as God commanded and the Midianite army was put to rout, slaying each other in the darkness, ---- and Gideon and the 300 men never raised a weapon. It's more accurate to say that God defeated the Midianite army than Gideon and his men. There are other parts of Gideon's life besides the battles that offer valuable lessons, even for us today.

For instance, we can learn important lessons by considering God's call to Gideon. As the story begins, the Midianites have been oppressing the Israelites. They stole or destroyed the Israelites crops and their herds and then the Midianites would graze their own herds in the Israelites pastures. Things were so bad that many of the Israelites had taken to the hills to live in caves. Rather than threshing wheat out in the open on a threshing floor, Gideon was secretly threshing wheat in a wine press, hoping that he and the wheat would escape the notice of the Midianites. An angel of the Lord appeared to him and said, "The Lord is with you." Gideon wasn't buying it. "If the Lord is with us, then why are we in the pickle that we're in? I've heard about all the wonders of God when my ancestors were delivered out of Egyptian bondage, but look at us now!"

There's a strange discontinuity in the text at this point. Gideon has been having a conversation with an angel, but now, all of a sudden, it says that the Lord said, "I commission you to deliver Israel from Midian's hands." Gideon protested that he's not the right person to take on that commission. There he was, hiding in the wine press, trying to secretly thresh some wheat. He wasn't a bold man and he knew it. He was a nobody. He said, "My clan is the weakest in the tribe of Manaseh, and I'm the least in my family. You've got the wrong guy." The Lord replied, "I will be with you." So far, an angel has said, "The Lord is with you," the Lord has said, "I commission you," and after Gideon's protest, has said, "I will be with you." After, being told three times that God is involved in this, you'd think that Gideon would bow his head and say, "As you wish. I'm yours to command." But Gideon is, to say the least, reluctant.

That's not unusual, actually. At the burning bush, Moses said, "I'm not the right person for the job. I'm nobody, I don't speak well, they won't listen to me, and they won't believe me." (Exodus 3:1 through 4:17) In Isaiah's grand vision of God and seraphim in the temple, Isaiah proclaimed that he was unworthy because he was a man of unclean lips. (Isaiah 6:1-8) And when Jeremiah was called to be a prophet by God, Jeremiah protested that he was unsuitable because he was just a boy. (Jeremiah 1:4-10)

Gideon, however, may hold the record for being reluctant about his call. After being told three times that God was with him, Gideon said, "Wait right here until I come back with something." Gideon went and prepared a meal of bread and meat and broth. When he put them on a rock, the Lord touched them with a staff and they were consumed with fire. At last Gideon seemed convinced that he really was dealing with God. And yet, later on, Gideon tested God twice to see if God meant what he said. One night he laid out a wool fleece on a threshing floor and told God to leave dew on the fleece and leave the ground dry. The next night he told God to leave the fleece dry but make the ground wet with dew.

What lessons can we learn from this? First, even when God calls us in clear and spectacular ways, those called by God are often reluctant to really believe that they are called. How much more deaf are those who are called in quiet ways. For most of us, the call of God is not some spectacular event, but more like the still small voice, the holy sound of silence, that Elijah experienced in the mountains. We have all, each and every one of us, been blessed with God-given talents, aptitudes, and abilities. God blesses us with gifts and strengths so that we can love both our God and our neighbor. All of us are called to do this. If we neglect using those talents for the glory of God and the building of God's kingdom, then we are reluctant and neglectful. We aren't responding to God's call to each and every one of us.

The second lesson to learn here is that those who are called to leadership often feel inadequate, unqualified, and they resist their call. That's so often the case in scripture, that it may be wise to hesitate

when someone is particularly exuberant about their own call to leadership and they're enthusiastic and insistent that others accept their God-conferred leadership. Gideon's timidity left room for God's presence and power. Paul wrote about his own experience in the twelfth chapter of 2 Corinthians about how he had a thorn in the flesh that kept him from being too elated, as he put it. He asked God three times to remove the thorn, whatever it was. But God's reply was, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." Paul also wrote about the call of God to all Christians in the first chapter of First Corinthians. Speaking to the brothers and sisters in the churches in Corinth, Paul said, "Think about your own call. There aren't very many of you who are powerful or wise or have noble blood. No, God chose the weak, the low, the despised, and those that the world thinks are foolish, so that none of us could boast of our accomplishments, but rather, God's power and wisdom could be seen.

The third lesson that we can learn from the story of Gideon only becomes apparent later on. Gideon began the conflict with the Midianites by following God's instructions which threw the Midianites into complete chaos without any of the 300 men striking a blow. But Gideon then took the initiative and took command of the rest of the conflict. Right after God called Gideon, the very first thing he did was to tear down an altar of Baal and the pagan sacred pole beside it. But after the conflict with the Midianites was over, Gideon collected gold from the people and cast an image which came to be worshiped by the Israelites. So it is that we see that having a call from God, even a call as persistent and impressive as Gideon's, doesn't guarantee that the one called will always be a faithful and true disciple of God. Even the very best can trip and fall. With power comes responsibility, but unless constant care is taken, power is a strong temptation to slip into corruption.

The book of Judges warrants our attention because it is such a clear example of God's repeated redemption and love for us, even when we act in unlovable ways. Just as God is persistent in redeeming us, God is also persistent in calling us, not because we're worthy or strong, but because God can use us for his glory. But perhaps we should be a little wary of those who promote themselves with proclamations of their call. And we must remember that even the most impressive call doesn't guarantee infallibility. Amen.

"Grace is indeed free, but as the book of Judges reveals, it is not cheap. It demanded of Israel, and it demands of us, our souls, our lives, our all – in short, it demands that we worship God alone."³

Othniel 3:7-11	40 yrs
Ehud 3:12-30	80 yrs
Deborah 4&5	40 yrs
Samson 13-16	20 yrs
Gideon 6-8	40 yrs

2Co 12:7-9 NRS Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness."

Co 1:26-29 NRS Consider your own call, brothers and sisters:¹ not many of you were wise by human standards,² not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸ God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, ²⁹ so that no one might boast in the presence of God.

¹ J. Clinton McCann, *Judges, Interpretation Series* (Louisville, John Knox Press, 2002) p 25

² J. Clinton McCann, *Judges, Interpretation Series* (Louisville, John Knox Press, 2002) p 63

³ J. Clinton McCann, *Judges, Interpretation Series* (Louisville, John Knox Press, 2002) p 25