

“Searching for Peace”

Those of you who can remember the ‘80’s might recall a certain television commercial that coined one of those unforgettable phrases. The ad featured a little old lady in search of the perfect hamburger. She was your stereotypical little old lady – about 4 feet 10 inches tall with somewhat blue hair and a large vinyl black purse permanently fixed into the crook of her arm. She would go from one fast food restaurant to another, order a hamburger, lift the bun off, look at the miniscule patty and exclaim, “WHERE’S THE BEEF?” Of course, this continued until she arrived at the restaurant that she was the poster girl for where a large, juicy burger finally satisfied her question.

The truth is that grandma was looking for a sign – a sign that she was getting the best buy for her seldom spent dollar. It seems as if humankind has been looking for signs for thousands of years and more often than not, we expect the signs to come directly from God. So it is with the main character in our Biblical story this morning – Gideon.

Many people only know Gideon as the one who is always leaving his Bible in the hotel rooms where he stays. However, Gideon is really one of the prophets that God raised up during what is known in our history as the Period of Judges. In fact, more is written about Gideon about any other prophet in the book of Judges.

After many years of wandering around, God had led the children of Israel out of the desert and into the Promised Land. When their leaders, Joshua and Caleb died, God's children had no clear instructions as to who their new leaders should be. So God selected what we have come to know as judges to lead His people. Reading the book of Judges is

like reading the rap sheet on a long-time petty criminal – it is filled with the same thing over and over again. Here is a quick run through of their crimes.

The writer of Judges tells us that the people of God would do what was evil in the sight of the Lord and as punishment, God would deliver them into the hands of one people or another. The evil usually involved idol worship and sexual immorality – sins that still abound today. God would allow a foreign people to prevail over the Israelites until He thought they had suffered enough and then he would raise up a Judge to deliver them from their misery. But always, after a time of living in obedience, the Israelites would fall back into their old ways and so the cycle continued.

This morning's Scripture finds the Israelites in their seventh year of persecution at the hands of the Midianites. The main tactic of these foreign enemies was that they would starve the Israelites to death. The Midianites would hide on the outskirts of town and watch the Israelites work hard for their sustenance. They would wait patiently while the people of God harvested the grapes, the wheat, the barley, the olives. Then, when everything was piled neatly in baskets they would gallop into town and swoop everything up, killing anyone who got in their way.

Gideon had decided to outsmart the evil Midianites, so the story of Gideon's call to be a judge begins in a wine press. The press was a big vat carved out of a rock in the ground, big enough for several people to get in and trample the grapes. Gideon was down there threshing wheat in an effort to provide bread for his family before the Midianites realized what had happened. It is in this setting that an angel of the LORD drops in and informs Gideon that HE will be the one to raise God's people up and out of their misery.

I must say that Gideon's response to the angel was exactly the same response that most of US have when we receive a call to service for God. The first thing he did was question the angel as to his qualifications for the job. "But Lord," he protests, "I am from the WEAK tribe of Manasseh and the youngest one in the family!" I imagine everyone here has at one time or another been faced with a challenge that seemed insurmountable.

"Who me – teach Sunday School. I never have before!" "Be an Elder – surely there is someone else more worthy than I." "Take the youth group on a retreat – I can't even control my own kids, much less someone else's!" I believe that most of us experience feelings of inadequacy and unworthiness when we are faced with a call from God.

This is what makes Gideon so endearing. He is the only Judge whose personal struggles with his faith are recorded. Most of this comes from his inability to accept himself for who he is and his disbelief that God can really use HIM. What a source of encouragement for any of us who have felt the same way.

I know that I experienced these exact same emotions when, as a young mother, I was asked to teach the "older" ladies circle in my church and when I was asked to serve as an Elder at the age of twenty-eight. Truthfully, my feelings of unworthiness are why it took me so long made to answer God's call to ministry.

After I tried, "But I am too old" "But I am not smart enough." "But my family would never accept this." I finally had to come clean with God and tell him the truth. So I said, "But I am not good enough." And God was quite clear in his answer when God said, "Of course, you're not good enough Julie. No one is. But I can use EVEN you."

The angel of the Lord said the same to Gideon with these words, “I WILL BE WITH YOU!” This made it clear that Gideon was called by God to enter into a Holy *partnership*. And today, I am called by God and you are being called by God, too. We are in a Holy partnership as members of the priesthood of all believers. God has given each of us gifts that can be used to strengthen His kingdom and God promises to be with us as we share these gifts with other disciples. And I have discovered over time, that the will of God will not lead me where the grace of God cannot carry me.

