

The Story Series: Week 8
Judges A Few Good Men... and Women
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Last week as I was greeting everyone after worship, someone commented to me that they always feel “at peace” when they leave on Sunday. I was thrilled by that comment, but I also realized that “peace” has nothing to do with me. That peace comes over us on Sunday mornings because as we gather in this place we are in the presence of God, and among God’s people. God places his hand of blessing upon us, and a sense of peace and joy and interconnectedness comes over us. I would argue that it’s impossible to experience that sense of peace anywhere else but in the presence of God. So it is good that we have gathered together here today. God wishes to bless us with peace.

We’ve been making our way through *The Story* of the Old Testament. Just a quick re-cap: We went from Eden to Egypt, then we followed the Israelites out of Egypt to the Promised Land, with both Moses and Joshua leading them. Now that the Israelites have occupied the Promised Land for a while, they are looking for new leadership. As we make our way through the book of Judges today, some very unlikely candidates rise up and take leadership. Those leaders are called “judges.” That’s where we get the name. God taps these people on the shoulder and says, “You’re it!” They become very unlikely heroes of the Old Testament.

When I say the word “hero” what comes to mind? When I was a kid, all of the heroes in cartoons wore either capes or masks. “Faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, able to leap tall buildings in a single bound...” Who are we talking about? Then for some reason, it wasn’t enough to be a hero, you had to be a SUPER hero... Batman, Spiderman, Wonder Woman. These were all people who were able to do extraordinary things, win the day, despite how evil the villains might be.

Today I want to ask the question, “What does it mean to be a hero according to the Bible?” What character traits would one possess, what achievements would one accomplish to be considered a biblical hero?

Biblical heroes are people who get things done for God. We’ve already met some biblical heroes. Noah building the great Ark; Moses leading the Israelites to Mt. Sinai where they received the 10 Commandments; Joshua conquering the land of Canaan allowing God’s people to finally settle in the Promised Land.

As we begin the book of Judges, we discover that Joshua has died at the age of 110. There is no great leader now. We are also told that the people now living in the Promised Land have begun to disregard the ways of God. The 2nd chapter of Joshua says the Israelites abandoned the ways of the Lord and lived according to the ways of the unbelieving Canaanites. This angered the Lord, so God handed them over to their enemies. When Israel went into battle, the hand of the Lord was against them.

Now remember, as the Israelites took over the land of Canaan, God told them that he expected *them* to set the example for everyone else as to how to live faithful lives. The Israelites were to bring others to the Lord by the way they lived their lives. But the exact opposite occurred. The Israelites abandoned the ways of God and chose to live by the ways of the culture – a culture of Godlessness where everyone did what was right in their own eyes. God had placed a call on their lives to be living examples of his will and ways. But instead, God’s people chose their own way. This is starting to sound like a broken record, isn’t it?

The people missed their calling. It was a call to holiness. The Israelites were people of the covenant. They had a special relationship with God. God had chosen them to become a nation like no other nation. They were to be like a lighthouse, shining the divine love of God to all other nations. That’s what it means to be holy people of God. We have been set apart for God’s purposes. Through our words and deeds, we are to be beacons of God’s love and grace out into the world. We have been blessed by God to be a blessing to others.

But instead of desiring to love and serve others the same way God had loved and served them, the Israelites chose to live life for their own selfish gain. Throughout the book of Judges, we see the Israelite’s rebellious cycle repeat itself over and over again. The best way to picture it is to think of a face of a clock. (There is a picture at the end of the sermon to represent this.)

Straight up at 12 o’clock is “sin.” People did what was wrong in the eyes of the Lord. At three o’clock is “oppression.” The sinful ways of the people lead to oppression. God withdrew his favor and his hand when the people disregarded his ways which allowed other people to come in and oppress the Israelites which made them miserable. At 6 o’clock is “repentance.” In the midst of being miserable, the Israelites thought to themselves, “Wait a minute, we’ve got a God who loves us.” So they cry out to God and ask for forgiveness, and in God’s mercy and grace, God delivers them. God lifts up people called “Judges” to help bring the Israelites once again to freedom. So 9 o’clock would be “Deliverance.”

If only that could be the *end* of the story! A happy ending! But every time God delivers them, the Israelites quickly lapse into their sinful ways once again. They would forget their calling to be God’s representatives out in the world. So this cycle of sin, oppression, repentance and deliverance repeats itself over and over again.

