

Judges

Gideon is never read in worship in churches that use the most common lectionaries. In fact, the whole book of Judges only shows up once every three years in the common lectionary and never does in the Narrative Lectionary. I think we lose something when we skip from the entry of the Israelites into the promised land straight to the royal narratives.

So, we're making a little segue this year.

Gideon may never get his time to shine in worship, but the story of the soldiers with their trumpets, jars, and torches has always been good Sunday school fodder. I have distinct memories of a kids' musical my kids were involved in at our church in Lincoln called Giddyup Giddalong Gideon.

We'll hone in on Gideon here in a minute. First I want to catch us up from last week. Last week we were on the border of the Promised Land. After 40 years of wilderness wondering, Moses gathers a new generation of Israelites to teach them the law before they claim the land God promised them.

There are two books in the Old Testament that address Israel's immigration into Canaan. The first is Joshua. Joshua is Moses' successor.

The book of Joshua can be a difficult book to read in light of our understanding that God created and loves all people. It's a story of God's command for Israel to move in and conquer the people who lived there, in some cases annihilating them.

There is no question that some of these old testament stories portray a more violent God than we might like. The flood was an example...and the plagues against Egypt. The question you have to ask is what's at stake?

In these stories, it's clear God is taking drastic action because it really is a life-or-death battle. Will creation continue to flourish as God intends or will the forces of anti-creation – the forces of death – win?

That's not always as clear in Joshua. The command, at least as Israel understands it, is to wipe out entire groups of people, many of whom are just living their lives.

Sure, the people who lived there did not worship Jahweh, the God of Israel. And many worshipped gods like Baal and Molech. Human sacrifice, and particularly child sacrifice, were sometimes a part of those religions. And God's big concern was that Israel would fall into worship of those gods and follow those practices.

So, in that sense, it's still a battle of life versus death. God is a God of creation. Baal and Molech were anti-creation. There are also some interpretive issues with Joshua we could discuss as well, but we won't now.

In any case, that annihilation didn't actually happen. Israel's army did march into Canaan with trust that God was on their side. They did win some battles and they did carve out a place for themselves in the land. But the original people still lived there too.

And the fact is, the intermingling of people did cause problems.

The book of Judges comes right after Joshua. Judges makes it clear that Israel settled Canaan less by successful conquest and more by immigration and assimilation. And unfortunately, that meant they too often did exactly what God feared – they adopted the gods of the surrounding tribes.

And some of those gods were the ones whose worship demanded human sacrifice.

There are two refrains repeated over and over in Judges. The first is “the Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the Lord.”

The second is “in those days there was no king in Israel.” The Judges were more like tribal leaders and not kings. Towards the end of the book, the two are put together....in those days there was no king in Israel and the Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the Lord.

There's a cycle that happens over and over in Judges. It goes like this: The Israelites did what was evil in the sight of God. So, God delivered them to one of the rival tribes. As a time of punishment and purification, the people suffered harassment and oppression at the hands of one of those tribes. In Gideon's time, it was Midian. Then after a time, God hears their cries and raises a judge to rescue them. And then the cycle repeats.

So, a couple things about God here. It says God delivers them over to their enemies.

Essentially, the people have already chosen a path of evil – idolatry being the chief evil.

Remember last week I talked about the importance of our image of whatever god we worship.

How you see your god not only affects how you relate to that god. It also affects how you relate to all of creation. If the people are worshipping gods like Baal who are violent gods, then that violence carries over. Even if they don't practice human sacrifice, human life is cheapened.

When they choose these other gods, they are choosing anti-creation. And God essentially says, OK if that's what you want, you got it. God delivers them to the people and gods they seem to have chosen.

That never turns out very well. It turns out the violence and oppression gets directed towards the Israelites. In their suffering, they cry out to God. God, who never abandons them, hears their cries and raises up a new judge.

That brings us to Gideon. God chooses Gideon to lead the army that will conquer the Midianites. Only it's a very unusual conquest. God wants the people to know that this victory will be because of God, not Gideon's nor the army's own strength.

So, first God has Gideon winnow down the troops. From a start of over 30,000, most are sent home. Only 300 remain. Then God tells them what to do next. It's going to be a surprise attack if you want to call it that. But there is no real attack. The 300 men each have a jar, a torch, and a trumpet. They sneak up to the Midianites camp. On the signal they throw their jars on the ground and they break with a great crash. The torches flare and the trumpets blare.

The commotion is enough to send the Midianite army into complete disarray. They start waving their swords and slicing each other, and finally they run away in a panic. The Midianites are done. Israel is once again rescued. The people want Gideon to be their king. But Gideon refuses and says only God shall rule over you.

Gideon himself is flawed and creates a sort of idol in his hometown. But he at least keeps the people from the worship of Baal. When he died, that changed. They again chose Baal as their god and the cycle repeats.

There's an ever-worsening downward spiral. The book ends with "at that time there was no king in Israel and the people did what was right in their own eyes."

After a little interlude with the story of Ruth, we come to essentially the last judge, Samuel. By that time the people are desperate from all the years of violence and misery. They think a king is the answer. It seems to work for other nations.

Like Gideon, Samuel tells them that God is to be their only king. But the people persist. The first king is Saul and then there's David. David's story occupies a big chunk of several books of the Old Testament.

We aren't actually going to talk about David this year. Next week we'll join the royal narrative when the monarchy too begins to fall apart and the nation of Israel divides.

So, today's story is important for laying the groundwork for Israel's kings. That royal line will indeed lead to God in the person of Jesus being anointed king. But his enthronement will be nothing that people expected.

And perhaps that's the key for us in the book of Judges. Human rulers will always disappoint – and sometimes they'll do even worse.

A second point is that when we don't follow God's commandments, humans tend to go down a path that leads to destruction. God is to rule over our lives so that all life can flourish.

But we have to be very careful with that. When we say God will be our ruler, we too often make God just like human rulers.

We forget that God's rule ultimately came through a cross. And the cross looked like a completely foolish way for a king to win. Sort of like taking 300 men with jars, torches, and trumpets up against a mighty army.

And maybe that's the final and most important point. God's rule has never been established by human power and never will be. And it will not look like power as we understand it. It is more likely to sneak up on us and surprise us out of our complacency. And it will replace all of our human understanding of power with a rule of love...love of God and neighbor, just as the commandments taught.