

300

In the name of him who calls us to battle and gives us the victory, dear friends in Christ: This evening's reading begins with that sad refrain that's all too familiar to us now: "Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord." And this time the Lord turns up the high heat on his people in order to encourage them to repent and return to him. He sends vast swarms of Midianites. These were a loose conglomeration of warlike, semi-nomadic tribes from the east that would invade the Land of Israel each spring about the time of the barley harvest. Then they'd stay for the wheat harvest that comes a month or so later, and they'd continue to stick around throughout the summer months and the various fruit harvests of apricots, olives, almonds, figs, and finally grapes. All the while they'd be helping themselves to these crops that were so painstakingly cultivated by the Israelites as if for them. Meanwhile they allow their vast herds of camels and other livestock to graze on Israel's fertile pastures and anything else that was green. And then in the early fall, having stripped Israel bare like a plague of locusts, they'd return to their own lands in the east, only to return the next year and do it all over again.

And there was nothing the Israelites could do about it. The Midianite hordes so greatly outnumbered the men of Israel all they could do is retreat into the mountains with their families when the enemy came. There they lived in caves or they set up crude shelters for themselves in the rocky ravines. And from defensive strongholds they built atop the hills, they watched helplessly as their land was ravaged, their crops consumed, and all their hard work wasted feeding the enemy. This happened seven years in a row. The people of Israel were wasting away. Then, finally, as if it was the last and least desirable thing to do, the people cried out to the Lord for help.

And as always, the Lord responded; but this time first by sending an unnamed prophet to remind them of the cause of their suffering. This wasn't just rotten luck. Through the prophet the Lord said, "Remember me? I'm the Lord who saved you from Egypt with mighty miracles. I gave you this good land. There is no God but me. I'm the only one who can do *anything* for you. And yet here you are worshipping the gods of the Amorites and other Canaanites – that aren't gods at all, and it's something I've told you not to do. Do you seriously expect me to prosper you when to take the honor that is due to me alone and give to a bunch of dumb idols? No. I won't do it. That is why you're suffering under the hand of Midian." And please understand, it's not that the Lord gets his feelings hurt when his people worship other gods; it's rather that he knows it's for their own benefit that his people need to look *to him* every good. Idols can't deliver. They can't save. Only he can; only he can provide all that is needed for this life and the next. And that's why he wants his people to look to him alone as God and Lord.

Well, it seems that in response to this rebuke, at least some of the people repented. We're not told how widespread this repentance was, because we know that a lot of idolatry continued going on; but there must have been some who returned to the Lord. And for *their* sakes, the Lord sent his special Angel to speak to Gideon – who, as we shall see, is yet another very unlikely deliverer for God's people.

When we meet him he's threshing grain in a winepress. And to fully grasp why this is so unusual, you have to know that threshing floors for grain were normally situated on hilltops where there was a flat, fairly smooth stone surface created by all the softer earth having been eroded away. These threshing floors might cover several acres of ground, so that the grain heads could be spread out, beaten or rolled under pressure to crack off the husks, and then thoroughly winnowed to separate the grain from the chaff. Wine presses, by contrast, were

much smaller: about the size of a bathtub. And they'd be down low in valleys under shady trees, near a stream. But here's the deal: with all the Midianites around, if you tried threshing grain out in the open where you usually did it, they'd see and come take everything. So what Gideon has probably done is snuck out at night, harvested as much grain as he could carry in his arms – and that most likely prematurely, otherwise it would be gone already – and now he's doing the best he can to thresh his very small amount of grain where (he hopes) the enemy won't see him. The point is that it's an act of desperation. It shows the weakness of God's people that they have to resort to this sort of thing just to keep from starving.

And that's why it's such delightful irony that the Angel of the Lord hails Gideon as a mighty warrior. This is the last sort of thing you expect a mighty warrior to be doing. Nor is Gideon comfortable with the title. He knows he's no fighter. He says as much. He describes himself as the weakest member of the smallest clan of the most insignificant tribe of Israel. It's like being the runt of the litter three times over. And on top of it, we find that he's not a very faithful man. The Angel says, "The Lord is with you!" And he answers, "Oh yeah? If the Lord is with us, then how come we're suffering like we are?" The truth is, he should know. His own father was one of the biggest promoters of idol worship around. He'd built for himself and the town in which he lived a shrine and altar to Baal, the chief god of the Canaanites, as well as a sacred Asherah pole and grove. Asherah was Baal's goddess consort (one of many). And it seems that he (Gideon's father) led the people in sacrificing to Baal, and presumably also in the other highly charged immoral sexual activities that went on at such places. So Gideon ought to have known exactly why the Lord was allowing the Midianites to run roughshod over Israel.

