

## “Imperfect People, Imperfect Leaders”

Judges 2:7-19, selected verses

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The people worshipped the LORD all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua, who had seen all the great work that the LORD had done for Israel. Then that whole generation was gathered to their ancestors, and another generation grew up after them, who did not know the LORD or the work that he had done for Israel.

Then the Israelites abandoned the LORD, the God of their ancestors, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt; they followed other gods, from among the gods of the peoples who were all around them, and bowed down to them. They abandoned the LORD, and worshipped Baal and the Astartes. So they provoked the anger of the LORD, he sold them into the power of their enemies all around, so that they could no longer withstand their enemies, as the LORD had warned them and sworn to them; and they were in great distress.

Then the LORD raised up judges, who delivered them out of the power of those who plundered them. Yet they did not listen even to their judges; for they lusted after other gods and bowed down to them. They soon turned aside from the way in which their ancestors had walked, who had obeyed the commandments of the LORD; they did not follow their example. Whenever the LORD raised up judges for them, the LORD was with the judge, and he delivered them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge; for the LORD would be moved to pity by their groaning because of those who persecuted and oppressed them. But whenever the judge died, they would relapse and behave worse than their ancestors, following other gods, worshipping them and bowing down to them. They would not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways.

Last Sunday was All Saints Day. It is always a poignant day, as we remember the lives of those who've died, both this year and longer in the past. Long after the funeral's over and the personal effects are packed, long after the thank you notes are written and a “new normal” has begun for us, All Saints Day invites us to remember. To remember the people we've loved, and to cherish the inheritance they've left us.

Why does it matter? Because forgetting doesn't just dishonor them; forgetting also weakens us. Sadly, that's what happens when the Israelites settle in the Promised Land. They forget what generations before them had learned. The generation the Lord brought out of slavery in Egypt ... the ones the Lord fed for 40 years in the wilderness ... the ones Joshua led across the Jordan River – when they all passed away, their memories died with them. This new generation in the Promised Land? They never knew hardship. They

never knew fear. They only knew their comfort and security. They forgot what their ancestors learned, to depend on the Lord.

It's easy to forget. I think of what people endured in the Great Depression and World War II – they learned the hard way that the only way they'd make it was to stick together and lean on God for strength. But by the time we got to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we'd forgotten. We'd forgotten how to stick together; we'd forgotten how to lean on God for strength. Like the Israelites in the comfort of the Promised Land, we'd gone after other “gods,” like money, fame and power. But when 9/11 hit in 2001, and the Great Recession in 2008, we came to our senses again – and discovered for ourselves how to stick together, and how to lean on God for strength.

Today's Scripture reminds us that God will always be there for us in our need – and God will provide leaders for us from our own community. Today we'll hear a few of those stories from the book of Judges. Whenever the nation was overwhelmed by enemies from without, or undone by failings from within ... *always*, God raised up leaders to find their way again.

As we hear these stories of the judges, shared by a few wonderful members of our congregation, I invite us to imagine our own circumstances, and our own people's needs. In our community and our world, what kind of leaders do we need? In politics, in business, in family life, and more: what kind of leaders do we pray that God will raise up for us? And what kind of leadership does God desire from *us*?

### **Deborah** (Judges 4)

*My name is Deborah. It was very unusual that a woman would be a judge at all, let alone one of the first judges. But when the Canaanites came up against our people, brutalizing us for twenty years, God heard their cries, and raised me up to lead them. I could not say no to God.*

*What did it mean for me to judge? For a long time, it meant serving as a counselor and mediator. I used to sit under the palm tree along the road in the hill country, and people would come to ask for my judgment – about their family life, about their business conflicts, even about their suffering.*

*But it became clear to me that all the wisdom of the world wouldn't matter if we continued to live in this oppression. So I summoned a warrior named Barak, and told him to take ten*

*thousand men to defeat the Canaanites. Barak refused to go unless I went with them, with my wisdom and authority - so I agreed.*

*Together we prepared the troops, and when the day came, the Lord threw the enemy warriors into a panic. Afterwards, I sang this song of victory.*

*In spite of the insignificance of women in our time, God used me. Let us never forget: in spite of any of our insignificance, God can use us.*

We know what difference leaders like Deborah can make today: I think of Malala, as insignificant as they get, who rose up anyway – who rose against the Taliban in Pakistan, and made the education of girls a reality again.

