

Messy People & Merciful God: The Lord is Peace

Trinity CRC, March 22, 2020 AM
Judges Series for Lent (from RW 2019)

Judges 6:1-24

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Friends in Christ,

We are all somewhat anxious if not terrified by this corona—COVID-19—virus plaguing our world. We are worshiping completely separate from one another for the first time ever because of this virus. This part is not fear-based, of course. It's wisdom, following the instructions of medical professionals. But all around is fear. People hoarding toilet paper of all things as if they won't be able to get to the store for the next 10 years. One couple I read about bought all the meat in their grocery store, leaving nothing for anyone else. We've all seen the panic-buying and irrational behaviour brought on by people's fear. The list of craziness grows longer by the day as people respond to COVID with fear.

We are in for a very different Spring season, something none of us have experienced before. We hear words like Global pandemic, Social distancing and Self-isolation and quarantine that are mostly foreign to us. And for some people, handwashing might be a new concept as well, but hopefully not! 😊 All this stuff can scare the SPIT out of us, but we aren't supposed to spit either because that can spread germs! Sorry, I need to laugh a little in the midst of all this craziness. But, seriously, life can feel pretty messy at times like this.

Where's God in the Messes?

In response, let's ask ourselves, first of all this morning, "Where is God in the mess?"

There's in a line in the movie "Let There Be Blood" that comes to mind in this situation. There's not much funny about that show. It's pretty dark. But at one point, a crazy preacher forces a semi-repentant oil man played by Daniel Day Lewis to say, "I've abandoned my child! I've abandoned my boy!" After a half-hearted repetition, the preacher isn't happy with the level of contrition the oilman shows. "Say it louder." he tells Daniel. "Louder!" Then Daniel finally shouts at the top of his voice in the little church building, "I've abandoned my boy!"

Anyway, as we read this story of Gideon in Judges 6, you get the sense that Gideon would like God to say the same words—to repent of abandoning his child, Israel!

Trouble comes and people are quick to wonder where God is. Even when they don't normally confess faith in God, they suddenly feel like he's to blame for our problems as if he is required to keep our lives trouble-free. Do you ever feel that way? The truth is that God's desire for Israel in their time of craziness was to get them to see that he was present for them. Out of love for them, sometimes the messiness in life is his wakeup call to know him better, for who he truly is!

Our world is currently living in fear of a tiny little microbe we can't even see. Israel at the time of our Bible reading was living in fear of the Midianites. V.6 says that the Midianites *impoverished* Israel. The passage speaks to the season of war back then. Each year in the spring, the Midianites and other allies came into Israelite territory. They were strong and powerful—and uncountable! They looked like a swarm of locust, a plague of grasshoppers. They covered the ground with their tents and cattle, destroying all the freshly budding crops. They frightened the Israelites so much that they fled... anywhere to get out of the sight of the Midianites. They hid in the mountains and caves, any place where they'd be less likely to be noticed.

So it is that we find Gideon threshing wheat in a winepress. That should strike you as a weird statement. You don't thresh wheat in a winepress. Normally you thresh wheat on a hill where you can find the best breeze. You beat the grain, throw it into the air and the wind carries away the chaff while the kernels of wheat fall to the ground on a sheet or something like that spread out by the farmer. But when the Midianites come to town, people go into social isolation. The winepress was an underground series of rooms. We don't have to get into the mechanics of it but just get the picture that Gideon is doing an outside job in an underground cave because he's deathly afraid of the Midianites finding him and stealing his food. The Midianites had done this for 7 years according to our text so 7 years of next-to-no harvest would be taking its toll on Israel.

Now the angel of the Lord comes to Gideon in his hideaway with reminders of God's works in the past for Israel. But here's the response to this divine messenger. Look at v.13:

Jdg 6:13 "But sir," Gideon replied, "if the Lord is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all his wonders that our fathers told us about when they said, 'Did not the Lord bring us up out of Egypt?' But now the Lord has abandoned us and put us into the hand of Midian."

