

Humble Hope
Sermon 194 | Greystone Baptist Church | August 20, 2023
Judges 6:7-22

It may seem strange to offer a sermon on hope from *any* text in the book of Judges. Strange because we never hear anyone offer a memory verse from this book when life is hard. Strange because we don't find material from Judges printed on sentimental cards sent to encourage one another during difficult times. We rarely even read from Judges when we gather for Bible Study. In fact, in nearly 15 years of ministry, I don't think I can recall even one time when a church member requested we examine this book.

I bet if we were to rank the books of the Bible like a top ten list - a top 66 list you might say - of greatest hits and best sellers, I bet *Judges* would fall near the bottom of that list, maybe in 65th or 64th place, right there with Leviticus or Numbers.

The truth is, we don't know what to do with this book. I suspect that might be because the picture it paints for us is not one of feel-good, anecdotal stories. Rather, the book of Judges drags us right down into some of Israel's darkest days. And to be honest, I sort of feel like we don't need any more of that, we do not need to compile any additional resources on despair and disappointment. We do not need any more sad news or bad news. So it is no wonder that we are not turning to these ancient pages in our search for a bit of good news.

The book itself is part of a greater collection of history woven together with story. It recalls the period of time between the death of Joshua and the emergence of the first King of Israel. It describes an in-between season of life for the people, a liminal space (so to speak), a time of change and challenge, a time during which different kinds of leaders were raised up to navigate Israel's ever evolving story.

Those oft quoted words of Esther seem to fit here, the heroes of this part of the story were not timelessly qualified or unilaterally spectacular, NO, they were a lot more ordinary if not even peculiar; but as the stories unfold we learn that their peculiarities uniquely qualify them for leadership *in* (as they say) *a time such as this*.

This *time* for which these strange leaders were called into action is characterized by a roller coaster-y relationship between the people and God that seemed to follow a very simple pattern:

- (1) the people forsake their God,
- (2) God allows enemies to attack
- (3) the people cry out to God for help and then
- (4) God raises up a leader from within to deliver them, to save them, to get them back on the right track.¹ A path toward peace in the land and right-relationship with God.

¹ James Limburg. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-33/commentary-on-judges-41-7-3>

Through this predictable pattern, a theological *question* looms in the background as both people and reader wonder: *Is God with us? Or has God forgotten us?*

Gideon is one of the peculiar heroes that emerges in the book; and though his role in the long story of Israel is rather short, Gideon's willingness to accept the call to leadership in this tumultuous time earns him a spot in the list of faith heroes found in Hebrews chapter 11. Yep, he is right there with the likes of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and even Rahab. But long before he appears on anyone's list of great heroes, Gideon is just a boy working on his father's land. We meet him there, beating out wheat in a wine press in order to hide it from his Midianite oppressors.

At this point in the story the Israelites have been "reduced to utter misery" (as one translation puts it²). They're in that part of the cycle where they've forsaken God (step 1), and so God has allowed enemies to attack them (step 2) and now they have begun crying out to God for help (step 3). Enter Gideon, son of Joash the Abiezrite, youngest in the family, which is the lowest clan in Manasseh. This is not looking good. Based on his genetic makeup and family lineage, Gideon is not going to have what it takes to lead the people. We are wasting our time. *But the story persists.*

At first even Gideon seems a bit skeptical - he doesn't see himself as a warrior and he is quite familiar with the power of the Midianites. But after a brief conversation with the angelic messenger God had sent, and a fiery sign on an altar Gideon himself built, he eventually comes to believe and accept his calling. This whole episode reminds us of the ways God has been *with* the Israelite people throughout their history. It has echoes of the Exodus from Egypt as God begins to raise up another leader to liberate the people from a new oppressor. It has echoes of the Elijah narratives as the fire consumes the makeshift altar - a sign of God's presence and blessing. And it has echoes of the time Jacob wrestled with the angel and then emerged to name the place "Penuel" meaning, here I have seen the face of God... words Gideon repeats as he gazes upon his own incinerated altar.

Gideon's faithful proclamation provides an answer to the looming theological question: *Is God with us or has God forgotten us?* At least it does for now...

Satisfied with his answer, Gideon began to assemble his army and through some rather unconventional means (read chapters 7 and 8) eventually led the Israelite people to victory. Even still, Gideon's success was not welcomed or affirmed by the whole nation. People criticized him for the altars he built, back when he was discerning whether this calling really was from God. People criticized the way he tore down the altars to Baal. People doubted that any serious leader could come from his tribe - sounds like what would also be said about Jesus, "*Can anything good come out of Nazareth?*"

But despite all the doubt, the story of God's liberating presence persists. You know sometimes when we read these ancient stories it is hard to see ourselves in the characters,

² JPS translation, Judges 6:6

in the unfolding drama. But this time it's so obvious it is hard *not* to see ourselves all over it. It makes me wonder if that ancient roller coaster relationship with God isn't only descriptive of the Israelite journey but also a little predictive of how our relationship with God would always be?