But the other reason I say that Gideon was not a very faithful man was because of his hesitancy to do what the Lord commanded him and his constant need for reassurance. We didn't read the whole account of his story – I skipped big portions of it. But having been called by the Lord through his Angel, Gideon demands a miraculous sign to prove that the Lord is indeed with him – as if having an angel talk to him isn't enough. The Angel gives him such a sign, and then tells him that his first mission is to tear down his father's altar to Baal. Even with the sign, Gideon is afraid to do it; so instead of stepping out boldly and doing what was asked knowing that he had the Lord's approval and protection, he sneaks out at night and does it under cover of darkness. The next day it's ultimately discovered that he was responsible. The townsfolk want to kill him. Oddly enough, though his father doesn't seem to approve of what his son has done, he steps in and saves Gideon. He says, "Look, it's Baal's altar that he destroyed. If Baal thinks it's a problem, if he's upset about it, then let Baal deal with him." That, by the way, is what Jerub-Baal means. You could translate it: "Let Baal deal with him" or "Let Baal get even with him". It becomes Gideon's nickname.

Well, as you know, Baal does not get even with him. How could he? There's nobody home. But this story about how Gideon went head to head against a god – a god a lot of people believe in – gets around. So he becomes something of a celebrity – a champion for the cause of the Lord. People are talking about him. And this is necessary for the next step, because now the Lord tells him to call out the men of the northern tribes in order to go war against the Midianites. And you can't have someone no one's ever heard of issuing a call like that. It has to be someone with a reputation.

Once again, though, Gideon is not so sure of himself. Again he demands a sign to prove that the Lord is going to be with him and deliver the enemy into his hands. What follows is the famous lamb's fleece episode. Gideon tells the Lord, "Okay, tonight I'll lay out a fleece. In the morning I want it soaked with dew but the ground all around it as dry as a bone." It happens that just way. Unfortunately, he's still not sure. His mind is still full of doubt in God's promises. He imagines there might be another explanation for the fleece being wet when everything else is dry. So he asks for yet another sign. "This time I want the fleece dry and the

ground soaked.” Sure enough, that’s what happens. So, finally, Gideon is convinced. And so emboldened, he issues the call to assemble the men of Israel for war.

We heard what happened: 32,000 showed up to confront what we know were at least 200,000 Midianites. Those aren’t very good odds. That’s being outnumbered by over six to one. You’d expect the Lord to say, “We need more men”; but instead he says, “We have too many”. The Lord is concerned that with odds like that, the men of Israel still might think they won the battle with their own strength. So he has Gideon send away everyone who’s afraid. 22,000 faithless but honest men leave. That leaves 10,000; and the Lord says, “Still too many” – even though the odds are now 20 to 1. Then comes the final winnowing. At the stream, those who drink by using their hands to lap up water to their mouths are separated from those who hunker down and stick their lips into the stream to drink. Much has been made of this by commentators. They usually say the men who used their hands wanted to remain more alert. By drinking they way they did they could keep an eye out for the enemy. I think that’s nonsense. You could just as well argue that they wanted to keep looking around because they were more afraid of the enemy than those who took their eyes off their surroundings for the few seconds it took to get a drink. But here’s the way I look at it: having a back that acts up sometimes, I think a more likely explanation for them drinking the way they did has to do with their age and lack of flexibility. It’s the older, stiffer guys who don’t bend so well – the guys less able to fight – that the Lord picks to win this battle. And when he’s done choosing, there are only 300 left. That makes the odds something like 666 to one; and the Lord says, “Perfect. That’s just the right number.” He tells Gideon to order the other 9700 to go.

