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Second Baptist Church
Lincoln, Nebraska

Unpacking

Judges 6:36-40

³⁶ Gideon said to God, "If you will save Israel by my hand as you have promised--

³⁷ look, I will place a wool fleece on the threshing floor. If there is dew only on the fleece and all the ground is dry, then I will know that you will save Israel by my hand, as you said."

³⁸ And that is what happened. Gideon rose early the next day; he squeezed the fleece and wrung out the dew--a bowlful of water.

³⁹ Then Gideon said to God, "Do not be angry with me. Let me make just one more request. Allow me one more test with the fleece. This time make the fleece dry and the ground covered with dew."

⁴⁰ That night God did so. Only the fleece was dry; all the ground was covered with dew.

I hate moving. There is something about watching all your worldly possessions packed in a truck and pulling away from the curb that gives finality to the decision you have made. It was 25 years ago that Grace and baby Katie and I made our way down I-29 toward Kansas City wondering if we had made the right decision in going to Seminary. Was it God speaking and telling us to "go" or was it our own self-interest or sense of self-ambition that was leading us? Always that question: "Are we making the right decision?"

This past Monday and Tuesday as I once again made my way down I-29 in a larger truck, I noticed that something had not changed. The route was the same. The scenery of the Missouri River Valley was the same as 25 years ago. And the question was the same, "Did I make the right decision. God? Are you in this, or is this just me?" Perhaps some of you went away from the service on Wednesday, July 22 with the same question after voting "yes" to confirm me as your new pastor. "Lord, what have I done? Is this the right guy? We don't know much about him. He's a stranger to us. But God, I'm just going to have to trust you on this one."

Am I having second thoughts? NOT AT ALL. I do believe God was in this. I saw signs where God was saying, "This is my plan – now get used to it." In our text today, we read about a familiar character in scripture that acted on faith and was richly rewarded for his ability to step out and do the impossible. The Israelites were being punished for their worship of foreign Gods. If we had time this morning, it would be fun to read the whole story, but instead I am going to retell it in the context of my message.

God allowed the Midianites to take control and capture the Israelite people as a punishment for her sins. The Israelites hid in caves while the Midianites attacked and destroyed their crops,

flocks and herds. They watched in terror as the enemy took over their springs and wells. They scratched out a living as best they could, but life was hard and they were beginning to lose their dream of independence and prosperity. I'm not so sure it is that much different for a church congregation that has gone through a period of difficulty. Whether it is conflict in the church or not having a pastor, as time goes on, morale begins to get low. We begin to lose our dream and vision of what God wants us to be.

Yet in the midst of this, like we read in the 6th chapter, vs. 12, *"The Lord is with you, mighty warrior."* Again in verse 14, the encouraging words, *"Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian's hand. Am I not sending you?"* This must have really JAZZED Gideon. "Wow, God wants me! Hey, I'm going to be a hero. They will talk about me for generations! I'm the one God is raising up to save Israel!"

However, that's not what he said. Instead, he responded more like you or I might respond. Vs. 15: *"But Lord, how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I'm the least in my family."* One thing I discovered long ago is that churches have a tendency to develop low self-esteem when they have gone through crisis. In fact, the members that I speak to often sound a lot like Gideon. "But Lord, how can our church amount to anything? We are the weakest church in the city! People leave and we've even had crisis. We've been without a pastor. How can you possibly use us?" I heard this from the members in every church where I served and I've even heard it here. There is an old saying from the 70s, "God don't make no junk." I seriously doubt that God would refer to his church as "junk." This is his bride we're talking about.

God says to Gideon in verse 23: *"Peace! Do not be afraid. You are not going to die."* See, God had a plan for Gideon. It is up to God to employ his plan, and it is up to us to say in the words of Isaiah the prophet, *"Lord, here I am, send me."* So eventually, Gideon is convinced that this gig is for real and God is not joking around with him. He picked a guy from the least of the tribes to do something great because that is what miracles are made of.

Who did God choose to bear his son into the world? A teenage girl named Mary who came from a peasant family in Nazareth. Who did God choose to lead Israel out of Egypt? He chose a slave who had a stutter and couldn't speak very well. If God picked the most able and the most promising talents around, then people might have a tendency to say, "Well, look how talented they are! My, they are really the best. Such leadership! Such eloquence."

We need to remember something from this message today. I want you to take this home with you. "God will use ordinary people and ordinary means to accomplish extraordinary things."

Do you remember these people? Moses and an old stick. Samson and the jawbone of a donkey. David and one little stone. A Widow and a small bottle of oil. A little boy and a small lunch of a few loaves and some fish. And in our next chapter, GIDEON AND SOME TRUMPETS AND JARS AND A FEW FAITHFUL MEN.

When it came time for Gideon to form his army against the Midianites, 32,000 men gathered at the spring of Harod. God told Gideon, "That's too many men." See, the Lord didn't want Israel to think that it was the power of the vast army of Israel that defeated the Israelites, so God told some of them to go home. Any of the men who trembled with fear at the thought of going to battle were told to go home. 23,000 men (three-fourths) ended up going home. Think of it.

There was a second reason the trembling men were sent home. MORALE. When fear sets in, it travels like a virus. It would have swept through the camp and the whole army would have been infected with fear. You can't go to war with cowards. There is nothing more demoralizing than people saying, "We can't win this war. The enemy is too strong."

Think of a church congregation when FEAR or NEGATIVISM travels from person to person. Think of the panic and reaction. FAITH is jeopardized. People panic. People leave. Their faith becomes crippled. Think of the attitudes that spread fear. "We can't raise our budget. We can't find a pastor. We can't win people to Christ. We're too small." But God has different plans.

So there Gideon was with 11,000 men left to fight the Midianites. But still, God said, "That is too many men. Take them down to the water and I will sift them out for you again." So when they arrived at the water, God cast aside all those who got down on their hands and knees and lapped water like a dog. The ones who scooped water and drank it out of their hands were more alert and aware of their surrounding than those who got down like they were bobbing for apples. Problem: There were only 300 men left. The valley was filled with the Midianites, the Amalekites and other nations from the east. Thick like locusts.

You know the rest of the story. With trumpets and empty jars, they entered the valley. They waited until the enemy armies slept and they broke the jars and pulled out the lit torches and the Midianites thought the armies were much bigger than they were. In those days it was typical in their warfare to have one torch and one trumpet for every 100 men. In this case, each one of the 300 men had a torch and trumpet and it caused panic in the camp of the Midianite because it looked like it might be 30,000 men! The groggy, sleepy Midianites turned on each other in panic and ran their swords through their own soldiers. God won the victory that day.

In the next several weeks, I am going to be unpacking my belongings. Books will go onto my shelves in my office. Eventually we will have a house and our furnishings will fill that house. I came here because I believe God led me here. I believe God wants to accomplish something here. But I can tell you right now, I will not be the cause of that success. God will be raising up individuals with the courage and strength of Gideon's army. Not physical strength, but spiritual strength. Not with weapons of steel, but weapons of prayer. It will be people with the courage to overcome hurts and wounds of the past and live victorious Christian lives with Christ at the center.

I hope you will unpack with me the necessary items to settle in to what God wants to do. Prayer. Agape love for each other. A willingness to serve Christ. A cheerful, positive attitude. I am thrilled to be here as your pastor. I look forward to the partnership we will be forming over time. Like Gideon, it is not about numbers and human potential, but rather about the work of God's hands in human lives. AMEN.