

11 October 2020

Doubt: Gideon
Judges 6-9; James 1:1-8

The New Testament Book of James begins with some strong words about doubt. Since we'll be thinking about doubt and faith today in our Old Testament story from Judges, let us begin by looking at what James says. We read James 1:1-8:

1 James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings.

2 My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, 3 because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; 4 and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.

5 If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you. 6 But ask in faith, never doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind; 7, 8 for the doubter, being double-minded and unstable in every way, must not expect to receive anything from the Lord.

“And the Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord gave them into the hand of Midian for seven years.” So begins Judges 6. The recurring cycle of the Book of Judges has resumed; once again Israel has turned from God and is being oppressed by a foreign nation. This time, the oppressors are the Midianites, and it's a little different. The Midianites were nomadic traders and raiders – Bedouins, basically – so they didn't occupy Israelite lands. Instead, they would sweep in on their camels, steal everything that wasn't nailed down, then set fire to the rest.

That was why, one day, a young man of the tribe of Manasseh was threshing wheat in a winepress. His family had managed to harvest some crops before they were burned to stubble by the Midianites, but you didn't want to advertise that small success by threshing the grain openly, so this young man was working in a pit, out of sight. The young man's name was Gideon.

“The Lord is with you, O mighty warrior!”

Gideon looked up. A man was standing at the edge of the pit, looking down at him. “You're a riot,” Gideon said. “Go away.”

“No . . . I'm serious. I've been sent to tell you that the Lord is with you.”

Gideon didn't look up. “Looks like it, doesn't it?”

“I'm a messenger of God!”

“What, an angel?”

“Yes!”

“Good. Give God a message for me. It was really great that God brought our ancestors out of Egypt and all that, as the stories tell. Good job, God. But you know what? Having been brought out of Egypt generations ago is worth exactly squat when the Midianites are burning our

crops and stealing our sheep. Could you ask God if he has any more mighty works up his sleeve, because we could use a few, and the old ones aren't wearing very well, if you know –"

"Will you be quiet? Yes, God has another mighty work. You!"

Gideon stared at him. "Look, I don't know where you got what you've been drinking, but you've had enough. Go lie down."

"The Lord has sent me to tell you to raise an army and fight the Midianites, and the Lord will be with you."

"Me."

"You."

"I am the youngest son of my father, whose clan is the smallest in Manasseh, which is the least of the tribes, and I'm threshing wheat in a pit because I'm afraid of the Midianites. I'm the least likely hero in Israel."

"That's how you know it's God."

"Not good enough. Prove it."

"What do you want me to do?"

Gideon took a deep breath. "Stay here. Watch the wheat. You look hungry, and even crazy people need food. I'll go get you something."

Soon Gideon returned with some meat and unleavened bread. The man said, "Put them on that rock." Gideon did. The man said, "Let them be a burnt offering to the Lord," and touched the rock with his staff. Fire came out of the rock and burned the food in a flash.

Gideon was very still. "An angel," he said finally.

"That's right."

"And you were serious. You want me to lead an army against the Midianites."

"Not me. *God* wants you to lead an army against the Midianites."

"I liked you better as a madman." Then Gideon knelt before the angel. "I am sorry I doubted you. I have sinned against the Lord, and my life is forfeit."

"Nice try, but you aren't getting out of it that easy. Can I just repeat what I've already said more times than I can count? The Lord will be with you."

* * *

That night, as Gideon lay awake on his bed, he realized that if he was going to fight for the Lord it would have to be all or nothing, and there was something he had to do first. You remember that first line from Judges 6 – "The Israelites did evil in the sight of the Lord"? Here's a part of what that means. Gideon's father, Joash, was an Israelite, and worshiped God, but like many Israelites he had never really gotten that first commandment about "no other gods before me." Or, in fact, the second commandment against "graven images." In addition to worshiping the

Lord, Joash also had an image of a bull (which often represented the Canaanite god Baal) and an Asherah pole. Asherah was the goddess of fertility, and the Asherah poles were wooden pillars set into stone sockets. So, in the middle of the night – when, perhaps, no one would be watching – Gideon got up, summoned a few of his father’s servants and pulled down the image of the bull and smashed it, then chopped down the Asherah pole.

