

TAKING THE FIRST STEP

Commissioning of Josh Johnstone
21st May 2017
Readings: Judges 6:1-16

For our visitors, we're early in a preaching series through the book of Judges. And from this morning's reading you'll have guessed Gideon's our focus for this morning. Now, Gideon's fame centers mainly around his use of a fleece to find God's will and an amazing victory over a huge army with just three hundred men.

But how did it all start? What was his beginning? What can we learn for today? Well like the rise of all the Judges, starts with Israel in trouble.



Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord, and for seven years he gave them into the hands of the Midianites. Judges 6:1

After forty years of peace under Deborah and her right hand man Barak the Israelites fell into evil, which again involved idol worship. So, God allowed a neighbouring nation to oppress his people. Why? So they might come to their senses, repent and return to God. Well, the Midianites were like a tidal wave, scourging the land. So much so the Israelites were forced to leave their homes and

[prepare] shelters for themselves in mountain clefts, caves and strongholds.
Judges 6:2

Now the Midianites weren't interest in political control but economic exploitation and stripping the land of their crops (v 3). They didn't "spare a living thing for Israel" (v 4). The Israelites were starving and the land ravaged (v 5) until we read in verse 6

Midian so impoverished the Israelites that they cried out to the Lord for help.
Judges 6:6

So, what did God do? Well, he sent a sermon! "What's the good of that?" you ask as I'm sure the Israelites did. "What?! Here we are starved and harassed to the point of death and you send a preacher! He better be good" Well, what did this preacher say?

This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: I brought you up out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. I snatched you from the power of Egypt and from the hand of all your oppressors. I drove them from before you and gave you their land. I said to you, 'I am the Lord your God; do not worship the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you live.' But you have not listened to me." Judges 6:8–10

What's God doing here? Let me use a modern day example to help. Have you ever got a speeding ticket? What were your first words to the police officer. Well, after an innocent "Is there anything wrong officer?" and he's explained you were 20k's over the speed limit - the apologies start. "I'm sorry? It won't happen again. Sorry," as he hands the ticket over. My key question is, "Were you sorry for speeding or just getting caught and having to pay a fine? There's a big difference.

You see, just being sorry for the fine is remorse and means you are more likely to speed in the future. Being actually sorry about the speeding and breaking the law is repentance and comes with a greater chance of not speeding in the future. Now the problem with the Israelites is they were sorry for the consequences and not sorry for the idol worship. There was remorse but little repentance. The unpleasant consequence of oppression by the Midianites, is so great they cry to the Lord for help. But they're cries of remorse not repentance? Cries of "Lord, help! Life is unbearable" not "Lord I'm so sorry for worshipping idols. Please help me." So God sends a prophet, a preacher to spell it out and make it clear. In effect God's saying, "The reason you're suffering is because you've disobeyed me. You're doing evil, worshipping idols and breaking my laws. It's time to repent, to turn 180 degrees and return to me."

And because God is a God of mercy he raises up a Judge. A judge the angel of the Lord finds in a most unusual place. We come now to the commissioning of Gideon.

The angel of the Lord came and sat down under the oak in Ophrah that belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, where his son Gideon was threshing wheat in a winepress to keep it from the Midianites. Judges 6:11

For us non-rural types we fail to see how bizarre this picture is. Threshing involves tossing wheat into the air with a winnowing fork where any breeze blows the lighter chaff away leaving the heavier seeds to fall to the ground. This is done in the open to catch any breeze. However, a wine press is not in the open. Often dug into the ground these were where grapes were thrown, trampled under foot with the juice extracted. So if you we're looking on that day, you might see the grain being tossed in the air but not see Gideon. Gideon is trying to get food, while hiding from the Midianites. Gideon is afraid. Which makes the angel's words all the more puzzling, so far from reality as to be joke.

"The Lord is with you, mighty warrior." Judges 6:12

Startled, Gideon looks up expecting a smart mouthed local but instead he sees someone very different. A sort of, “Don’t mess with me person”. So, respectfully he asks...

But sir,” Gideon replied, “if the Lord is with us, why has all this happened to us?
Judges 6:13

Obviously Gideon slept through the sermon. Remember God said, “I rescued you from Egypt and you thanked me by worshipping idols. This is why nasty things are happening!” Resisting the urge to lecture Gideon on keeping awake through sermons the angel instead commissions this timid, “hide from the enemy” Gideon to a great work.

