

Sermon
Judges 6:11-24

Gal 5:16-26

Pentecost
“Led Beyond Our ‘Buts’”

May 24, 2015
Acts 2:1-21

Pentecost! The birthday of the Church! The day we remember how God’s Holy Spirit empowered some very uncertain followers of Jesus so that they could offer the forgiveness and hope of Jesus to the world. Will we speak in tongues today? Will we suddenly find ourselves brimming over with the fruits of the Spirit we heard about in the reading from Galatians (peace, joy, patience, kindness, self-control, gentleness, love, generosity, and faithfulness)? Or will it be a day of “Okay, some of us wore red, but nothing much happened?”

This year, on Pentecost, I’m going to talk about Gideon. Gideon was one of the folks God called up to help Israel when it was in a bad situation long ago, before the days when Israel had kings.

When we hear of Gideon, we may think of all the Bibles in the dresser drawers of hotels and other institutions. But Gideon was a man who lived at a time when his country, Israel, existed under the constant threat of the much-more-powerful Midianite people. The Midianites would come barging into an Israelite community and take whatever they wanted: crops, people, livestock, anything of worth. Israel didn’t have strength to stop this marauding. In Judges 6, we are told that the people of Israel cried out to God, and that God gave them a prophet to tell them, in essence, that they had brought the bad situation upon themselves by turning away from God.

But finally, God decided to act to help Israel, and God did so through a young man named Gideon. Gideon is one of my favorite characters in the Bible because he was so terribly human!! We only heard a little of Gideon’s story today, so I think I’ll fill you in on some of the rest of his story.

First, did you notice that Gideon was full of fear? His story starts with him hiding in the winepress so the Midianites wouldn’t see him. But did you notice how the angel greeted him? “The Lord is with you, brave and mighty man!” (6:12)

This greeting ought to get our attention, for at this point the Bible has said nothing to suggest that Gideon is brave OR mighty. God apparently could see possibilities not obvious to us.

Gideon’s response is quite believable: “If God is with us, then why are things so rotten? Why has all this happened? What happened to all the great things we were told God used to do for our people? We’ve seen nothing; God has abandoned us.” (6:13)

No mention of the angel anymore. The Bible says, “Then the Lord ordered him, ‘Go with all your great strength and rescue Israel from the Midianites. I myself am sending you.’” (6:14)

Now we start the “But” section! The “wait a minute” section. Gideon is full of questions and

reluctance.

— How can *I* rescue Israel? My clan is the weakest of Israel, and I am the least of my family.

Answer: You can because I will help you.

— I need proof that you really are the Lord. I'll bring you an offering of food (a goat and a bushel's worth of flour for bread) and see how you accept it.

Response: The angel of the Lord touched the offering and it burned up. When that happened, Gideon was terrified, so the Lord told him, "Peace, don't be afraid."

And now we get into things we didn't hear about in today's reading.

God told Gideon to go and tear down Gideon's father's pagan worship idols, and then to build an altar to God on the site. Gideon waited until the dark of night, because he was afraid of his family and the people in the town, but then he did go, with ten of his servants, to carry out God's orders. (6:25-27)

Soon after, the Midianites started new threats against the people. We are told that the Spirit of the Lord took control of Gideon (6:34), and Gideon called for others to gather for war. But the story takes a neat turn here.

Even though Gideon had been given proof of God, he wanted MORE proof. He said to God, "You say that you have decided to use me to rescue Israel. But I need more! Here's a test. I'll put some wool on the ground. If, tomorrow morning, there is dew on the wool but not on the ground, then I'll know that you are really going to use me to rescue Israel." (6:36-37) And so it was, just as Gideon had requested!

But that was not enough! The next day, Gideon said to God, "Please don't be angry, but THIS time, how about dew on the ground but not on the wool? Just one more little test." And so it was. God put up with Gideon's need for proof.

But there's more! In chapter 7, we learn that Gideon and his men were in a position to fight the Midianites when God decided to make some changes. God declared that there were too many in Gideon's army, so that they might think when they won the battle that they had done it themselves. So the army had to be culled. All who were afraid should leave. So 22,000 went back home, but still, 10,000 men remained.

Still too many, God declared. So God told Gideon to separate the men by the way they drank water from a stream, whether they used their hands to drink the water or simply got down on their knees and lapped like a dog. The hand-cuppers — only 300 — were the ones God allowed to remain as Gideon's army. The others left. So the army had been cut from 32,000 to 300 men.

That night, God told Gideon to attack the Midianites in the dark. Even though God promised Gideon a victory, God still said to Gideon, If you are afraid to attack, go down to the camp with your servant and listen to what the Midianites are saying. Gideon did go down to listen, and he heard a man telling of a dream and the interpretation another Midianite gave it, predicting that God was giving Gideon victory over them. This gave Gideon courage to attack, and God gave him and his tiny army victory.

Gideon was used by God to rescue the people of Israel. But Gideon was not perfect. In fact, the Bible tells us that not long after the victory Gideon used his strength to viciously pay some folks back for not helping him earlier. He was all too human.

All this is to help us see that we do not have to stop being human in order to start being God's. God can use who we are, even when we get caught up in our "But how can I do ...?", even when we have fears and doubts and threats that seem too big for us.

Throughout our lives, we will always be able to come up with a "but" in response to God's call to us. Jesus said, "Love your neighbors..." "But Lord, they are scary, they are mean, they have hurt me." In response, God says this: "But I am with you."

Jesus said, "Seek first the kingdom of God..." And we may say, "But Lord, I have to do this... But I'm already pushed to the limit... But I'm afraid you'll ask me to give up too much..." And God says this: "But I am with you. I know what you need. My Spirit will give you strength and lead you forward."

It's all about power, power for the kind of life that fills us rather than depleting us. The kind of living that leaves OTHERS filled with life, too. That's what God offers, that's what Jesus came to live out for us, and that's what we are seeking every time we pray or come to worship God.

The Holy Spirit of God worked through a small group of folks in an upper room in Jerusalem almost 2000 years ago, and because of the power it provided them and all who believed after them, we are here today still daring to proclaim that Jesus Christ offers life, abundant life.

Find your fears, your places of reluctance, your need for proof, your angers and pain, all your "buts," and take them to the Lord in prayer. God has an answer for them all, for God has life and purpose AND missions for each of us to do. No matter what we come up with as a reason for not stepping out in faith, God has a life-giving BUT: "But I am with you. You are mine. I am your God, with you now and forever, to the end of the age and beyond!" Thanks be to God! Amen.