

One of the great truths of the Bible is that when God looks at us he does not see us for what we are, but for what we can become, as he works in our lives. He is in the business of taking weak, insignificant people and transforming them by his presence in their lives. He begins with us where we are, as we are. He knows our weaknesses, failures, discouragements, doubts and inadequacies, but he does not say, "You get rid of those, then I can use you". Rather, he comes to us in our weakness with the promise of his presence that will transform our inadequacy into his strength.

The truth of God's transforming presence is vividly portrayed in the life of one of the great heroes of the Old Testament, the judge Gideon. But when we first meet him in Judges 6 he is hiding fearfully in a winepress to thresh his wheat, thoroughly discouraged by the marauding Midianites.

What had the Midianites done to strike such fear and despair into the hearts of the Israelites? They had developed a unique strategy against Israel. Rather than invading and occupying the land, they simply waited until the harvest was ready. Then, as verses 3-5 record, they would move in from the desert to the east, cross the Jordan River in huge numbers with their camels and overwhelm the land. Their camels gave the Midianites a mobile, long-range, swift, attack-capability against the Hebrews, who were entirely dependent on foot soldiers. Their military and numerical superiority left Israel defenceless. Like a plague of locusts, they would swoop through the land, stripping it bare of grain, vegetables, fruit and livestock. Finally, with their camels loaded down with their spoil, they would cross back into the desert and live there until the next harvest. They did this for 7 years and left Israel in a desperate situation, reduced to hiding food in mountain caves and strongholds. But nothing could stop the Midianites. Israel was defeated and helpless, and finally, realizing their need, they "cried out to the Lord for help" (v. 6).

1. The Word that Criticizes Us (vv. 7-10)

Every other time in Judges when God's people called on him for help, he immediately sent them a judge to bring deliverance. Not this time. God sent a prophet because he had a message he wanted his people to hear.

There is a great difference between a cry for help from trouble, and a cry of repentance for sin. Israel called on God, upset at how the Midianites were mistreating them and ruining their lives, but they had not dealt with their sin. So God's prophet came. He reminded them of God's faithfulness and grace - how he had delivered them from slavery in Egypt and given them the land of Canaan and set forth the terms of his covenant: "I am the Lord your God. You shall not serve the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living".

God had done all that, in his grace for them. Yet, deliberately and defiantly, they had broken their covenant with him. By his prophet God was reminding them of one basic fact. They were what they were, and where they were because they had turned away from him. The prophet comes and helps them to understand why they are in the trouble they are in. He wants them to understand where their idolatry - their sin - has led them. God sends the prophet to convict of sin before he sends the judge to rescue from oppression because the people are regretful, but not repentant. Regret is sorrow over the consequences of a sin, but not over the sin itself. The Israelites were regretful for what they had lost, and wanted it restored - but they were not repenting of their idolatry. Regret is all about "us": how I am being hurt, how my life is ruined, how my heart is breaking. But repentance is all about God: how he has been grieved, how his repeated saving actions are being trivialized and used manipulatively. What can we learn from this? Many things but, most importantly, to check what we are sorry about as we sorrow over our situation caused by our sin. Is it the consequences of the sin in our lives, or the sin

itself? Is it the loss of the pleasure that an idol offered (money, career, sex, friends, even family), or the damage to our relationship with God?

2. The Grace that Holds Us (v. 11)

There is something strange about the prophet's preaching in vv. 8-10. He didn't finish his sermon! After hearing the prophet accuse the Israelites on God's behalf, "But you have not listened to me", we expect him to go on to his punch line, which would normally be an announcement of judgment. The judgment that should be announced is omitted. Instead the Angel of the Lord goes to recruit and prepare a man to deliver, to rescue Israel even though there is no evidence of real repentance by the people of Israel. That is why I have titled this section "The Grace that Holds Us". How like the God of the Bible whose covenant love is so great! When he "ought" to destroy he delivers yet again. When he has every right to shatter he nevertheless prepares to save. How "slow to anger" (Exodus 34: 6) indeed! That is why Ephesians 2: 4 is so gripping. There we are lifeless (because we are "dead in....transgressions and sins"), helpless (because we are captive to Satan and our own sinful desires) and hopeless (because we are children of wrath). "But, because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy" (Ephesians 2: 4). No-one could ever have invented a God like this - a God who restrains his judgment to hold us in his grace.

