7-2-17 Rev. Amy Haines

Judges 6:11-24a Gideon’s Need for a Sign  Unlikely Heroes of the Bible Series

Have you ever said to God, “Please give me a sign. Show me that this is the right direction for my life. Make it clear to me what you want me to do.”

I admit that I have, especially at critical moments of my life. As a young college student, I asked for God’s sign that God was indeed calling me into ordained ministry, beginning with seminary.

As a pastor, there have been times when I asked for a sign from God on how to handle specific situations in ministry. One year ago this coming week, I asked God for a sign to make clear whether or not to accept the unexpected call to itinerate from the district office back into the local congregation and come here.

What I have found in my life is that while I have never heard the voice of God speak clearly to my request for a sign, and while I have never had an experience where I can say God clearly showed me the path I was to take, nevertheless God has guided me step by step throughout my journey of life, of faith, and of ministry.

Today we get to ponder the story of another unlikely hero of the faith, a Judge by the name of Gideon, who made it a habit to ask God for a sign.

Now the judges of Israel were not the black robed lawyers like the Supreme Court that influence the laws of our land today. Instead, they were faithful men and women whom God would raise up at specific times in the life of the nation of Israel. Their purpose was to guide the people in battle with foreign enemies and to guide the people back to faithful worship of Almighty God. The judges ruled in the years prior to when Israel wanted a king.

Gideon lived less than 300 years after God’s people moved into the Promised Land. For the 40 years prior to his time, they had lived in relative peace with their neighbors and faithfulness to Almighty God.

Little by little, however, the people of Israel began to be content with their lives and turned away from following God’s commands. They began to worship the pagan god Baal, whose altar Gideon’s own father cared for in their town of Ophrah. Then they became fearful of their desert neighbors the Midianites, who every year at harvest would suddenly appear in the villages of Israel to wreak havoc, steal livestock and destroy crops. For seven years this happened.

Can you imagine their frustration, waiting and watching on a crop to finally be harvested only to have it suddenly stolen or destroyed? I can remember the derecho, or land hurricane, that hit Ohio 5 years ago and the sudden damage it did through wind and rain to the wheat and corn crops.

In northwest Ohio the wheat harvest was only a week or so away. The corn stalks were standing tall. Then the derecho hit, and both wheat and corn were flattened. Some stalks on the edge of fields were literally pulled out of the ground.

Farmers expect some years to be good and others to be ruined by forces often out of their control. But imagine seven years of sudden devastation.

Gideon’s story begins amid his fear and frustration, as we find him trying to thresh wheat in a winepress, hiding from the Midianites.

A winepress was a pit carved out of rock, often found in a valley, where grapes were pressed for juice or wine. Gideon, however, was trying to thresh wheat by hand in the pit, rather than with animal assistance on a threshing floor. A threshing floor was found on the top of a hill or in an open field, where the wind would easily throw away the chaff. In the winepress Gideon would have tried to throw the grain up just high enough to be blown away yet not high enough to be seen, so afraid he was of the Midianite marauders.

At least Gideon is willing to try anything to harvest his wheat and provide for his household.

Yet after seven years of such struggle Gideon is feeling pretty despondent.

Then suddenly, unexpectedly, an angel of the Lord appears. The angel says to Gideon, “The Lord is with you, mighty warrior!”

I imagine Gideon at first simply looking at the angel as if to say, “are you talking to me?”

The words themselves do not register for Gideon, they are so far out of any realm of possibility, at least in his mind.A mighty warrior was a military leader. Gideon certainly did not see himself in that way. So Gideon ignores the words of the angel.

Instead, as a despondent farmer hiding out in a winepress, Gideon lashes out in the fear and frustration of so many of his kinfolk: “With all due respect, my Lord, if the Lord is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all his amazing works that our ancestors recounted to us, saying, ‘Didn’t the Lord bring us up from Egypt?’ But now the Lord has abandoned us and allowed Midian to overpower us.”

“Why?” Gideon asks. How many of us have ever lashed out at God in a time of sorrow or a time of struggle with that same question, “Why?” Why does God allow suffering? Why does God not stop war? Why is there so much hopelessness in our world today? Why does life feel like such an uphill battle?

In that moment, we want answers, we want to be able to wrap our minds around the reasons something happened, especially unexpected, so that we might once again feel in control.