It sure reminds me of the times when we have been, like the Israelites, "reduced to utter misery." Surely we can remember some times when we have grown distant from God, either by circumstance or by our own doing. No matter *how* we got to that point, we do know a little something of that feeling, of being at our absolute lowest point. And since we are familiar with how that feels, we probably also know what it's like to cry out to God for help. Not quite sure if God is even listening anymore: *Is God with us or has God forgotten us?*

If there is any hope to be found in Judges, in Gideon, I wonder if it is simply this: *God remembers us. And God IS with us.* God did not forget US, we just forgot to look where God likes to work. In Manasseh. In Nazareth. In the most marginal places and through the most marginal people. With Gideon of all people! - youngest son, lowest tribe, weakest clan.

Isn't it just like God to weave a story of hope that starts like that?

You know, this whole ordeal reminds me of the story of three black women: Katherine Goble Johnson, Dorothy Vaughan, and Mary Jackson. Their stories most of us would never know if not for the 2016 film, appropriately titled, *Hidden Figures*. In the film we see each of them struggle with the systemic racism that worked behind the scenes to prevent them from receiving adequate education and transportation. Even still, these women earned their way onto NASA's payroll during the height of the space race in the 1960s. Armed with brilliant minds, a persistent sense of self-worth, and an absolute conviction that they were *going* to make a way - for themselves and for other people of color suffering under the yoke of racial discrimination.

God was at work, liberating God's people from the racism that was oppressing them. And remember, God's liberation hope begins on the margins.

The whole movie is well worth the 127 minutes it takes to watch it, but there's one scene in particular that I think might help us today in our quest for hope. Katherine (one of the three women) has recently been assigned to a special task group that is trying to get the first American into orbit. She's the "computer" - the math person. And she's the first person of color, much less female person of color assigned such an important task. Nobody thinks she'll last more than a couple of days - this is a notoriously transitory position and she'll be working for a notoriously grumpy director.

As the scene plays out, we quickly learn that the director isn't her biggest problem - it's her colleagues, namely her immediate supervisor, the lead engineer on the job, who refuses to accept Katherine as part of the team. In one late-night meeting between the program director and Katherine's direct supervisor, the director tells the supervisor, "You know, you

have one job to do. That is to take all these geniuses in the room, and figure out which one is the most genius one of all." Soon thereafter, the supervisor begins to notice what the director had seen from the beginning. Katherine was the most genius of all the geniuses. She was the one who learned to see beyond the numbers. She was the one who could see the mathematical equations that hadn't been invented yet but that would be required to map out the astronaut's re-entry (that had been the stumbling block for everyone else until then). Katherine's beautiful mind was the way to the program's success, to the first American in orbit, to liberation (in many ways) and NASA almost missed it - because they (and so often we) were not interested in anything or anyone that came from the margins.

They almost missed it (and so do we!) because of our own egos, our own pride, our own desire to control the places from which *hope* might spring forth. But friends, I *hope* that sooner or later we will learn that *hope* is always trying to push through. Hope is persistent, hope is stubborn, and yet hope so often requires us to get *low* enough, humble enough, broken enough... to accept it.

Katherine's is just one story in a collection of innumerable stories from our past that remind us of the ways God works through marginal people and places to bring about God's Kingdom and God's liberation from all the things that oppress and hold us captive to despair.

We almost missed orbit, we might have missed the moon if not for these three remarkable women and so many like them whose names are forgotten but whose brilliance and hard work propelled NASA to its place in American history. We almost missed it! Because we failed to remember where God likes to plant the seeds of hope.

Gideon was no different. A youngest son of the lowest family of the humblest clan of the nation. And yet Gideon was the only one who could deliver the people from Midian.

So what do YOU think? Is there any hope to be found in Judges? Any liberation from despair taking root in the margins of our lives? Well, we may not see it yet, but if we get low enough to conceive it, I'd be willing to bet that there is hope on the horizon. We can be sure of it, because while WE may not always remember God's way of hope, we can rest assured that God *does* remember us. God has not forgotten us. And God *is* springing up hope just up ahead on the horizon.

Behold! Says the prophet Isaiah, *I am about to do a new thing; Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?*