The next morning, the people of the village were aghast. Why would somebody deliberately anger the gods? Soon everybody knew what had happened, and who was responsible. I imagine one of the servants squealed. A crowd of angry townspeople came to Joash’s front door, demanding his son. Joash looked at the wreckage of his idols, then looked back at the crowd. “Are you fighting Baal’s battles for him now? If Baal has a problem with my son, let Baal deal with it himself.” Joash shut the door, and the people went home. For years after, Gideon was sometimes called Jerubbaal, which means “Let Baal deal with him.”

Not long after that, the Midianites joined forces with some other raiders and began gathering for a major attack on Israel. Gideon mustered his courage, such as it was, and sent messengers throughout the tribe of Manasseh, as well as to the adjacent tribes of Asher, Naphtali, and Zebulun – summoning them to war. And they responded. An Israelite army began to form.

Now throughout the stories of Gideon, the Lord often speaks to him. Sometimes it’s through a messenger, as it was that first time, and other times it seems as if God is speaking directly. It switches back and forth, even in mid-conversation, and gets confusing, so for the rest of our story today I’m just going to pick one and run with it – having God speak through the angel of the winepress.

As Gideon stood surveying his growing army, a voice beside him said, “I told you so.”

“Oh, it’s you.”

“Good to see you, too. You didn’t believe you could do it, did you?”

“We haven’t done anything yet. Look at them. We’ve mustered a few thousand farmers to take on a nation of professional warriors. They’ll wipe the mountains with us.”

“I told you, the Lord will be with you.”

Gideon shook his head. “Not good enough. Prove it.”

“Proof again?”

“Just looking for some reassurance. Look, here’s what I’m going to do. We’ve been having heavy dewfall around here in the mornings. I’m going to spread out this sheepskin tonight. Tomorrow morning, if there is dew on this sheepskin but the rest of the ground is dry, I’ll know that you really speak for God.”

“Gideon, God doesn’t usually play games like that.”

“I don’t usually go to war, either. See you in the morning.”

The next morning, when Gideon awoke the ground was dry as a bone. Not a drop of dew anywhere. Taking a deep breath, he went to check the fleece. It was soaked. When he picked it up, it dripped a steady stream of water, and when he wrung it out, it filled a cup.

“Ahem,” said a voice.

“Could have occurred naturally,” Gideon said. “Tell you what, we’ll try it again tomorrow, but backward: all the ground damp but the sheepskin dry.”

“You are a piece of work, Gideon. You know that?”

But of course it turned out exactly as Gideon had demanded. The ground was soggy with dew, but the fleece was dusty dry. Gideon sighed. “Fine,” he muttered. “I’ll do it.”

“Good,” said the angel. “But there’s a problem.”

“Yes, I know,” Gideon said. “We’re still outnumbered. The Midianites have way more men than we have.”

“Wrong. God thinks you have too many men.”

“I beg your pardon.”

“If you win with an army this size, people will say you were a great general and praise you and your soldiers.”

“So?”

“They’re not. The only way your farmers are going to defeat anyone is if God is with them. The Lord just wants all Israel to recognize who gave them the victory. You need to send some of the troops home. Summon the men.”

Gideon looked at the dry fleece in his hand, then pulled out his ram’s horn to summon the troops. When they were gathered, he looked at the angel, who said, “Ask how many of them are afraid, and then send those men back home.” Gideon looked at him, and the angel added, “Except for you. You have to stay.”

Gideon made the announcement. “We are fighting for the Lord, who brought us out of the land of slavery, out of Egypt,” he declared. “We have no need to be afraid. All those who are frightened of the Midianites are dismissed. Go home.” There was a long shuffling pause, and Gideon added, “No, really. I mean it.”

Before long, two-thirds of Gideon’s army was gone. “I hope you’re happy now,” Gideon muttered.