We need to hear this ancient story more today than ever before. Joshua’s generation dies out, and the new generation begins to worship other gods. Christianity is always one generation away from dying out. If we do not tell the stories of the faith, if we do not live by the ways of God, then Christianity runs the risk of dying out in the next generation. We already see this happening in America today. The parents of my generation (Generation X as we are sometimes called) our parents started falling away from the church in mass numbers during the 70’s and early 80’s, so my generation doesn’t have the Christian background of past generations.

They did not attend church. They don't know the stories of the faith. They don't have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. And just look how the values and priorities have begun to radically change in the United States. Christianity is always one generation away from dying out. We, who have been named and claimed by God, must pass on the faith to the next generation.

We must know the stories and tell them often. We must share our joy of being a forgiven child of God. We must reveal the will and ways of God by the way we live our lives. We must not fail in our calling to be God's faithful people.

In the book of Judges, God lifts up 12 judges – leaders, deliverers – to help the people carry on the faith. The stories of these judges are some of the greatest in the Bible. Judges 4 & 5 tells the story of Deborah, a woman full of wisdom who settles significant disputes by giving them Godly counsel. People throughout the whole land would stream to Deborah to help them untangle their lives. She was a woman of wisdom, of courage, of faith and fearless determination that the Lord used to provide Israel with 40 years of peace. For those Christians who believe that the Bible does not hold a high regard of women in the church, I tell them to read the story of Deborah. Next week we will be talking about Ruth, another woman who God uses to fulfill his Grand Vision for the world.

In Judges 6-8, we meet a judge named Gideon. An angel of the Lord appears to Gideon and says, "The Lord is with you." And Gideon says, "Pardon me? If the Lord is with us, then why is all of this bad stuff happening to us?" Have you ever asked that question? I sure have.

But the angel of the Lord tells Gideon, "Go with the strength you have and rescue Israel from the oppressive Midianites. I am sending you!" Sounds very much like what God tells Moses through the burning bush, doesn't it?

"Go in the strength you have!" the angel tells Gideon. In other words, "Go in faith and do what needs to be done, knowing that it is God's will, and knowing that God Almighty goes with you!" Is that not the exact same call the Lord gives to each and every one of us in this room? "Be strong and courageous and go out in faith and do what the Lord has commanded you to do. And know that the Lord goes with you." God's mission, God's vision for the world has been the same from the very beginning: to overcome the rebellious, sinful ways of the world by God's faithful people living lives of love and service.

Now we might have the same response as Gideon had to that call: "Pardon me? You talking to me, Lord? You want *me* to do *what*?" Once when Jesus asked his disciples to do something that was out of their comfort zone, they pleaded with Jesus: "Lord, give us more faith!" And Jesus told them pretty much the same thing the angel told Gideon. "Go with the strength and in the faith you have." Jesus says, "If you had faith even as small as the mustard seed – the smallest of all seeds – you could move mountains!" Jesus scolds his disciples and says that they haven't yet used the faith they have been given, so why are they asking for more?

All too often we think to ourselves... "If I just keep coming to church then one day I'm gonna get it. I will have so much faith that I am going to make a huge difference!" Meanwhile, God is saying to us, "Why don't you watch a little less TV and go across the street and help your neighbor in need? You have enough faith to do that, don't you? Or why don't you realize that you have more than enough stuff and start giving your riches to the kingdom so that everyone would have enough?" That would be a good way to start exercising our faith. Faith is a lot like muscles in our body. The more we use our muscles, the more we have. The more we exercise our faith, the more our faith develops. "Go with the strength and faith you have," God tells us.

The third judge I want to mention is Samson whose story begins in Chapter 13 of the book of Judges. He's probably the best known judge in the Bible. He was a man of great strength who lost his power when his wife, Delilah, gave him a haircut. Why did God judge him for getting a haircut? Samson had made a covenantal vow with God to be a Nazarene, so his identity with God was made manifest by never getting his hair cut. His long hair was his mark of being a follower of the one, true God. Well, one day Samson shared this little secret with his wife Delilah (who was a Philistine, the enemy of God). She saw it as an opportunity to mock Israel's God and so one night as Samson fell asleep, she had someone shave his head making Samson lose all of his power and his right standing with the Lord.

Samson's story, I believe, can be summed up in the words of St. Paul in the 12th chapter of 2 Corinthians. He writes, "My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness." Samson ultimately ends up defeating more than 3,000 Philistines by collapsing two pillars on top of them in one of their pagan Philistine temples.

Often times we think it is all about us. The problem with that is that's all we've got – us! But when we realize that is all about God, then we tap into this reservoir of God's power and wisdom and love. As we connect ourselves to God, God ends up working miracles through us. We become vessels by which God's Grand Vision for the world begins to fall into place.