But I suspect that we rarely think of our *own* potential as leaders. Perhaps out of genuine humility, perhaps out of the overwhelming needs of the world, perhaps out of our own preoccupations with other responsibility – for whatever reason, we don't imagine ourselves being called to make a difference. We forget that sometimes, it's not even our own power that matters, but our role in inspiring other people. Like Deborah choosing Barak, and accompanying him even into battle, sometimes what we're called to do is call out other people's gifts, and back them when they waver, and accompany them on their way. And I wonder: how might God be calling *you* ... how might God be calling you to lead, or to call out other leaders?

Deborah was one of the first judges in ancient Israel. But she wasn't the last. After Deborah died, the Israelites relapsed into their old ways, forgetting the Lord, and going after other gods. Soon the Israelites were under attack again – this time by the Midianites. So the Israelites cried out to the Lord again; and though God was exasperated by their faithlessness, again, God sent a prophet and a judge.

### **Gideon** (Judges 6)

*My name is Gideon. When an angel came saying, "The Lord is with you," my first reaction was to argue: 'If the LORD is with us, why are we suffering? And where are God's wonderful deeds that our ancestors told us about?' But the angel argued back, "Well, in fact, you're the one God is commissioning to rout the enemy." But I didn't trust God. Three times, I pressed the angel for a sign – something to convince me that I wasn't just dreaming this up ... something to convince me that the Lord was truly with me. Three times, I pressed for a sign. And three times, a sign was given.*

*So when the Lord called me to go to my own father's house and tear down his altar to the pagan god Baal ... and build an altar to the Lord in its place ... and sacrifice my father's own young bull on the new altar: well, I did it. I was so afraid of my family and my townspeople that I couldn't bring myself to do it in the daytime. Instead, I snuck in by night – but I did what the Lord commanded, in spite of my fears.*

*In the morning, I prepared for the worst. I will never forget that day. The spirit of the Lord took over, and the whole people stood with me – even my father! - and we prepared for battle against the Midianites.*

*Then God gave one more sign: God told me there were too many troops in my army! Instead of 30,000 troops, God had me put just 300 troops in the field. With just 300 men, we went up against the Midianites, and blew our trumpets against them, and their army fell before our very eyes.*

*In spite of my fear and distrust, God used me. In spite of all of our fear and distrust, God can use us.*

We know what difference leaders like Gideon can make, don't we – leaders who move beyond their fear; leaders who stand up for what is right, even when it means confronting their own tribe, their own loved ones. And we know the damage that's done when people aren't willing to confront those close to them. How different things might have been in Fox Lake if Lt. Gliniewicz's colleagues and family had called him on his wrongdoings; how different things might have been for thousands of investors if Bernie Madoff's loved ones had torn down his altars to the almighty dollar.

And it makes me wonder: have we ever felt called to be truth-tellers to those we love? One of the scariest moments in my life was when my sister and I drummed up the courage to speak to our Mom about her alcohol-abuse. We were terrified of hurting her; we had no idea whether it would “work.” But we had to try. And we were dearly blessed by God's grace. And I wonder: how might God be calling *you* ... how might God be calling you to tell the truth to those you love? How might God be calling you in spite of your very real fears?

Gideon was among the judges who had to confront those closest to him, in spite of his fear. But there were other judges too ... because as soon as Gideon died, the Israelites went after other gods once more. And the people

fell into the hands of the Philistines for forty years, until the Israelites rose up again to beg the Lord to help them.

### **Samson** (Judges 13)

*My name is Samson. I wasn't even supposed to be born; my mother was barren. But an angel told her she'd conceive and bear a son, and he would save her people from their enemies. So when I was born, she dedicated me to God as a nazirite – one whose hair would never be cut.*

*A special strength came with that dedication. When a lion attacked, I killed it with my bare hands. When I was thirsty, God cracked open a rock and water poured out. And when the enemy Philistines rose up against us, God raised me up, and our enemy fell at our feet.*

*But I made a mistake – I fell: I fell for a woman named Delilah. She pestered me for the secret of my strength. I resisted, but when she accused me of not loving her, she broke my heart. So I told her my secret: 'I am a nazirite dedicated to God from birth. A razor has never come near my head; if my head were shaved, then my strength would leave me.'*

