

**“ ... *What We Have Left Undone* ”**

In the name of him who loved us and gave himself for us, dear friends in Christ: You probably noticed that this evening’s reading from the Holy Scriptures is one of those which pastors secretly take great delight in calling upon unsuspecting persons to read aloud in front of a group because it’s chocked full of the baffling names of unfamiliar places and tribes for the hapless reader to stumble over. *Some* pastors get their kicks this way, that is; but as you all know, *I* would never do such a thing ...

Anyway, as was noted, it’s from the book of Judges, which has got to be one of the most depressing, and for that reason one of the most neglected, books of the Bible. This is a pity, because despite the sad history of Israel’s downward spiral into sin and idolatry that the book records, there is also revealed in it much about the character of God. We see especially his patience, his forbearance, his forgiveness, and his infinite love for his people who seem intent on doing everything imaginable to provoke him to anger. And, as we shall see in this series of evening devotions, the book of Judges also reveals to us several wonderful portraits of Christ our Savior, who is the sum and substance of all the sacred Scriptures.

The reading before us is the introduction to Judges, which provides an overview of the whole book. It describes repeated cycles of brief periods in which the Lord’s people are relatively faithful, followed by their turning away into various forms of apostasy, in response to which the Lord raises up enemies to afflict his people. Eventually, on account of their misery, they get around to crying out to the Lord for deliverance, and then he sends them a savior in the person of one of the judges, who leads God’s people to victory and renewed faithfulness to the Lord. And then the whole thing happens all over again; with one important difference: though the pattern repeats, we see with each cycle a substantial step down. The peaks of faithfulness are never as high as the ones that came before, and the valleys of sin are increasingly darker and deeper. If you’re not encouraged by the spiritual condition of God’s people at the beginning of the book of Judges, just wait until we get to the end: it only gets worse.

But this begs the question “Why?” What is the problem with the Lord’s people that causes them inexorably to turn from him and to pursue other gods and lives of reckless abandon? Mind you, we aren’t talking about spiritually blind Gentiles who do not know the Lord and haven’t received his mercy. We’re talking about God’s chosen people: the ones he called out and made his own nation, the ones he delivered from bondage in Egypt and sustained in the wilderness, the ones to whom he gave his holy Word, and to whom he promised a delightful inheritance. They know the Lord’s mercy and love. They know his goodness. They’ve experienced them time and time again. So what is it that causes them consistently to turn away from his grace and the special relationship they have with the one true God to follow after other so-called gods who never did a thing for them—and never can?

The reading we heard answers this question; but to properly understand, it will be helpful for us to locate the period of the Judges in biblical history. It’s that three or four hundred year span that begins immediately after the initial conquest of the Promised Land and ends with the establishment of the first Israelite monarchy. Remember that after being delivered from bondage in Egypt, the nation of Israel spent forty years in the wilderness under the leadership of Moses. The reason they spent those forty years in the desert was because of the Lord’s judgment against them. Here had delivered them with mighty signs and powerful miracles from the iron grip of the Pharaoh who had enslaved them. And in so doing the Lord showed his people how he could and that he would fight for them. But then, when he led them up to the

edge of the Promised Land and said, "Go in and take possession of it. I'm giving it to you", they chickened out. They said, "Oh no! This land is full of big, strong, warlike Canaanites! We'll never be able to beat them." Moses and a few others said, "What do you mean? The Lord is on our side. We can't lose." But the vast majority drowned their voices with their protests of fear and faithlessness. They refused to budge. And the Lord said, "Fine. Have it your way. Since you refuse to believe that I'll give you the land, *you* can't have it. I'll let this unbelieving generation die in the desert, and I'll give the land to your children."

Forty years later that day came. Israel, now under the leadership of Joshua, crossed the flood swollen Jordan River in what was a repeat of the miraculous Red Sea crossing; the Lord holding back the raging river and thus allowing his people to cross into Canaan on dry land. And almost immediately they met their first major challenge: the fortified City of Jericho. In those days it would take many months, maybe years, for a trained army to conduct a successful siege against a city like that. But the Israelites knew nothing of such things. They had few weapons between them and no knowledge whatsoever of the art of war.