So that's the Israelites' story. Let me ask this: What about our story? When future generations look back on our story, how do you think they would rate our walk with the Lord? We are people who have been blessed with faith. Through Word and Sacrament, we have experienced first-hand the true presence of God. God continues to work miracles in our midst. We have the same choice as the Israelites: to serve the one, true God, or to chase after other gods; to claim our call to live holy lives, or to follow the ways of the culture that surrounds us.

So how are we doing being the people of God? Let me read something that I shared in Sunday School this morning:

Sadly, the Church in America has become "Canaanized" in much the same way that Israel did during the days of the Judges. The lives of American Christians bear far more resemblance to their unbelieving neighbors than they do to the transformed life expected by the New Testament writers. Every day the church is becoming more like the world it allegedly seeks to change. The divorce rate in the church is equal or above the

national average. We give less than 2% of our income to the work of the church. (Did you know that if every American Christian would tithe their income we would have over \$140 billion dollars each year to help the poor and spread the gospel?) Couples think nothing of living together before marriage; premarital sex has become a given. Christians spend 7 times more hours each week watching TV than in Bible reading, worship and prayer.

I feel it in the room. This is difficult to hear. But perhaps we need to hear it. Our track record isn't much better than the Israelites. Instead of us transforming the world, the world seems to be changing us. In that cycle we looked at earlier, it seems as though believers today are stuck in the sin/oppression part of the cycle. I'd like to suggest that it's time for us as believers to move towards the repentance/deliverance portion. We need to turn back to God and begin living again by his ways. We need to set the example for the rest of the world.

So what does it mean to be "all in" for God? I'm not a poker player, but I came across one of those poker shows on TV this past week and I realized something. Faith is a lot like poker. Now am not promoting gambling, I just want to leave you with an image (see 5 playing cards picture at the end of this sermon).

In poker, your hand is dealt. You have five cards. The first card you look at is "**God's Word.**" Write that on the first card. God's Word. That's what we've been given. The book of Isaiah tells us, "The grass withers and the flowers fade, but the Word of God lasts forever." God has spoken into our lives words of wisdom, forgiveness, and hope. God has revealed his thoughts to us, his plans, his desires. We have God's Word, and we should never take that for granted.

The second card we've been dealt says, "**God's Presence.**" God is not way up in the heavens somewhere. God is not at a distance but rather close at hand. God is with us. God is here and he is moving among us right now. In Matthew 28, Jesus says, "I am with you wherever you go; with you until the very end." God is with us always. We are never alone.

The third card says, "**Adoption.**" God has claimed each and every one of us as one of his very own children. We have an inheritance. We are a child of God. We are part of God's family. That's the card we've been dealt.

The fourth card is "**Called.**" We have a clear purpose as children of God. We have been called into relationship with God; called to be witness to God's mercy and love; called to love and serve the Lord. It's our purpose. We are called.

The fifth card is "**Eternity.**" In John 14, Jesus tells us that he is going ahead of us to prepare a special place for us, so that where he is, we can be also – for all eternity.

That's the five cards we have been dealt: God's Word, God's Presence, Adoption, Called, and Eternity.

Now there are other cards in the deck that we could have been dealt. One card in the deck reads “15 minutes of Fame.” I don’t think you really want to be dealt that card. Another card says, “You can retire in luxury.” Now that sounds like a card worth keeping, but what card would you end up trading in? When we really think about it, wouldn’t we rather retire in heaven than in luxury? So I think I’ll hold on to my “Eternity” card.

So here’s the deal. Here’s the hand that you are holding. It’s the cards you have been dealt by God. As baptized people of God, we all hold the same hand. So the question becomes, when we have been dealt a hand like this, will we choose to keep it, or will we choose to trade in some cards for other cards, in hopes that we might end up with a better hand? That’s what the Israelites did.

God has dealt us an amazing hand. And when someone is dealt an amazing hand in poker, the player usually says that “I’m all in,” meaning that the player usually slides all of his chips to the center of the table as if to say that I give everything I have for this one hand. I’m all in!