We yearn for God to answer our whys, when so often the whys are too complex to be answered in full. Although cliché, bad things do happen to good people. As many miracles as there are in modern medicine, there are still as many mysteries in the human body. Consequences to actions still occur, and sometimes we will find ourselves in the wrong place at the wrong time.

While we may never get the answers we truly desire, this side of heaven, never shy away from asking the why, or any other questions that are on our hearts and minds, even in frustration.

God is big enough to handle our fears and emotions. The Psalms are full of times that David questioned God and struggled with the ups and downs of life.

Rather than respond to the whys in our lives, God reminds us, like God reminded Gideon from the beginning, “Do not be afraid. The Lord is with you!”

Rather than respond to Gideon’s questions born out of his frustration, the angel, who is really the Lord, reiterates the call placed upon Gideon. “Go in this might of yours and deliver Israel from the hand of Midian; I hereby commission you.”

Yet Gideon still cannot translate the words to his brain. He still cannot wrap his head around God’s call upon his life. So like many of his ancestors and many of his lineage, even to us today, Gideon began to make excuses. “With all due respect, my Lord, how can I rescue Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I’m the youngest in my household.”

Have you heard Gideon’s line of speech before? How many other biblical characters also try to give excuses of why they ought not to follow as God leads?

-- Moses tells God, I can't stand up to Pharaoh.

I'm only a shepherd. I can't even talk good (Exodus 3:12, 4:1).  
-- Saul tells David, you can't go out there and take on Goliath.

"You are just a boy" (1 Samuel 17:33).

-- David, when the opportunity to become the king's son-in-law presented itself,

demurred: "I am a poor man and of no repute" (1 Samuel 18:23)

-- Solomon, when facing the challenges of being king like his father before him,

got cold feet: "I am only a little child" (1 Kings 3:7).  
-- Jeremiah, when called by God, protests:

"I am only a boy" (Jeremiah 1:6).

-- The disciples, when told by Jesus to go feed the multitude, protested:

"We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish" (Matthew 14:17).

-adapted from -“The Onlys” 2-1-98 homileticsonline.com

How many times have you given God an excuse

when you have been called to go forth in Jesus’ name?

I am too young.

I don’t have the time.

I am not qualified to teach.

What if I am asked a question I don’t know how to answer?

I am shy.

That is out of my comfort zone.

God surely isn’t calling me.

To Gideon’s excuses, and to the excuses of Moses and Jeremiah and even all of us today, God responds as God so often does, “Do not be afraid, I am with you.” No matter what you face, I will guide you. Trust me, not your own abilities. Trust me and follow me. Do not be afraid. I am with you.

A Scottish Pastor once wrote:

..God is not looking for the best qualifications, best ability, best charisma, best prospects type of people – not that he would turn down these sorts automatically, because it's also true that some of the most gifted people in our society have also been some of God's best servants. But that is a coincidence and not a requirement. I think that is because God knows that the vast majority of men and women fall into the "I am only" category. But only is enough with God's help, and it would amaze you what God can make of them.  
 -Alasatair Symington in Conversation with Rikki Fulton, "Only is Enough," For God's Sake, Ask!

(Edinburgh: Saint Andrews Press, 1993), 46-51. In “The Onlys” 2-1-98 homileticsonline.com

God sees us as we are meant to be, as we are created to be, as God calls us to be. God sees beyond current reality to our potential and possibility. God sees beyond our excuses to what God can and will do with us and through us if we are willing to allow God to guide our lives.

God continually told Gideon, “I will be with you.” Still, Gideon is in denial that God could ever use him. So his doubt and hesitancy comes out in Gideon’s first test of God.

Gideon pleads, “If I’ve gained your approval, please show me a sign that it’s really you speaking with me. Don’t leave here until I return, bring out my offering, and set it in front of you.” And the Lord replied, “I’ll stay until you return.”

Although Gideon struggles with doubt, he is also a man of action. Gideon left the Lord by the rock and went to prepare his offering, which would have taken an hour or two to complete.

Gideon killed and prepared a baby goat. He used half a bushel of flour to make many unleavened cakes, enough that would have fed his household for several days. When he brought the meat, broth and bread to the angel, setting them on the rock as instructed, Gideon finally got his sign. For the angel reached out and the offering was devoured by fire from the rock, then the angel disappeared.