The second response that Gideon had, which I believe we would have too, was to validate the source of the call. How could Gideon believe that this stranger was really a representative of God? So he asked for a sign. Now some might say that this showed a lack of faith. However, throughout the Old Testament we read about God's people asking for a sign. In ancient times, it was not only acceptable but considered a good idea – to test the spirits, to make sure that what is calling you did not come from the dark side of the moon or your imagination.

Truth be told, I believe that most still look for signs today. See if you can identify with any of these thoughts. “If she doesn't answer the phone, it must be a sign that I am not meant to be the one to forgive first.” “If you are really with me God, there WILL be a parking space on the front row – I am visiting someone in the hospital after all.” Or here is my favorite – “if the sweater is marked down tomorrow and they still have it in my size, it was MEANT TO BE for me to buy it.” Come on ladies, you know we’ve all been there.

But on a larger and more important scale, I believe that we want to know God’s plan for our lives, but we’re not always sure how to find it. Perhaps we think it can only

happen in church, when we are in God's house, sitting in a Holy place. But in reality, holy places can be down in a wine vat or at the computer or in the carpool line or in a middle school classroom. When we are ready for the sign that God will send, God will find us no matter where we are.

God sent Gideon a sign. As the angel of the Lord touched the rock where Gideon had placed his carefully prepared meal, the food was consumed in an instant by a fire. And Gideon believed and followed God AND his instructions.

And to reinforce that this truly was the Lord speaking and offering God's plan for his life, Gideon was given the gift of God's peace. And isn't that something that we all covet as well. Peace. And not only do I mean the absence of war or disagreement but that peace that passes all understanding. That feeling deep in your gut that, no matter what happens, God will be with you and take care of you.

The Hebrew word for this is ***Shalom!*** And it is actually what the writer of Judges tells us that God gave to Gideon. When Gideon finally recognize that it was the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who had come to him and placed his hand so firmly on his life, Gideon was filled with fear. Yet God said, "Shalom be with you."

Shalom. In Hebrew *shalom* means so much more than simply peace. It means fullness, security, completeness. **It means having everything you need to be wholly and happily yourself.** And what a gift God offers to each of us. You see everyone here is created in God's image. Everyone here is a beautiful child of God. God knows that about each of us. But the reason we don't all have shalom is because WE just can't believe it about ourselves.

If you want to see how Gideon was used by God to accomplish God's purposes, I invite you to read the rest of his story in the book of Judges. But if you want to feel God's *shalom* in your own life, you will find *it* in the Bible as well. The true miracle of Holy Scripture is that it is the story of OUR redemption. Every story, even Gideon's, is really about you and me. So we will find a sign of God's shalom for us as well.

Now, since I am not vain enough to think that you hang on my every word, you may not remember that I said a few minutes ago, "IN ANCIENT TIMES" God's people were encouraged to ask for a sign. But Jesus was clear when he said that no sign would be given to the New Testament Christians. He said this because WE have already been given a sign. Even Jesus Christ himself.

Our world is full of all kinds of signs that prove that God is real. They may be large signs like the miraculous cure of a particular kind of cancer or a terrible sadness that turns into personal growth. But more often than not, signs come to us in our everyday tasks, down in the wine press. The sleeping baby's breathing that the mother listens for at the side of the crib. The small flower that is able to bloom through the crack in the sidewalk. God's signs of His existence abound. They always have and they always will.

But the sign of Shalom, the proof that God is with us, the belief that we are loved just as we are came through the life, death and resurrection of God's only Son. God's desire to spend eternity with every person here is so great that God's son lived among us to show us God's ways. And when, in our disbelieving we continue to argue, "Who me? Surely I'm not worthy!" God's only Son died on the cross to give us a clear sign.

Because friends, when Jesus conquered sin and death he conquered the sins of unworthiness and the inability to accept ourselves and others just as we are. By Jesus'

atonement, God looks at us and instead of seeing us as we are, God sees us as we WILL be when we are perfected in Heaven.

But until that time, God offers us Shalom. Peace. Wholeness. Safety. The promise of God's presence and of perfection in God's perfect timing. So it is my prayer that we will continue to look for signs – signs that remind us of God's presence. Signs that remind us that God is still working in our lives and calling us to discipleship.

But it is Jesus' resurrection for us all that we can be assured of shalom. The realization that we have everything we need to be happily and wholly ourselves, cherished children of the one true God. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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