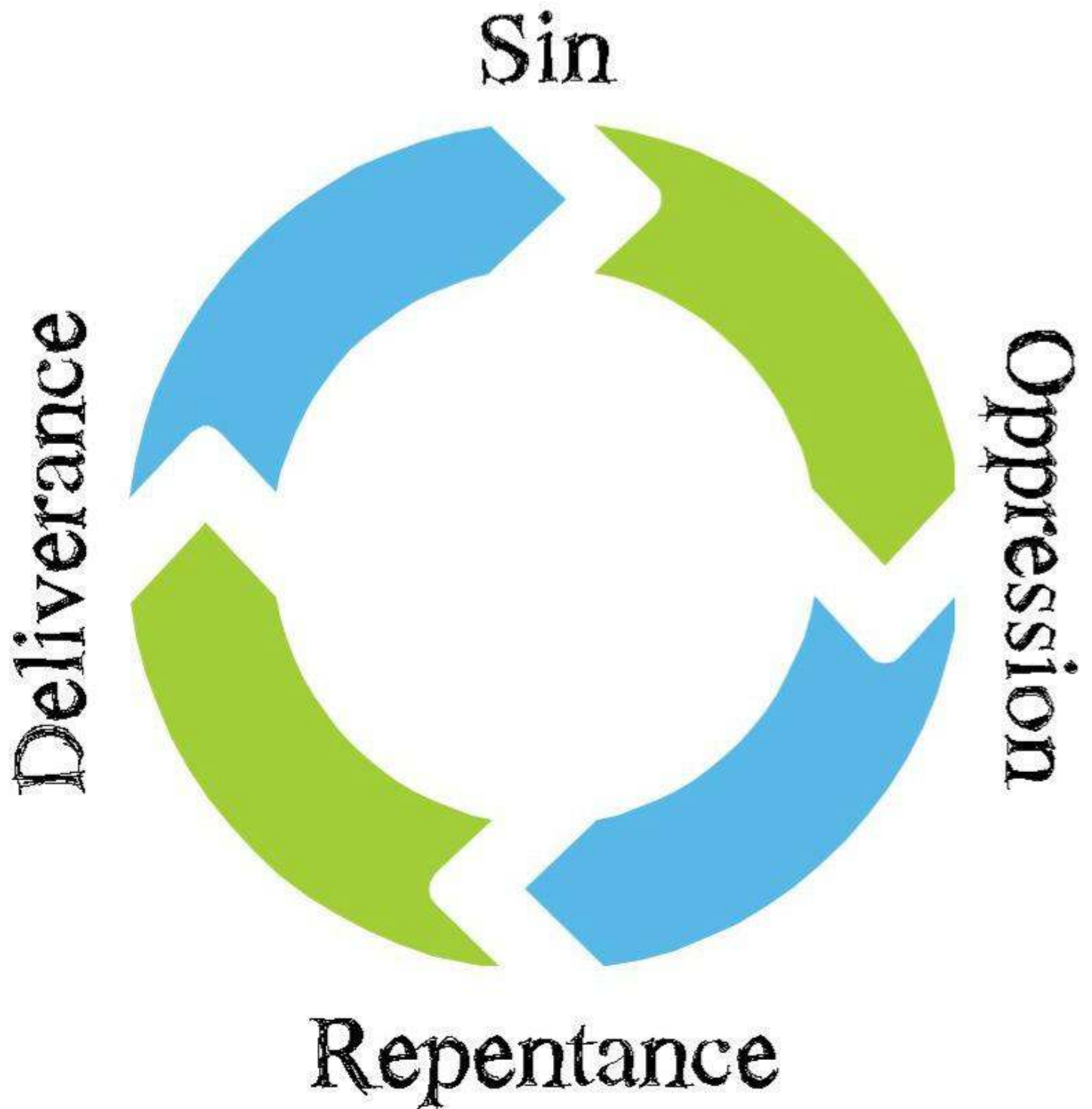
“I’m all in” in my desire to worship so that I can focus on God’s Word. “I’m all in” in telling others about what Almighty God has done in my life. “I’m all in” in telling others this story of God that I am relearning myself as we make our way through this Old Testament series. “I’m all in” in my desire to share my riches and talents for the building up of Christ’s church.

We risk everything – every chip we’ve got – for the glory of God! The call to holiness means that we are “all in.” We must offer our whole lives for the sake of claiming this world for Christ. This world is in desperate need of some unlikely heroes – people like you and me – to go “all in” for God. As the people of God, we need to boldly rise up and respond to God’s call to be God’s holy people. We need to prayerfully discern where we are holding back, and then confess our lack of faith, so that God can deliver us, making us effective witnesses once again to his awesome power and love.

Through our lives of faith and service, may we be known as Christians who are “all in.”

By the grace of God, Amen.

THE BOOK OF JUDGES



5 Playing Cards Of Faith

God's
Word

God's
Presence

Adoption

Called

Eternity