No doubt you've heard that song about how "Joshua fi't the battle of Jericho"; but that's not the way it happened. If it had been up to Joshua and his advisors, they would never have taken the city. It was the Lord who fought the battle of Jericho. *He* made the walls come a-tumblin' down. And in the battles that followed, the Israelites learned a couple of important lessons. They discovered that whenever they went into battle against the Canaanites relying on their own strength and tactics, they lost – even when they heavily outnumbered their foes; but when they fought their battles trusting in the Lord and counting on him to give them the victory, they always won regardless of the strength of the forces arrayed against them. The latter lesson was proven decisively in what was by far the greatest battle of the conquest. What happened was that the various city states of the Canaanites realized that because they were each looking out for themselves, the Israelites were taking them on piecemeal, one city at a time. The way things were going, it would only be a matter of time before they captured all of their cities. So they decided to join their forces together into one mighty army that vastly outnumbered the comparatively puny and ill-equipped army of Israel. On the morning of the battle, the end result seemed to be a foregone conclusion. But once again the Lord fought for Israel, and the soldiers of the enemy fell in droves before the swords and spears of Israel. The battle raged all day – it was a terrible slaughter; but as it began to get late, Joshua was concerned that his small army simply didn't have enough time to destroy the remaining enemy forces, which were still quite numerous. He didn't want them to sneak away under cover of darkness and live to fight another day. So he prayed to the Lord who caused the sun to stand still in the sky for an extra 24 hours. This gave the Israelites the light they needed to finish the job. They killed the entire enemy army, which effectively broke the back of organized Canaanite resistance to the Israelite occupation.

With major joint combat operations thus completed, each of the Israelite tribes was then assigned its own territory within the Promised Land. They were to move in and settle their portion of the land; and they were to complete the conquest by killing or driving out every last one of the Canaanites who lived there. The Lord had given his people an extermination order regarding the Canaanites, which today is the cause of much confusion among people who don't understand how the Lord who is so full of grace and mercy could ever command such a terrible thing. It really isn't that hard to understand. The Lord is, after all, the judge. And he had passed judgment on the Canaanites for their hundreds of years' worth of sin and idolatry. If he had sent plagues that destroyed them like he did to the Egyptians, or if he had rained fire from heaven on them like he did to Sodom and Gomorrah, no one would think twice about it. But because he asked Israel to carry out his judgment, it suddenly becomes mean and inhuman. Why? It's the same thing. The Canaanites end up just as dead or dispossessed. The only

difference is that by asking Israel to carry out his judgment it becomes a test of their faithfulness. Will they do what the Lord asked of them or not?

And it needs to be said that the Lord had very good reasons for wanting the Canaanites either eliminated or driven out: He didn't want his people to learn their idolatry and evil ways. He knew that if they were allowed to remain in the land, it would only be a matter of time before they started intermarrying with his people, and once that happens it becomes impossible to keep the faith pure. Compromise is inevitable. You can almost imagine a conversation: "Honey, you promised: last year we celebrated Passover with your family, which was really boring by the way; so this year we get to celebrate the spring fertility festival with my family by participating in a wild drunken orgy and sacrificing our youngest child to Baal. It's only fair." And what do the children of such relationships who manage to survive learn? That one religion is as good as another. And since Canaanite religion was far more sensual and lax in its moral code, which do you think they'd choose?

Well, we heard what happened. Each of the tribes did indeed take possession of their own piece of the Promised Land, and for a while they continued to press forward with the campaign to mop up or remove the remaining Canaanites. But in every case they failed to finish what they started. In some places it was because the Canaanites dug in their heels and fought harder than expected to stay. In other places the Canaanites had better weapons like chariots of iron. But it's important to recognize that these were only excuses. We've already seen that no one could stop Israelites when they placed their trust in the Lord. If they couldn't defeat the remaining Canaanites, it had to be either because the Israelites were trusting in their own strength to do the job or because they simply didn't think it was that important to do it. I suspect it was some of both. They got overconfident in their abilities, and when they found that the going was harder than they expected, they gave up. They decided that they'd done enough already. Besides, they were tired of all that fighting. And no doubt some of them justified themselves by thinking they were being merciful by letting the Canaanites remain. And then we heard of a few tribes who thought they had a better idea than the Lord. Why kill or drive out the Canaanites when you could make them slaves? Why not use them to make our lives easier? Funny thing about slaves, though, is that they don't like being slaves; and if ever they get the upper hand, watch out. They're more than happy to bite the hand that they feed with all their work if and when they get the chance.

