

Covenant Word

Get Somebody Else

Judges 6:1-6, 11-16; Luke 6:12-16; 1 Corinthians 15:3-11

A Message by
The Reverend John Duke
Sunday
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The Bible can serve many roles in our lives. One of the roles it can serve for us is that of mirror. The Bible can help us to see ourselves as we really are, not just how we think we are or how we wish we were. That's the problem with mirrors. They are brutally honest. Mirrors show our beauty, but they also show our flaws, if we are willing to really look

at the reflections in front of us. The same is true of the Bible. Sometimes the reflection we get from the Bible is one that bothers us

– it can show us our unkemptness and it can show us flaws that we would rather not see. But sometimes it helps us to see ourselves as God sees us – to see potential and beauty there that we otherwise may be blind to.

That's the case, I think, with the story of Gideon. This is one of those stories for some reason that is not included in the lectionary, but it's a great story. And through it we can potentially see ourselves for better or for worse.

Now this is not the Gideon who sneaks into hotel rooms in the middle of the night to leave Bibles under pillows. This is the story of one of Israel's judges. It helps to understand the context of Gideon's story. It takes place during one of the transitional times of Israel's history. They had escaped from bondage in Egypt and had entered their Promised Land. But it was a land still occupied by other people. The Israelites fought and conquered many people there, but there still many other people willing to fight for this land. This was also a time before they had a king. They were a loose confederation of tribes. They pulled together when needed to in order to fight together, but they were not a highly unified nation. So in-between crises, they all went their separate ways.

A pattern emerges in this time period. In between crises, the people of Israel would become very lax in following the commitments that Moses

tried to lead them to make. They would worship other gods and would break the laws they had been given. God would respond by giving them up to plunderers who would wreak havoc on them. Then Israel would start crying out for God's help. God would respond by giving them leaders, called judges, to help them defeat their enemies. When those enemies were gone, it wouldn't take long for Israel to again forsake God and the commandments. In biblical language, they "did what was evil in God's sight." God would again send enemies against them. This pattern would happens again and again during this time period – Israel sins, God sends enemies, Israel cries for help, God sends a judge, the enemy is defeated, there is a short period of peace, and then the cycle begins again.

Our story today picks up about 40 years after the judge Deborah had brought peace. Israel had begun again to "do what was evil in the sight of God", and again, God decided to teach them a lesson. This time, God sent a group of people called Midianites against them. The Midianites were a war-like people, and they swarmed into Israel, our text saying there were too many of them to count. But not only did they have the advantage

of numbers, they had another advantage. Historians tell us that these were the people who had domesticated the camel and who had

learned how to fight while riding camels. The Israelites were used to fighting eyeball to eyeball with their enemies, but they suddenly found themselves fighting eyeball to kneecap with these hairy animals moving about 40 miles an hour. That makes it pretty hard to hit an enemy when he is not only moving that fast but is several feet above you and bouncing up and down to boot.

So the Israelites were routed, and they went into hiding for seven years. They hid in the mountains and in caves. In the end, they turned again to God, as they always did when in trouble.

That's not too unlike many people today, and perhaps even many of us. When things are going well, it is easy to forget about God. We take care of business and enjoy life. And if we let God into our lives too much during the good times, and take seriously all the commitments that God requires, that might even hinder us from enjoying life as much as we are. So for many, when things are going well, God becomes someone we may tip our hats to, but that we don't really want too much in our lives. Then some crisis occurs, and pretty quickly we turn to God for help. That is what God is for many people – a problem-solver. He's a genie we go to in order to get our wishes fulfilled. So when things are not going well, it is to God we turn. When things are going smoothly, then we seem to be fine as we are, much as Israel seemed to

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But Israel was in crisis now, so they called to God. And God answered. Some time later – we don't know how long – an angel of God appeared to a man named Gideon. Gideon is sifting wheat down in a winepress so as to not be seen by any Midianites who might come by. This angel speaks to him, and says, probably with a smirk on his face, "God is with you, you mighty warrior." Do you see the humor in that? Gideon and his people have been

hiding for seven years, and here is Gideon hunkered down doing chores in a winepress so he won't be seen by the enemy, and this angel refers to him as a mighty warrior of God. The angel surely saw some irony in that title. Or maybe he knew something that Gideon didn't know yet.

But Gideon doesn't respond to that title right away. You have to imagine that the first thing he did was to jump half out of his skin when this stranger suddenly appears and talks to him, when Gideon is already nervous about the possibility of enemies sneaking up on him. Apparently, Gideon decided that this must not be one of the enemy, and he responded to him, but what he addressed was not the title the angel gave him; it's the other thing that the angel said – "The Lord is with you."

Gideon said, "Really? Then why has all of this happened. Where was God when the Midianites overran us? Where are all the wonderful deeds that our ancestors tell us that God did for them?" On the one hand, this is a pretty natural reaction. Many of us do wonder why bad things happen to us, and what role God had in them. At the very least, we often wonder why God let these things happen to us. But as with Gideon, this is often a case of shortsightedness. Israel's history was one in which God had been fully involved. There were many stories Gideon had heard of God's blessings, but in the midst of crisis, all that Gideon could see was what happening then. And in this case, he also didn't seem to acknowledge that there was blame to be had by Israel – they had abandoned their commitments to God. But all Gideon could see was that they were in trouble, and he didn't see anything that God was doing about it. He didn't recognize that the conversation he was in the middle of was in fact God doing something about their crisis.

