

Epworth Chapel on the Green
February 10, 2019
Fifth Sunday after Epiphany
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Judges 6:11-24
Psalm 85:7-13
I Corinthians 15:1-11
Luke 5:1-11

Our Old Testament lesson this morning introduces us to a man named Gideon, who finds himself on the horns of a serious dilemma. As we meet Gideon, the children of Israel find themselves in circumstances that can only be described as dire and desperate.

The text tells us that the Israelites have been reduced to starvation by the Midianites, who have pillaged and plundered the land and the people to such an extent that the children of Israel have literally had to “run for their lives.” Things are so bad that life is officially lived in “survival” mode.

As we are introduced to Gideon, he is threshing some wheat in the bottom of a winepress, hoping it might become daily bread before it’s too late and the Midianites come. As he does so, an angel appears to him and says, “Mighty hero, the Lord is with you!”

And the dilemma that confronts Gideon now comes front and center. The problem is that the angel says *one* thing, but Gideon’s circumstances say quite another. And the two versions of reality seem to stand in direct contradiction to one another.

God says, “I am with you.”

Gideon says: “Really? That’s not how it appears from down here at the bottom of this winepress! From down here, it looks as though God cut out a long time ago, and is nowhere to be found. From down here, all that can be seen are Midianites, and the God who delivered us from Egypt is nowhere in sight.”

“Speaking of the Midianites,” says the angel, “I want you to rescue Israel from them.”

“Is that so?” says Gideon. “And I suppose you also want me to make pigs fly, too, right? Do you know who you’re talking to? I’m the smallest person available from the weakest clan in Manasseh.”

“I know,” says the angel. “But God wants you to go forward in the little strength you have, and God will be with you. You’ll see.”

And in that moment, Gideon faces a serious challenge. He is confronted with *two* conflicting versions of reality. God says one thing. But his circumstances clearly seem to say another.

God says, “You’re a hero.” Gideon says, “Then why am I down here at the bottom of a winepress feeling very much afraid?”

God says, “You’re strong.” Gideon says, “Then why do I feel so weak and helpless?”

God says, "I am with you." Gideon says, "Forgive me, but you've got a funny way of showing it!"

Centuries later, we find ourselves sitting here in this room empathizing with Gideon, because we can identify with the conflict he faced. We identify with Gideon because the challenge that confronted him is the same challenge that sometimes confronts us.

The challenge: *How do we trust God when what God promises us or asks of us seems to contradict our present experience?*

There may be a relationship in your life that is so damaged that it seems beyond repair. But if God were to say to you, "I want you to pray and to seek reconciliation," what would you do?

The Spirit may be tugging at your heart and speaking to you about a vocational change. But when you look at your present circumstances, all you can see is your lack of resources and your inadequacies.

God may be speaking to you about an opportunity to use your spiritual gifts for some ministry purpose, but your present circumstances may lead you to ask, "God, are you talking to *me*?"

What do we do when our lived experience -- when reality as we know it -- collides with what God says to us and what God may ask of us? What do we do

when what God asks of us seems to be so *big*, and what we have to offer seems so *small*?

I don't pretend to have all the answers to that question. But I do know what Gideon was asked to do. In the face of overwhelming anxiety and inadequacy, Gideon was told: "Go in the strength you [do] have."

When you're down at the bottom of a winepress hunkered down in survival mode, your problems loom so large that they are all you can see. Gideon was at a point where his circumstances had grown so large that he felt himself to be small in comparison. Indeed, he sees himself as the weakest of the least. And perhaps he was.

But God doesn't ask us to be something we are not, or to give what we do not have. God simply asks us to be who we are, to use what we know, to give what we have in the present moment. God doesn't ask us to concern ourselves with how his promise will be accomplished. God simply asks us to trust him with what little we have, and to move forward in faith.

So to Gideon, God says: "Just go in the strength you have..."

To Peter, Jesus says, "Just throw your nets out where the water is a little deeper..."

And to you this morning, God says: "If you can trust me with who you are, and with what little you have, then little can become much."

But I suspect this morning that God will not achieve the “much” without our “little,” because God doesn’t work these wonders for our sake alone.

God’s work in Gideon’s life was not just for Gideon’s deliverance, but for the deliverance of the *people*. And Jesus didn’t burst the nets so that Peter’s eyes might pop out in amazement. He did so in order that Peter, James, John and the others might be empowered to fish for *people*.

And God is at work in your life right now, busy taking your little and transforming it into much. And the wonder of it all is that it’s not just about you -- it’s about others, so that they might see what God is doing in you and give God honor and glory.

As we come to the Lord’s Table this morning, I invite you to come and to see yourselves *not* through the eyes of your circumstances, but through the eyes of the Father who loves you and calls you his beloved child. Receive the grace he offers you. And go forth with the assurance that little is much, when God is in it. Or, as the apostle Paul would say: *now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever.*

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.