The Lord turned to him and said, “Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian’s hand. Am I not sending you?” Judges 6:14

What’s this great work? To save. Gideon is commissioned for a rescue mission. Now this is where it get’s personal, Josh. No matter what you think you are being commissioned too, no matter what expression your ministry takes amongst our youth at it’s core you’re part of a rescue mission. Not rescuing folk from camel riding, desert dwelling Bedouins of Midian but from all those ensnared by Satan, oppressed by the world and captive to sin.

This may sound intimidating. It’s a big ask. That’s exactly how Gideon felt. Listen to Gideon’s second objection. His first was God’s not with us and now...

But Lord,” Gideon asked, “how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family.” Judges 6:15

Gideon argues he couldn’t possibly do this impossible task of rescuing Israel for he’s least in a minor family in the weakest tribe. And you know he’s right. Gideon couldn’t rescue even one person in Israel, let alone the nation unless... Well, listen carefully to the Lord’s reply

The Lord answered, “I will be with you, and you will strike down all the Midianites together. Judges 6:16

Gideon could not possibly rescue unless God was with him. And here we have a pattern that’s found elsewhere in the Bible: God asking people to do impossible things, they objecting and God promising to be with them.

At the burning bush Moses objected - Ex 3:11–12

But Moses said to God, “Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?”

And God said, “I will be with you. Ex 3:11–12

And Jeremiah as he his commissioned said...

Ah, Sovereign Lord," I said, "I do not know how to speak; I am only a child."

But the Lord said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a child.' You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the Lord. Jeremiah 1:6–8

Even to Joshua God was commissioned with these words...

Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go."
Joshua 1:9

See the pattern. God commissions someone to do the impossible. They object and he responds. "Go, for I am with you"

And this is God's word to Josh, "Go, I am with you" And this is at the core of every commissioning. God's people seek God, God raises someone up and say's "Go, I am with you".

Now some may say, "Ah yes, it's all very well for Gideon but how is God with us? How will God be with Josh?"

Well let me explain. After Gideon, God raised up a True and Better Judge. One also commissioned to rescue his people. And this True and Better Judge was commissioned by John the Baptist, and filled with the Holy Spirit. He bound demons and set captives free. And then this True and Better Judge executed the greatest rescue mission in the universe by dying on the cross and being raised from the dead. And his last words as recorded in Matthew are...

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."
Matthew 28:18-20

Notice his last words, This True and Better Judge, Christ our Lord, promises us that as we participate in the great rescue mission, he is with us and will never leave us. So by the Holy Spirit, Christ and his presence is with us.

And this is the only basis by which we can commission Josh - the basis of Jesus' presence, by his Spirit, to equip and guide.

And so let's draw all this together with some implications from Gideon's commission. We'll pick up his story in the weeks to come but what can we learn for today.

1. Our weaknesses do not limit God

Well, the first take home is our weaknesses do not limit God. Gideon was the least in a minor family in the weakest tribe, Moses was a murderer on the run with a stutter and Jeremiah was just too young. Yet God saw past all this and turning to Jesus said, "I think we can work with this". And he says the same to each of us this morning. You may think you're of little significance, useless at public speaking or too young or too old. But these are not limitations for God. He can work with anyone with a humble and teachable heart

2. God's plan for us is more than we can imagine

The second take home is God has more planned for us than we can imagine. We're not sure what Gideon was thinking as he was commissioned but I guarantee he never thought he'd defeat the Midianite horde with just three hundred men and go on to rule Israel for forty years. It's the same with Josh and each of us. God's plan for us is more than we can imagine.

3. It's all about God and his rescue

The third thing we can learn from all this fuss - the Lord's presence, the commissioning the miraculous flames and disappearing angel was not about Gideon - it's all about God and his rescue. Now Gideon went on to do just that, to rescue Israel. And when this was his focus, God did amazing things through Gideon. But when he took his eye off the rescue and put it on himself, there was trouble. It's the same for us. God delights in each of us as a Father in his child. He longs for us to follow him with joy, eyes fixed on Jesus, keeping in step with the Holy Spirit. But at the end of the day, it's never all about us. It's all about God, his rescue mission, his glory. Which is why we will finish today's commissioning with the hymn, To God be the Glory.