

OT SCRIPTURE LESSON Judges 6.1-16, 7.1-8, 8.22-23

NT SCRIPTURE LESSON Luke 16:19–31

When we look to the New Testament reading from this morning, we find Christ preaching this famous parable. We see Christ telling the parable, which we know so well, of a man given identity apart from his suffering, we see past his poverty to see a man who has a name, Lazarus. Jesus tells this parable to a group of Lazaruses, masses of Lazaruses, in desperate need, rushing to Christ because in Him they have found something they need. In the parable we hear of a man who suffered outwardly, who was tortured by dogs on a rich man's doorstep, and was given God's consolation, given God's peace. We hear the word of comfort spoken to all those who are broken, the way Luke writes them in his beatitudes "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh". This is not the abstract beatitudes we find in Matthew's Gospel, for those who are poor in spirit and hunger for righteousness. It also is not a parable to invoke morality, the good news that Jesus is proclaiming is not, give a dollar to someone in need.

This is the Gospel, the good news, that the Lazaruses of the world can grab ahold of. To the outlaws and outcasts, you victims of society, you men and women without work, you broken down, you who have suffered injustice, you who have been beaten and abandoned, you lonely and miserable, you will be given not only the peace of God but the joy of God. Blessed are you Lazaruses of yesterday and today, for you have a God.

I love the story of Gideon, it is one of the many stories in the Bible that reminds us of the kinds of people who God calls. At times the people God chooses throughout the Biblical

narrative seem a little ill-conceived at best. Whether it is Jacob, who is the father of the Israelite people who stole his brother's blessing, who lied and cheated his way into being part of God's story. And God seems perfectly fine with this. Or Moses, the man who God called to deliver the Israelites, and guide them in the ways of the Lord, who by his own admission had a speech impediment. He was certainly no Charlton Heston. A list of the people God has called reads more like a trashy tabloid, or in some cases a rap sheet than a naming of saints. Why does God call these people? Can't He find anyone else, people with pasts that aren't so dark and tendencies that aren't so human?

Gideon is no different. He is hardly the hero we would expect and probably not the kind of hero the Israelites wanted. In Joshua, which accounts for the history right before the book of Judges, we are told about Joshua who brought the people into the land, conquering the Canaanites, and laying waste to the cities. In the reading from last week, we heard how the Israelites committed their community, their lives, and the lives of their children, to God. But now the text tells us, the Israelites have done what is evil in the eyes of the Lord. Now such a short time later we find that the people of Israel have been forced into living in caves in order to hide from the oppression of the Midianites. They are a nation of Gideons hiding in holes in order to survive. The text tells us that eventually the oppression becomes so severe that the people cried out to the Lord for help. The unnamed prophet that the Lord sends, reminds them of all God has done for them, and how the people have not been loyal to God in their worship of other gods. There is no mention of a deliverance from God, or someone else being sent, we have no idea how much time has passed between the prophet and the calling of Gideon. The next line we have after the prophet's condemnation of Israel is that we find Gideon in his hole, in his winepress.

The angel of the Lord addresses Gideon saying “The Lord is with you, mighty warrior”, when I read this, I cannot help but picture this as a joke. God must be laughing to think of Gideon, who is so afraid, as a mighty warrior. Gideon even admits it he says “My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family”. Gideon has no delusions of grandeur, he admits from the moment the angel appears to him, that he thinks they have got the wrong person. And who can blame him, the image the text paints for us is not a strong man, a man who can carry this people of his back. He is not the Hercules, the Siegfried that we all want. Gideon asks the angel if the Lord is with us, why all of these tragedies have befallen us. He asks where all of the wonders our ancestors told us about are, which so many of us often ask, where are the miracles? This is the same wonder which the Lazaruses who surrounded Christ were looking for, wondering, where is the miracle to end our torment, our oppression? Gideon wants God to do something miraculous and he does not think that he is the man to do it, and as the readers we cannot really disagree. Gideon seems to be a completely ordinary and unspectacular man, in search of a spectacular solution to the suffering he sees. He’s a nobody, he has nothing to distinguish him.

Why would God call someone like this? God could probably have found a hundred Gideons, maybe thousands, His people were a people of Gideons. A people hiding in caves in order to survive, a people who are laughably weak. Why would God choose Gideon? He seems to get that God is capable of these miraculous deeds, but despite the fact that this prophet has told them why God has allowed them to fall into the hands of the Midianites, Gideon just doesn’t get it. Likewise we can turn to the parable and ask why does God have mercy on Lazarus, and the crowd of Lazaruses around Christ? So often we answer this by saying that it is internal, its all about attitude. But we hear nothing of Lazaruses internal life, in fact he seems to be rather pushy

waiting on the doorstep of the rich man, and would not go away. No both figures leave us wondering why God has taken any interest in them.

Is there any better comparison for us as the Church? We are the people God has called rich and poor, highly placed and lowly. We are the people who God is calling to do His great work in the world. Gideon was called to redeem the people of Israel, we are called to participate in God's justice, to remove the chains of fear that bind people through the good news of Christ's redeeming work. We cry out to God to fix our broken world, we see our communities rocked by tragedies, injustices, and ask who God is going to send. And God says to each one of us, each of us Gideons, the church of Gideon, and says I am sending you. The Lord says to us, go and use this strength you have to free your people, free your people from what oppresses them, from what binds them, from what makes them flee into their holes. And yet every time we receive this call we respond in the same way, our immediate reaction is that we remember how unimportant we feel, as individuals and a community. It feels that God is somehow joking asking a people so undistinguished to do something so miraculous in the world. It is so easy to see the call we have been give and look up to God and say, how am I supposed to do this phenomenal thing?