The Lord has abandoned us!! That's faithless Gideon's response! Isn't this God's fault? He's supposed to keep our lives trouble-free. We've been abandoned! We can all easily fall into that way of thinking when things are tough, can't we? Shouldn't God keep me from all harm? I mean, isn't that what Psalm 121 even says?! Why did this COVID virus come to us? Why do we have to hide in our houses? Why do people have to get sick and some die? Why doesn't God step in? The assumption in our questions and in Gideon's is that God must be against us when things go badly. As Gideon put it, "if the Lord is with us, why did this happen to us?" In other words, it's God's job to stop bad things for us. So he must not be with us!

God is With Us

But the second thing that this passage shows us this morning is that God is with us!

When our daughter Rachel almost died and then was recovering, I needed to ground myself afresh in the realities of my relationship with God in our Lord Jesus Christ. The song we'll sing after the sermon became one piece in my daily bread early on in that journey. I listened to it almost every day and sometimes several times a day. It had encouragement that I needed. It fed my soul along with Bible reading. It kept me focused on knowing that God is with us in the storms and challenges and messiness of life.

From their fearful circumstance, v.6 tells us, “the Israelites cried out to the Lord for help.” And vv. 7 & 8 say,

Jdg 6:7 When the Israelites cried to the Lord because of Midian, ⁸ he sent them a prophet, who said, “This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: I brought you up out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery... and goes on from there with more detail.

The interesting thing about this cry of Israel is that it's just a cry for help. It's not a cry of repentance even. It's like a lot of us. We don't pray until something bad happens. Our child gets sick and suddenly it's, “O God, help!!!” COVID comes and we cry out. Our jobs are threatened, our economy is crushed as if the Midianites trampled our land too. Too often our reaction is to doubt God's presence or concern. So, we cry out in fear to God to fix things!

Well, God's messenger reminds Israel of God's covenant—his promise to be faithful to them. Along with reminding Israel of God's promise, he recalls God's actions in Moses' day to bring Israel out of Egypt! The messenger's point is that God is always present. He's faithful to his covenant promises, even when we don't see him.

In his time and way, God acts on behalf of his fearful people. He provided a deliverer—Moses—to the Israelites slaves in Egypt in his time and way. God always has the long-game in mind when we only see and feel our immediate needs. Israel was in Egypt 400 years. God never had them out of his sight. He always had a plan for deliverance that moved at his perfect pace, despite the anxiety of those crying out. God is steady and faithful. The world is in his hands. Likewise, during the time of Judges when Israel is being pummelled over and over by the enemies that she failed to banish from Canaan, the Lord gives his covenant children reminders of his presence.

One of God's actions is sending reluctant Gideon to Israel. As much as Gideon did some pretty great thing for Israel in the upcoming chapters, we notice that he's full of reluctance and weakness. As we already noted, Gideon was hiding in a winepress. As the chapter continues, we also see that he tries to get around God's call. He describes himself as coming from the smallest or weakest tribe and clan which isn't really true. His father was wealthy; Gideon was nobility of sorts in that part of the country. But he downplays his place when God asks him to serve. He reminds us of Moses and his hesitancy to serve as God's mouthpiece years earlier. Nonetheless, God uses this weak vessel—**this** cracked clay pot if you will—to bring reminders of his love and faithfulness to Israel, reminders of his presence in the past to encourage his people in the present.

After that little history lesson, God calls Gideon to rescue Israel and he gives Gideon this assurance in v.16:

Jdg 6:16 The Lord answered (Gideon), "I will be with you, and you will strike down all the Midianites together."

I'm with my people, says the Lord. You have nothing to fear.

Today, the presence of God is guaranteed to us not only in his covenant promises but in the fulfillment of those promises through God's action in sending Jesus to us. Gideon was an unwilling servant of God who managed, with God's help, to deliver Israel from the oppression of Midian for a time. But Jesus willingly becomes our Immanuel—God with us. He takes on the enemies and wins. He heals those living in fear. He touches those who are forced into social isolation—like lepers—and heals their bodies so they can connect again with people. He delivers those in mental isolation—demon possessed people living in the hills, afraid of themselves and feared by everyone who sees them. He heals the unclean woman who touches him and removes the plague of social distancing that held her in bondage for 12 years. He touches the eyes of the blind so they can see the world and enjoy life in a new way. He even touched dead bodies and raised them to life. Jesus acted out of love for those of us living in fear in this messy world.