The angel didn't respond to these questions of Gideon's. Instead he told Gideon to go in his might and to deliver Israel. This time, Gideon does respond to this idea. He basically says, "Are you kidding?" He pointed out that of all the 12 tribes of Israel, his tribe was the smallest. And of all the families in his tribe, his was the weakest. And of all the people in his family, he was the least significant. In other words, Gideon said, "Boy have you got the wrong guy! You should be asking pretty much anyone else but me to do this for you. I am the last person in Israel that you should be talking to!"

This kind of response may sound familiar to you. Frequently in the Bible, God approaches people and calls them to do some important work, and their responses are very similar to that of Gideon. When God told Moses to rescue the people of Israel, Moses' response was, "But I can't talk so good! Get somebody else." When God told Jeremiah that he was to be a prophet to the nations, Jeremiah said, "But I'm just a boy! Get somebody else." When the prophet Samuel told Saul that he was to be Israel's hope and king, Saul replied in much the same

way that Gideon did – "But my tribe is the least important in Israel and my family is the humblest in the tribe." Time and time again, God comes to people to give them important work to do, and their reply is, "You've got the wrong person. Get someone else."

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in neighborhoods and that there are many dying in wars, but I can't do anything about it. Get somebody else." "I know that there is corruption and dysfunction throughout the principalities and powers, but I can't do anything about it. Get somebody else."

That's a natural reaction for most of us. The problems that exist seem to be too great for us to address in any effective way. And humility is a great quality. But God doesn't seem to think the same way we do about those things. We would look for people with great leadership skills and charisma to accomplish the great things of the world. But look at who God tends to pick. Gideon was the least of all of those in Israel. Moses was a shepherd. Jeremiah was a boy. Look at those that Jesus picked to be his disciples and to lead the church – Peter who spoke before he thought, a religious zealot, a tax collector who was considered a traitor by his own people, fishermen.

Bill Leonard is the dean of the divinity school at Wake Forest University. Some years ago, he did a sermon about the type of people God calls and uses to further the Kingdom's work. The sermon was called "Send in the Clowns". In it, Leonard talked precisely about how flawed and improbable the people were that were used in the Bible and throughout history to accomplish God's work, often in world changing ways.

Gideon didn't feel he was worthy of the task being given him. We may not feel worthy or equipped either to do great things on God's behalf. But sometimes we can accomplish far more than we would have thought if we only allow ourselves to be used. People like Mother Teresa and Francis of Assisi and Martin Luther and Dietrich Bonhoeffer and many others stood up and made a difference, not because they were confident they were God's gifts to the world, but because they saw needs and saw that people needed to act, and they were willing to be used by God as God saw fit.

You probably know the rest of Gideon's story. It took some convincing, and Gideon required several tests to become

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convinced that this was all of God, but eventually he caught on fire. He went on a recruitment drive for God's army, and managed to build any army of 32,000 men. But God, said, "You know, Gideon, that army is just too big. I want people to know this is my doing, and not a military feat. Tell those who are afraid to go home. Gideon did. Apparently a good number of Gideon's army had been saying to themselves, "What was I thinking?", because when Gideon told those who were afraid to go home, 22,000 left, leaving Gideon with only 10,000 men.

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But God said, "Gideon, that is still too many men. Have everyone drink from the nearby creek. Those that scoop water up and bring it to their mouths, send home. Those who put their faces to the water and lap it up like dogs shall be your army." Of the 10,000 men that were left, 9,700 scooped the water up and got honorable discharges. Gideon was left with 300 men. With those 300, he went to the Midianite camp with trumpets and with torches in clay jars. When the signal was given, they all broke their jars, so that their lights shined, and they blew their trumpets. Chaos broke out in the Midianite camp, many of the Midianites hurting each other in the confusion, and Gideon and his army managed to defeat them.

Gideon didn't feel he was worthy of the task given him. But he found out that if he would allow himself to be used, in spite of his reservations and lack of self-esteem, he could accomplish great things on God's behalf. That has always been so. Doing great things for God doesn't require certain skills or attributes. What it does require is a willingness to say, "Here am I, send me."

King Saul is someone who stands in contrast to Gideon. The Bible says he was tall and strong and handsome and that God chose him to be king of Israel. But Saul kept stumbling, and in the end, through the prophet Samuel, God told him that the problem was that Saul was small in his own eyes (1 Sam. 15:17). He couldn't see himself as a worthy tool of God's, and that caused him to not trust in God or himself enough to be faithful and to be successful.

Any of us can do great things for our world and for God. Our age, our skills, our life circumstances don't prevent us from being modern day Gideon's or Moses' or Mother Theresa's. What can hinder us is our own self-image and a lack of willingness to act on God's behalf. But if we see ourselves the way God sees us and if we make ourselves available to be used, if we look at what needs to be done and do say, "I'm not going to wait for God to find someone else. I'm going to see what I can do", then in spite of our failings and fears, God can lead us where we need to go and can help us to do what we need to do. Peter was something of a fumbler, but he became a pillar of the church. Paul persecuted the early church, but ended up becoming probably its greatest missionary. Gideon saw himself as the least of all of those in Israel, but he saved Israel from an enemy to numerous to count.

Let's not wait for others to do what needs to be done. Our world is in crisis, and it needs people to act. The needs of the world may seem to be like the Midianites – too numerous to count and too great for us to do anything about. But – you are mighty warriors of God, and God is with you. See yourself as God sees you, and you can be the blessing that the world needs.