Judges 6: 11 does not tell us of the people's heartfelt repentance, the burning of their idols and so on. Instead, "the angel of the Lord came and sat down....where....Gideon was threshing wheat in a winepress to keep it from the Midianites". God is commissioning his judge - even though the people have not repented. God does not wait for us to repent before he begins to save us - "while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5: 8). God does not begin to save us because we repent. We repent because he's begun his saving work in us, through the external work of his Son on the cross and the internal work of the Spirit of Christ in our hearts.

3. The Promise that Equips Us (vv. 12-24)

The promise is simply, "The Lord is with you" (v. 12). Such a promise raises all sorts of problems for Gideon - in particular, if God is with us, why has all this happened to us? Clearly he isn't with us, because he has put us into Midian's hands instead of rescuing us like he did our ancestors. And, in response to Gideon's implicit suggestion that they needed an Egypt-style rescuer, another Moses, God says, "You are the salvation I am sending. You are my mighty warrior. You are the Moses for this generation of my people". How easy it is for us to make both of Gideon's mistakes! First, we tend to see our troubles as evidence that God has left us, instead of asking how God is working in and through them for our good, as he promises to (Romans 8: 28) - in the Israelites case, to show them the poverty of idolatry and to cause them to cry out to him in repentance and for rescue. Second, we are often waiting for God to do something to us or for us, or wondering why he doesn't use someone to bring help. We essentially say: "Lord, why don't you remove this problem?" instead of saying: "Lord, please make me the person who can handle this problem".

So God tells Gideon that he is the one who is being sent to "save Israel out of Midian's hand". "Am I not sending you?" asks the Lord (v. 14). This provokes the second "disagreement" between Gideon and God. "I am the least in my family", Gideon objects (v. 15). He is, economically and socially, the poorest member of the weakest clan of Manasseh, one of the less prominent Israelite tribes. "How can I save Israel?" he asks. Yet the angel of the Lord has already called Gideon a "mighty warrior" (v. 12). Why? We have seen that Gideon is the kind of man who hides fearfully in a winepress to thresh his wheat! Is Gideon being deliberately modest or is it that he just hasn't realized how much potential he has? The reality is that if God says that Gideon is a mighty warrior, then he is. Gideon is to use his own abilities - "the strength you have" (v. 14). But Gideon's potential is not alone sufficient. It needs to be combined with the knowledge that it is God who is sending him and God who will be with him (vv. 14, 16). Gideon is correct to suggest that he cannot save Israel - in his own strength. God is correct to tell him that he will save Israel - using his own strength combined with knowing that God has called him to

(Judges 6: 1-40, Ephesians 2: 1-5)

this task, and is with him in it. As God's people today, as we look to a new year in the life of Canterbury Presbyterian Church and the wider church, we need the same attitude in the areas of service to which God has called us, don't we? And what incredible comfort and strength we receive from that promise - "but I will be with you" - a promise given by God to Moses (Exodus 3: 12), and to Joshua (Joshua 1: 5) and by Jesus to his disciples just before he ascended to heaven (Matthew 28: 20). You can go through a lot with that promise - indeed it is all we need.

Gideon, however, needs assurance that this promise is really God's promise - "give me a sign that it is really you talking to me" (v. 17b). He must know it is God's word or at least that it comes with God's authority. So he proposes that he prepare an offering of a young goat to set before the angel of the Lord. He prepares the meat in a basket and its broth in a pot and arranges the items as the angel directs. The angel touches the meat and the bread with the tip of his staff and "zap", they are consumed by fire. And the angel of the Lord disappears. It is then that Gideon realizes just who this angel of the Lord was! It was God himself. The narrative makes this clear by sometimes speaking of the angel of the Lord (vv. 12, 20, 21). And at other times speaking of the Lord - and, indeed, in v. 14 we are told that "the Lord turned to him and said". Here, surely, we have a deep hint of the Trinity. There is good reason to see this figure as God the Son, a pre-incarnation appearance of Jesus Christ. His concern, even then, was to bring salvation and peace to his people.

There is an amazing paradox in what happens in v. 22. Gideon wanted assurance of God's promise, but, when the assurance came it terrified him rather than strengthened him - "Alas, Sovereign Lord! I have seen the angel of the Lord face to face!" (v. 22). This sort of talk seems strange to us because we Western Christians have no real sense of the terror and awesomeness of God, for we think of intimacy with God as a right that is ours rather than an indescribable gift. There is nothing amazing about grace as long as there is nothing fearful about holiness. But, thankfully, Gideon knew better. Nothing is more assuring than God's "I will be with you" but nothing is more overwhelming than the fact that it is God who says it! Indeed it is only God who can speak peace to the trembling - to those fearful of judgment. And he has done that to us in Christ, our Saviour.