Finally Gideon realized to whom he had been speaking, and recognizing that he had been face-to-face with a messenger from God and lived to tell the tale, cried out in fear and faith. Once again the Lord reassured Gideon with the words, “Do not be afraid! You will not die.”

After such a heavenly encounter, one would think that Gideon would trust every word that comes hereafter from the Lord. Yet Gideon is human, so much like us, that he continues to waffle between faith and doubt, between confidence and needing reassurance, up until the time that with God’s help the Midianites are defeated in battle.

Today we have heard Gideon ask for a sign from the angel to show that he had gained God’s approval. In just a few short verses later, Gideon asks for another sign, “To see if you, O God, really intend to rescue Israel through me as you have declared.” What follows next is the text that once made Gideon a household name.

He sets out a wool fleece on the threshing floor. If the dew is on the fleece but the ground is dry, Gideon knows the Lord will do what the Lord has declared. The next morning enough dew was on the fleece alone to fill a small bowl with water. Gideon was still not convinced. He begged for one more test. This time, if the dew be on the ground, yet the fleece is dry, he knew finally that the Lord will do what the Lord has declared. And God made it so.

Finally, Gideon was sent into battle—with only 300 troops, trumpets and torches. Without a doubt Gideon finally knew that God alone would win the battle.

Who would have believed that Gideon of all people had the faith to first pull down the altar of Baal and risk of the wrath of his own father? If we were Gideon’s neighbors, we may not have believed in him.

Who would have believed that Gideon of all people had the faith to step by step pair down his troops from 32,000 to 300? If we were one of the thousands of troops sent home prior to the battle, we may have thought this latest military leader was out of his mind.

Who would have believed that Gideon of all people, from a forgotten family in a forgotten tribe, would become the next Judge chosen by God?The judges raised up were often the least likely to be chosen for such a task.

Gideon often struggled to believe that God would do what God said He would do. Gideon often asked for a sign of reassurance that what he was called to do was divinely appointed. Yet Gideon continued forward in faith, trusting as God guided him step by faithful step.

How many of us, when looking back upon our faith journeys, would recognize a pattern of 2 steps forward in faith, followed by 1 step backward in doubt. 2 forward, 1 back we journey ahead in hesitant faith.

Hesitantly or boldly, however we move by faith, at least we still move. And as we journey ahead, God calls us, God encourages us, God challenges us, and God still believes in us.

Do we believe in ourselves? Are we willing to step forward in faith, even amidst our doubt?

This week our nation celebrates Independence Day. The revolutionary war was won because our troops trusted in their leaders battle after battle, day by day, even as they lost comrades around them. The troops believed in what they were fighting for, freedom from England and protection of their homeland.

From memorial day to veteran’s day to independence day we celebrate and remember all who have served and continue to serve our country, realizing that those we honor as our military heroes are ordinary men and women from all walks of life who are willing to be faithful to their comrades and the cause of freedom.

The unlikely heroes whose stories we ponder this summer were those from all walks of life who responded to God’s call upon their lives, stepping forward in faith even amid their doubt.

How is God calling you today, how is God calling us today, to do more than ask for another sign from God, to do more than insist on doing only what we can do in our own strength and ability?

How is God calling us today to step out in faith, trusting God to guide us step by faithful step, into our homes, into our work places, into our neighborhoods, into our community, not in battle but in love, not to destroy others, but to build others up, to offer hope and healing, care and community to a world that needs to presence of God in our midst and in our lives? How is God calling us today to do our part and let God do the rest, to live by faith not fear, to live by hope not despair, to live in community and not isolation as the people of God who make up the body of Christ in this world?

When we come forward in a few minutes to share in the bread and cup of Holy Communion, we come forward thankful that God claims us as beloved children, and loves us in spite of our fears and our doubts, our questions and our struggles. We come forward thankful that Jesus meets us where we are and we do not have to be perfect to come to Jesus. We come forward thankful that the Holy Spirit constantly nudges us forward in faith, encouraging us to grow every day in our love for God and love for neighbor.

May we journey, like Gideon, from people of doubt to people of faith. May we journey, like Gideon, from those who look at our lives and world not from the perspective of what we cannot do, but from the perspective of what God can do through us. May we journey, like Gideon, step by faithful step into a future of faith, of hope, and of trust in Almighty God.

May it be so. Let us pray.