This, then, is what caused Israel's steady decline: they failed to complete the conquest. They left the job only part of the way done and let some of the Canaanites dwell within their land. And then everything the Lord told them that he wanted to keep them from happened. They made compromises. They were lured into idolatry. They began adopting the pagan practices of their neighbors. They intermarried with them. In short, they became corrupted. And once something is corrupt, it never gets better. It only gets worse over time. And that's what we see throughout the period of the Judges: God's people going steadily from bad to worse – all because they failed to complete the conquest they started. The irony of it is that the Lord then used the various nations of Canaanites that were supposed to have been destroyed to afflict his people and drive them back to himself. The very nations that were supposed to be conquered grew in strength and became the conquerors and oppressors of God's people – the Lord's instruments of judgment to bring his people back to faith and trust in him who alone can save.

Well ... maybe you're wondering at this point what any of this has to do with you and me. The answer is a great deal; but first let's emphatically reject an improper application that has sometimes been made. This text is not the Christian's mandate to wage holy war and destroy our unbelieving neighbors or the adherents of other religions. Despite what some people think, the USA is not the Promised Land, nor are we to attempt to establish with politics, force, or both

some kind of earthly theocracy. Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world.” Let that much be clear; and don’t let anyone try to convince you otherwise.

That being said, each one of us *is* a part of God’s Kingdom, which is in the world; but it’s not of it. We’ve been called out by the Lord to be his own. And just as Israel crossed through the Jordan to receive its inheritance, so we too passed through the water of Holy Baptism to enter this kingdom. Passing through that flood, we were united with Christ in his passion, death, and resurrection, and we were made heirs of his eternal Promised Land. And we too have been given an extermination order: not to kill the Canaanites out there; but to destroy completely the Canaanites in here. We are to hunt down and kill without mercy the sinful self – the old nature within that would lead us into sin and the worship of anything other than the one true God.

When we rely on the Lord to fight for us, then amazing victories happen: great strongholds of sin fall – the walls and towers come tumbling down at the Word of the Lord; but when we rely on our own weak flesh to defeat the power of what seem to be even the smallest sins in our lives, they always get the upper hand. They prove to be intractable. But here’s the real problem: we always leave the job unfinished. Like the Israelites, we get tired of the fighting the flesh. We think to ourselves, “That’s good enough.” Or we find that some sins are hard to eradicate, so we settle down and make compromises. We make our peace with them. I won’t press you too hard to leave, if you don’t bother me too much. We may even imagine that we can make the sin serve us somehow. After all, it provides the pleasure I seek and so makes my life better – so why destroy it; I can keep it around and remain its master. I can take control of it whenever I like. Right. A foolish thought indeed; but who here hasn’t had it? The point is that all the sins we allow to remain drive us away from the Lord and come back to oppress us in the end.

In the confession of sin in Divine Service I, one of the things we say is: “we have sinned in thought word and deed, by what we have done and *what we have left undone*.” Normally, when we say this, we think of what are called “sins of omission”; that is, the good things we should have done, but didn’t. Let me suggest that the biggest thing we always leave undone is the act of repentance – of confessing our sins to the Lord with contrite hearts and receiving his mighty word of forgiveness, which word not only removes the guilt but also empowers us to defeat temptation in the future. We always exempt something – we always leave the job only part of the way done. This is like taking antibiotics to kill 90% of an infection, or having chemotherapy to kill 90% of the cancer cells, or hiring an exterminator to kill 90% of the cockroaches. What happens? The remaining 10% comes back in no time to full force of numbers, even more resistant to treatment and determined to stay and make your life miserable—or, since we’re talking about sin, to kill your life of faith outright.

Today we begin another Lenten season together. It is above all a time of repentance – a time of deep introspection to hunt down the sins in our hearts and minds that need to be driven out and destroyed. We can’t fight this war on our own. Only the Lord Jesus, who defeated sin and death for us, can equip us with his Word and Holy Spirit to continue to fight the battles that lie ahead. To be fair, in this life it will always be a fight; but we need to keep pressing forward, for the moment we stop attacking the old nature by repenting of sin, it reforms, regroupes, and comes back even stronger than before. Let us resolve, then, to not let up and let Jesus Christ be our great judge who never dies, and our deliverer who will rescue us from all the sin within, and in the end, give us the final victory. In his holy name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***