Ultimately, Jesus takes on sin and defeats Satan for us so that we can be assured of God's presence for eternity.

Live in Peace

But in this life already, Jesus wants us to live in peace, not fear. That's the third thing to see in our reading for today. Gideon was fearful of a lot of things, even of the Lord. After the angel of the Lord showed God's approval of the offering Gideon made, Gideon was afraid he'd die because he was in the presence of God. Listen starting at v.22.

Jdg 6:22 When Gideon realized that it was the angel of the Lord, he exclaimed, "Ah, Sovereign Lord! I have seen the angel of the Lord face to face!"

That reminds us of Moses at the burning bush who also feared for his life after encountering God. You read the same sort of words from Samson's father in Judges 13. Here in Judges 6, we read,

Jdg 6:23 But the Lord said to him, "Peace! Do not be afraid. You are not going to die."

24 So Gideon built an altar to the Lord there and called it The Lord is Peace.

The knowledge of the presence of the Lord gave peace to Gideon in the face of the Midianite attacks.

You and I are assured by Jesus in the fears of our lives that peace is his gift to us. One passage that comes to mind is where the disciples are all fearful because Jesus is talking about leaving them. They are confused and upset. And Jesus says in John 14:27,

Jn 14:27 Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

Fear in uncertainty gripped the hearts of the disciples then just as it can grip our hearts today. We have no idea at this time how long this pandemic will last. We have no certainty that it will not touch us or to what degree it will touch us.

The Apostle Paul learned to rest in the peace of Christ during the uncertainties and messiness of his life. He wrote these well-known words to the Church in Phillipi:

*Php 4:4 Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ⁵ Let your gentleness be evident to all. **The Lord is near.** (There's the presence of the Lord; therefore, he says,) ⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God (Cry out to him). ⁷ And **the peace of God**, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

That peace of God is ours through Jesus Christ no matter whether the threat is Midian or COVID. We look back at Jesus and remember that he is our victor over every force of evil, illness, death, sin and Satan. Like Gideon and Israel were told to look back at their deliverance from Egypt to remember the faithfulness of the Lord, so we look back at Jesus and remember what he did for us. Remember how he is victorious over leprosy, blindness, bleeding and even death. And on the cross, he won the victory over our sin to give us peace with God. Jesus wants us to live in the peace that he has won for us. He's got us and the whole world in his loving and saving hands.

Share the Peace

But before we end, remember—finally—that Jesus also wants us to share the peace he gives us. He calls us to be agents of his peace all the time. And no time is more important than when fear surrounds our community.

After God assures Gideon of his presence and Gideon gets peace from God, we read this in v.24:

*Jdg 6:24 So Gideon built an altar to the Lord there and called it **The Lord is Peace.** To this day it stands in Ophrah of the Abiezrites.*

The words "To this day it stands" are an invitation to come and see. The writer of Judges is saying to the people of his day, the altar Gideon built to commemorate God's gift of peace is still standing in Ophrah. Go and see it if you don't believe me. He's saying that the altar is Gideon's testimony. People would look at it and ask, "What's that here for?"

In a similar way, we can lean into Jesus during these uncertain days of COVID-19 and live out of the peace that Jesus fills our hearts with. And our lives will bear witness that the Lord is our peace.

When Rachel was so sick, we didn't know if she'd live. Then we didn't know what quality of life she'd have if she lived. But many of you lived through that trial with us as you followed our story on Facebook. We were socially isolated from you by being 10,000 miles away in a land where we could scarcely communicate with

people in their language. Yet, the peace of Christ that passes all understanding was ours. And I don't say it was our peace. It was his peace in us. People said to us at times, "You're handling this situation so well. Your lives are such a testimony." And all we could say was, "Thanks be to God. The Lord Jesus gave us his peace."

So, you see, dear people, it's not us. It's him! It's Jesus! Cry out to him in this time of uncertainty and fear. Draw near to him. And be assured that his peace will fill you and make your life a testimony to people who are living in fear all around us today. Don't be afraid. The Lord is with us and the Lord is our peace.
Amen.

Let's sing the words of Be Still My Soul, including the verse:

*Be still, my soul, thy God doth undertake
To guide the future as He has the past
Thy hope, thy confidence, let nothing shake
All now mysterious shall be bright at last.*