#### 4. The Demand that Commits Us (vv. 25-32)

God tells Gideon to tear down his father's altar to Baal and to cut down the Asherah pole beside it. Then he is to build an altar to the Lord his God, and, using the wood of the Asherah pole, to sacrifice on it, as a whole burnt offering, one of his father's bulls. Why does God make such a demand? Because two altars cannot coexist side by side. You cannot have an altar to Yahweh, to God, and an altar to Baal - they are mutually exclusive. The demand placed on Gideon was meant as an example for Israel. God was preparing to deliver them but Israel must be properly prepared for such deliverance. When your child falls on the ground skinning their knees, you don't simply slap on a band-aid over the mess. No, first you clean the wound, getting rid of the grit and dirt, and then you apply the band-aid. And that is Jesus' way. When the rich young ruler came to him, he exposed the riches and wealth that were his idol, told him to dispose of that idol and "then come, follow me" (Mark 10: 21). Such is God's demand on Gideon and Israel. If God is to be their Saviour, Baal must go. Judges 6 and Matthew 6 agree: no one can be a slave of two masters (Matthew 6: 24). For Gideon and for you and me those times come when our commitment to the living God can no longer remain hidden. We have to take a stand, we must declare ourselves as being Christ's disciple - and, if need be, stand alone against the social and cultural and religious expectations of the community.

Gideon "did as the Lord told him" (v. 27). He was obedient. That's what counted. And, in the morning, Ophrah was in uproar. Somehow word leaked out that Gideon had done it. The town leaders paid Joash a visit, demanding that he turn over his son for execution. But Joash defended his son with biting satire: "If Baal is God, surely he doesn't need any help from Ophrah's leaders to maintain his honour - he should be perfectly able to deal

with my son himself!" So the challenge to Israel was clear: either continue to prop up Baal or worship at God's altar.

5. The Assurance that Settles Us (vv. 33-40)

At the next harvest-time, the Midianites, Amalekites and other eastern peoples flooded again into the Valley of Jezreel to gather their food and plunder. But this year there was a new twist, "the Spirit of the Lord came on Gideon" (v. 34) and, in the Spirit's power, he summons his own clan and the whole tribe of Manasseh and also Asher, Zebulun and Naphtali to assemble for conflict. The Spirit's power, however, is joined to Gideon's human weakness, and so we note, finally, the assurance that settles and calms us. Gideon is still unsure of God's calling and promise. So he sets out a wool fleece and asks God to confirm his plans by making the fleece wet with dew while the ground is dry. And then he asks for further confirmation by reversing the request (fleece dry and ground wet). God meets both requests. Many people have criticized Gideon for this action. If, however, it was so wrong and sinful, why did God respond? Others have imitated Gideon in this action. They say, "Lord, if you want me to take this job, let me get a phone call or email from them today".

But we must be careful. When Satan asked Jesus to "test" God by asking for a "sign", Jesus rebuked him (Matthew 4: 5-7). So what is going on here? Gideon was very specifically asking God to show him that he was not one of the forces of nature (like the other gods), but was sovereign over the forces of nature. Gideon wasn't looking for "little signs" to help him make a decision. He was really seeking to understand the nature of God. We have to remember that Gideon did not have the Bible, nor many of the other "means of grace" that we have now (such as the sacraments and Christian fellowship). He was very specifically addressing those areas where his faith was weak and uninformed. We cannot use this as a justification to ask for little signs or signals. Gideon wasn't doing that - rather he was asking for supernatural revelation from God to show him who he really is. This isn't about how to make a decision. No, it is about how we need to ask God to give us a big picture of who he is. Living after the Cross, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we have the advantage over Gideon of knowing Jesus Christ, the Son of God, as he reveals himself in his Word.

Gideon's request was for help to build up his faith. God, in his grace, responded - and twice! When we make the same request because our faith is fragile or wavering, God graciously responds - by pointing us to the fullest, final revelation of his character and purposes - the Lord Jesus Christ. When we, like Gideon, find ourselves doubting God's promises, or God's presence, we can ask him to point us again to Jesus, his Son, saying: "I do believe, help me overcome by unbelief!" (Mark 9: 24). This is what Gideon needed, and received. You can be sure that God will do the same for us.

Amen

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