*And Delilah? She betrayed me. She sold me into the hands of my enemy. When I fell asleep in her lap, Delilah had my head shaved, and immediately, my strength began to leave me. That very night, the Philistines seized me, and gouged out my eyes, and hurled me into prison.*

*But hair grows back, doesn't it? So when the Philistines gathered for a party for their pagan god, and they called for me to entertain them, to mock me in front of the crowds. But the joke was on them. I prayed with all my might: 'Lord GOD, remember me and strengthen me only this once, O God.' Then I grasped the two pillars where I was standing, and I leaned my weight against them, and I strained with all my might. And the house came down around them. The house of the Philistines fell.*

*In spite of my weakness, God made me strong. No matter how weak we are, God can make us strong for the work of the Lord.*

We know what difference leaders like Samson can make. Leaders dedicated to the Lord and, in spite of their weakness, are used by God in amazing ways. I think of Rev. Mike Nevling who was pastor at The Village Church in Northbrook but had to retire because of his cancer – he and his wife Linda are here now, and blessing us with their faithfulness and courage. I think of Phil Haltom, whose story I've told before, who left the pastorate after misconduct, but whose profound and humble process of redemption has blessed countless others. It's not just clergy; it's all of us who have committed ourselves to God's purposes, and who end up falling short of our heartfelt

aspirations. But sometimes God can use us most in our weakness. As St. Paul writes, “In my weaknesses, the power of Christ will dwell in me.” And I wonder: how might God be calling *you* ... how might God be calling you – not in the midst of your strength or success or achievement, but in your weakness?

One last story. After Samson, the people returned again to their old ways. But God was not through with them yet.

### **Samuel** (I Samuel 1, 3, 7)

*My name is Samuel. I too was born of a mother who was barren. Her name was Hannah. One day, she went to the Temple to pray. She prayed so fervently, the priest thought she was drunk! But she wasn't; she was pouring out her soul before the Lord. So the priest blessed her, and soon after she conceived, and here I am.*

*My mother was so grateful to God that when I was still little, she brought me back to Eli, the priest, and left me there to serve the Lord. Each year she used to make me a little robe and bring it to me.*

*One night when I was sleeping, I heard a voice say “Samuel! Samuel!” I called back, “Here I am!” and I ran to Eli to ask him what he needed. But Eli said, ‘I didn't call; lie down again.’*

*So I went and lay down. I heard the voice again: ‘Samuel!’ And I went to Eli, and said, ‘Here I am.’ But he said, ‘I did not call, my son; lie down again.’ And I heard the voice a third time, and I went to Eli, and said, ‘Here I am.’ Then Eli understood that the LORD was calling me. And Eli told me, ‘Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, “Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.”’ So I lay down again in my place. And the LORD came and stood right there, calling ‘Samuel! Samuel!’ And I said, ‘Speak, for your servant is listening.’ It was amazing!*

*When I grow up, I know the LORD will be with me. And I know what the Lord will want me to do: the Lord will ask me to call to the people, just as the Lord called to me. God will ask them to be serve him alone, and put away all their other so-called gods. The Lord wants their hearts again, for the people to serve only the Lord. And I know the power of God: my people will hear God calling them, and they will answer and follow. And when they do, I will bless them – and I will raise a stone at the holy altar – and I will name the stone “Ebenezer,” which means ‘The LORD has helped us.’*

*How can I be so sure? It's only because of my mother's faithfulness and Eli's guidance and courage that I'm sure. I learned from them. I'm still learning from*

*them. And this is what I know for sure: we can all learn from those who paved our way in faith.*

We know what difference young leaders like Samuel can make, who inspire us in their youth – just as we know what difference leaders like Deborah can make in their insignificance, and leaders like Gideon can make in their fear, and leaders like Samson can make in their weakness.

Why? Because in God's hands, any of us can be leaders. In God's hands, any of us can be called. In God's hands, any of us can be blessed to be a blessing. It's not about *us*. It's about the work God needs to be done: the work of justice and kindness, the work of truth-telling and love, the work of calling one another to faithfulness, the work of calling one another to belong to God alone.

And I wonder? What is it God is calling *you* to do?

I don't know what your particular calling is but I am absolutely sure of this. God needs you and your gifts to make this world a better place. As it was in the time of the judges, so it is now. May you hear God's call to you to raise up and bring God's message to God's beloved.