And you need to picture Gideon doing the chicken thing here. You know: “Bu-bu-bu-bu but ...” He’s not sure about this at all. It seems like the formula for disaster for the 300 – and more importantly, for himself. So once again the Lord gives him a sign as a confidence builder. He directs Gideon to take his armor bearer and sneak down to the enemy camp at night to listen to what they’re saying. He does this. Just as he arrives, he overhears a conversation between two of the enemy soldiers. The first is relating a dream he had. In the dream he saw a loaf of barley bread – and this is one of those little round pita loaves, about the size of a pancake. It comes rolling down the hill and knocks over one of the Midianite tents. And the dream is really quite absurd. This is no nylon pup tent that gets flattened. The Midianite tents were large, heavy things made of animal hides. They were designed to hold up against the brutal winds of the desert. To think of such a sturdy tent being knocked down by an attack pancake no matter how ferocious it might have been is laughable. But the guy hearing the dream isn’t laughing. He takes it as a bad omen. “This can only be the sword of Gideon, the Israelite. We’re doomed. God has given all of us into his hands.”

This tells Gideon several things. First, it’s a prophecy meant for Gideon to hear that indeed the Lord is going to give him the victory. That’s comforting. Second, it tells Gideon that there is among the Midianites a deep-seated anxiety. The Lord has been at work planting terror in their hearts. It seems that the Lord has made Gideon’s name known and feared even among the enemy. It’s like he’s larger than life; some sort of boogiemán. And you have to assume that it’s not just these two guys Gideon hears who are talking about it. The same dream and interpretation is being repeated all over the camp. And this tells Gideon how to win the day. The enemy is already on pins and needles of fear. All it will take to spread panic through their camp is a sudden, unexpected, and well-timed “Boo!”

And that’s more or less what he does. Dividing his force into three companies, they take up position at several places near the enemy camp. At Gideon’s command, the 300 break earthenware jars to mimic the rattling sound of armor, they blow ram’s horn trumpets – which were usually assigned one to a company, thus making his force seem much larger than it is. They light their torches, and they shout “A sword for the Lord and for Gideon!” the two names

the enemy fears the most. The irony is that Gideon's men have no swords in their hands. And if they're carrying swords, they never use them. No matter, the result is pandemonium. The Midianites begin running every which way. And in their confusion, as various companies collide in the darkness, they imagine that it's their Israelite enemy. They think they're surrounded. And they begin slaughtering each other. This goes on for hours. Gideon, seeing the mayhem and the Midianites in chaos and flight, sends word to the men of Ephraim to seize the fords of the Jordan. They are to cut down the panic-stricken survivors of the self-imposed Midianite blood bath. When it's over, 135,000 of the enemy lie dead on the field; and two of their main generals have been captured and executed. The Midianite plague on Israel is over. God's people are free. And there's no question about it: the salvation of Israel was won by the Lord.

There's actually quite a bit more to Gideon's story that we won't get into. I commend that reading to you. What I would like to do is draw out some of the Christology of this account, which is a bit different than what we've seen with the other judges to date. The judges we've considered thus far were Christ figures in their own right. That is, something about them foreshadowed the mission and ministry of Jesus. And I suppose you could say that since Gideon delivered Israel from their enemies, he's a savior of sorts – and that's Christological.

But Gideon's overall lack of confidence and his constant need for reassurance and for signs aren't very Christ-like. One thing that Jesus always demonstrated was complete trust in the Word and promises of God. Gideon's not that way at all. And for that reason, it's better that we see ourselves in him rather than Jesus. Gideon is a lot more like us.

Consider: in the battle into which the Lord calls us, we are the weak ones. We are compromised by sin, fearful, and unable to free ourselves from the power of sin, death, and the devil. And yet, the Lord chooses us. He calls us by name, appoints us his captains, and makes us the promise of victory. And he knows that we need constant reassurance – signs to bolster our faith. And so he gives them to us. That's what his Sacraments are: Baptism, the Lord's Supper, even Confession and Absolution. And for that reason, I think it's significant that Gideon is called where he is in a winepress threshing grain – a place where the source of bread and wine have come together, so to speak. I also think it's significant that the other 300 are chosen at the stream, by the water – just as we were chosen by the Lord in Baptism.

But where this all comes together is in the battle itself which is won not by numbers or by might or by the sword, but literally by the Word. That's the sword of the Lord with which we have been armed: The Word of God. It's the one weapon with which we can defeat all the wicked schemes of the Evil One. It's what the enemy fears the most. And we know, of course, that this Sword of the Spirit, the Word of God, is not a thing: it's a person. The Word of God is none other than the Lord Jesus Christ. It's he who fights for us. It's he who lives for us. It's he who died for us. And it's he who was raised in glory to raise us and lead us to victory over all our enemies. We, by nature, are not mighty warriors. Like Gideon, we are fearful and weak; but we can do all things through him who gives us strength: The Lord Jesus Christ. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!