“Not yet. Still too many. Funny, I would have thought more would have been afraid.”

“You’re joking.”

“Take them down to the stream and tell them to get a drink. As they drink, separate those who scoop water up in their hands from those who drink straight from the stream.”

There were still several thousand men, so the exercise took a while, but when all was done, only three hundred men were in the group of water-scoopers. Gideon sighed with relief.

“Yes,” said the angel. “That’ll do. Keep that three hundred and send the rest home.”

“Oh, come on!”

“Gideon, let me remind you —”

“I know, I know. The Lord is with me. He’d better be.”

And so it was that that very evening, Gideon and a mere three hundred men made dark camp on a hill overlooking a vast plain covered with the watchfires of a thousand Midianite camps. Gideon watched them glumly.

“I bet I can guess what you’re thinking,” said a voice beside him.

“Bet you can’t.”

“You don’t think you can do it, and you’d like a sign from God.”

“All right, good guess.”

“Gideon, at this point if you weren’t questioning God I’d check you for fever. Tell you what. Why don’t you sneak down to the edge of the Midianite camp and listen for a bit?”

So he did. As he drew near the camp, he heard one of the Midianites saying, “I had the weirdest dream last night. I don’t usually remember my dreams, but this one stuck with me. We were all in camp, and this huge loaf of barley bread came bouncing down the hill and hit the center tent pole and everything went flat.”

Other voices around the fire laughed at the speaker, and a few wished they had that loaf of bread right now, but then one voice said, “Um, I don’t know where this came from, but I think I know what that dream means. I think the barley loaf represents the sword of Gideon the Israelite, and the tent is us, and it means we’re going to be beaten.”

While the other Midianites laughed at the last voice and called the interpretation even weirder than the dream, Gideon climbed back up the hill. The angel said, “Ready now? Let me tell you what you’re going to do.”

In the middle of the night, Gideon and his men crept down the hill and spread out in a loose circle around the perimeter of the Midianite camp. Each man carried an empty water jar and a torch, and each had a ram’s horn on his belt. No weapons, just a ram’s horn. When they were in position, they lit their torches, but hid the light under the jar. At last, Gideon blew a blast from his ram’s horn. All the men smashed their jars, both making a tremendous racket and flooding the field with light. Then they all grabbed their rams’ horns and sounded the attack, but stayed where they were.

The Midianites scrambled from their blankets in a terror, each one grabbing his weapons and lashing out at anything that moved, soon there was a sustained battle as sword clashed on sword and spears parried and thrust. Gideon’s three hundred men stood quietly around the perimeter, watching. “They’re too many for us,” a voice cried. “Run!” The Midianites scattered and fled their camp in all directions, leaving their dead behind, and as the sun rose, they found themselves alone or in small groups . . . and surrounded by the men of Naphtali and Asher and Zebulun who had been sent home. They made short work of the Midianite stragglers. Even the tribe of Ephraim, who hadn’t even been part of the original force, joined in. The Midianites were utterly routed.

When it was all over, loaded with plunder, the Israelites gathered before Gideon and knelt in gratitude and awe. “Let’s make Gideon king!” shouted one. Soon the whole army was shouting, “King Gideon! King Gideon!”

Gideon raised his hand, and at last the shouts subsided. He said, “You don’t get it, do you? I didn’t do this. You didn’t do this. There’s no way we could have done this, except that the Lord was with us. You don’t need a king, you’ve got one. Now go home and give thanks to God.”

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A final word: In the passage we read before the story, James had some harsh things to say about people who doubt. Well, I don’t want to say that James is wrong, but the story of Gideon shows us that it’s at least more complicated than that. Gideon’s questions didn’t keep him from being a faithful follower of God. In fact, the opposite of faith is not doubt, just as the opposite of love is not hate. The opposite of love is indifference, and the opposite of faith is hiding in a pit and doing nothing. Gideon questioned God at every step, but he kept stepping forward. People who doubt are at least taking God seriously. This week, take God seriously, and see where God takes you.