When the Lord says to Gideon, "Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian's hand. Am I not sending you?" We know just how wrong he gets it. Gideon has the trumpets sounded, calls the largest army he can possibly muster. We pick the story back up when Gideon has brought every man he can possibly find, there are probably old men and younger boys, and this thirty-two thousand probably includes anyone who could possibly pick up a sword. This is the strength that Gideon brings with him, it is this group who are no closer to being mighty warriors than Gideon, and they are facing an impossible task, there is no way this miniscule force can compare to the Midianites. The joke isn't over, God called His "mighty

warrior” Gideon and told him to bring his strength and Gideon has brought this army. I imagine these people who bear the scars of living under oppression, they are weak, their spirits broken, and they are filled with hopelessness. Gideon still does not understand what his strength is. But the Lord is certainly about to show him. Gideon wanted a miracle and God told him to expect a miracle but Gideon brought back up, just in case.

Again I am reminded of the Church, how often we look to something other than God as our strength. When we finally respond to God’s call, we rustle up every weapon we can, we calculate, we crunch numbers, form committees, talk to all the right people, we raise every offensive and defensive strategy we have. And then God comes to us, like Gideon and says put down your weapons, your armor, and your pride, and God tells us that His grace is sufficient, that God alone is our strength. We are humbled by God, we are reminded that it is not our plans, or our good intentions that sustain the Church, but God alone. Despite all of our doubts, yours and mine, even when our powerlessness is grinding us into the ground, God has phenomenal, immeasurable plans for you, and throughout all of them, God will be with you.

This is the Gospel which God had to slowly teach Gideon, the Gospel which Christ proclaims to the crowd of Lazarus, the unemployed or underemployed Lazarus, Lazarus the crippled, Lazarus the begging child, Lazarus helpless parent, Lazarus the criminal, Lazarus the godless. That despite your weakness, despite your helplessness, God has incredible plans for you, not in the far off, but now. Plans which He is calling you to, plans which God will guide as our true strength.

God responds to Gideon in a very unusual way. God tells Gideon that the troops are too many, that they will take credit for the victory instead of giving credit to God. And suddenly Gideon starts to get it, he follows the Lord’s instructions and sends more than two-thirds of his

army away. Gideon gets it but we know he must be torn apart inside, wanting desperately to follow God, but also held back by his understanding of what is effective. The men that are left have even less of a chance against the overwhelming Midianite forces. Despite this God still isn't happy, God is still going to make Gideon understand what God is capable of. God is going to ask Gideon to let go of his notions, of his plans and ideas about what strength is and understand that God alone is his strength. So God tells Gideon, the 300 that drink water like a dog, those ones who look ridiculous, just those. So after they are split up again at the river, it finally seems like Gideon understands the magnitude of God's statement to him, "I will be with you". When Gideon has nothing left, when he is almost alone, he finally realizes that God is his strength, that God is with him, that God's word, His promise is stronger than any foe, any doubt, any or our individual weaknesses.

In Christ's parable, we could cynically wonder whether this is truly good news to all those who suffer, whether this is just telling them that their hope lies in another world, if they just wait for it. Surely this has been used countless times as a deception for those suffering injustice. But Christ does not leave their suffering, our weakness, Gideon's weakness, He heals it. Christ takes suffering so seriously, that whenever He encountered it, He must destroy it in the moment. God sees the weakness of Gideon to grasp what letting go of his notions, his safeguards, Christ sees the weakness of Lazarus and He must destroy it. God, who sees us all as the Lazaruses, the Gideons, who are in need of God's mercy and grace, endlessly needy, became for us the eternal Lazarus, the crucified Christ. And this is the magnitude of the Gospel that Christ is for us Lazaruses and Gideons, the eternal Lazarus who sends us out into the world with a mission, and His presence.

After the battle, we are certain that Gideon finally understands. After the battle is over the people say to Gideon “Rule over us, you and your son and your grandson also; for you have delivered us out of the hand of Midian”. It seems now that Gideon the unspectacular and confused, Gideon the joke, is the only one who understands. God wanted Gideon to understand that the only strength that matters is God, but the people already want to lift up Gideon as their strength, by making him their king. But Gideon understand now, so he responds by saying, “I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the Lord will rule over you”. The people look at the strength they understand, they look to someone they believe has brought them victory and freedom, they look at someone they believe is a hero. Instead Gideon gives them the true strength, Gideon tells them exactly what God told him, Gideon tells them that God will be with them that he will rule over them. Gideon tells them that God is author of their freedom, of their liberty to follow the mission God is sending them.

Why is Gideon called to this task? Why am I called to this task, why are we all called to the task of being the Church? God calls many who do not seem to be the kinds of people we would expect. Lazarus is no different than the hearers of the parable, no different than any of us. Gideon is no different than thousands of others, and like Gideon many of us appear to be unremarkable but it is not about who we appear to be but who we are called to be. Blessed are you Gideons and Lazaruses of the world, you have a God.