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In Whom Do You Have Faith?

Matt Hall

West Valley Presbyterian Church

This summer we saw the return of an American Hero: Superman. Now, you might have been thinking that Superman has been laying low recently. If you are older than me, you may remember that he was wildly popular in the late 70's and early 80's. The first Christopher Reeve Superman released in 1978, it was followed by two successful sequels, a spinoff, (Supergirl), and then one last poorly received Superman in 1987. That film was such a flop that Hollywood decided to give the character a rest. He reappeared in a forgettable movie in 2006 and then was put back on hold until this summer.

If you have not seen it yet, "Man of Steel" is a fun film with a lot of Christian themes. In fact, the film studio has attempted to work a lot with churches in providing resources highlighting the parallels of their message and ours. Overall, the movie, though a bit heavy handed, is a classic superman movie and was successful enough that a new movie has just been announced: Batman and Superman.

Superheroes are a curious piece of Americana. They got their start following World War 1, but it was during World War 2 that they really took off. Comic books, particularly superhero comics, gained immense popularity during the war as cheap, portable, easily read tales of good triumphing over evil.

In a world that had seen two world wars, and was now entering a nuclear age, Superheroes resonated with Americans. You could argue that the ten years following World War 2 were the Golden Age of Comics as Americans were searching for a hero who represented the best we had to offer.

The last ten years we have had another Golden Age, a Golden Age of Superhero movies. Spiderman, Batman, Captain America, Thor, Iron Man, The Hulk, Avengers, Xmen, The Incredibles. Following the September 11th attacks we turned our attention back to Superheroes looking to them to show us our better selves, and to defeat evil again.

America has always been a country that has celebrated our heroes. Whether they be our founding fathers, George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, or men who have accomplished great feats like Charles Lindbergh and Thomas Edison.

It seems, particularly in times of trouble we go looking for heroes. I don't know about you, but there are times when I wish we had a few superheroes around to stand for the best of our values. To fight to restore justice. Men who were looking to fight for our values, to restore our way of life?

I think our desire for heroes is a part of our DNA. This is a longing that God has placed in us. Ultimately, I think this longing points us to Jesus, but the bible is full of lesser heroes who inspire us.

We talked about how Superheroes rose in popularity following World War 2 and then again post 9/11. In scripture, we see the same thing happening. Today we are going to be looking at Gideon. Who, while not Super, like Samson, is a hero. An unlikely hero, even an imperfect hero.

The story of Gideon is found in the book of Judges. Judges is the history of Israel after they had arrived in the Promised Land but before they had received a King. Israel, as a nation, was not doing very well.

You might recall that following God's deliverance of Israel from slavery in Egypt, where he miraculously parted the Red Sea, Israel wasted no time in creating a golden calf and practicing Idol Worship. Moses had to call the people back into repentance, back into right worship of the true God of Israel – after they had experienced a miracle.

Israel, we will see in Judges, has developed an unfortunate habit of being rescued by God, worshipping God, getting bored by God, and then worshipping other gods, being oppressed by another nation, and then back to being rescued by God. Judges is basically this story. Unfortunately, each return to God is less effective than the time before. Judges is a depressing story of the downward spiral of Israel, in the face of God's faithfulness.

During this time, before God gave Israel a human king, God used Judges to basically hold Israel accountable and inspire them to get back inline. These men become heroes for Israel, though we are going to see some deep flaws.

We first meet Gideon in Chapter 6. He is the fifth Judge of Israel. Meaning, Gideon is on the fifth wave of this cycle. Israel has been oppressed by the Mesopotamians, the Moabites, the Philistines, the Caanites, and now they are being oppressed by the Midianites.

And this oppression is rough. We begin in Chapter 6 of Judges.

The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord, and for seven years he gave them into the hands of the Midianites. 2 Because the power of Midian was so oppressive, the Israelites prepared shelters for themselves in mountain clefts, caves and strongholds.

Israel is hiding in caves. That's how bad their oppression is.

3 Whenever the Israelites planted their crops, the Midianites, Amalekites and other eastern peoples invaded the country. 4 They camped on the land and ruined the crops all the way to Gaza and did not spare a living thing for Israel, neither sheep nor cattle nor donkeys.

Israel is forced into famine by their oppressors.

5 They came up with their livestock and their tents like swarms of locusts. It was impossible to count them or their camels; they invaded the land to ravage it. 6 Midian so impoverished the Israelites that they cried out to the Lord for help.

Things got so bad for Israel.. hiding in caves starving to death – they call out to God. And God responds. He sends out a prophet, we don't know who, he is unnamed. And the prophet says, *“This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: I brought you up out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. 9 I rescued you from the hand of the Egyptians. And I delivered you from the hand of all your oppressors; I drove them out before you and gave you their land. 10 I said to you, ‘I am the Lord your God; do not worship the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you live.’ But you have not listened to me.”*

Friends, this is the first time that Israel has asked for help from God, and God has sent a prophet to rebuke them. They're going to God asking

for help, expecting help, and he rubs their face in their sin. God has had it with Israel, he is angry with them, and rightly so. He has done so much good for them, and they have abandoned him over and over again. But God, despite his anger, does not abandon Israel.

Instead we see him send an Angel to Gideon. The Angel tells Gideon that the Lord is with him, and calls him a Mighty Warrior. And Gideon, responds, *“Pardon me, my lord, but if the Lord is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all his wonders that our ancestors told us about when they said, ‘Did not the Lord bring us up out of Egypt?’ But now the Lord has abandoned us and given us into the hand of Midian.”*

Gideon feels abandoned by God, not recognizing that it’s actually the other way around. We are about to find out that Gideon’s family? They have an altar to a false God. Gideon is not a good Jewish boy. He’s abandoned his faith.

Gideon is then told this by the angel, *“Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian’s hand. Am I not sending you?”*

This is important. The angel tells Gideon to go in his strength. And Gideon, being rather self aware, says, *“how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family.”*

Gideon, like Moses before him, starts to tell God why he is unqualified to do God's work. He belongs to the weakest clan, and is the weakest in his family. He is not a natural leader.

But God says, "I will be with you." And Gideon request a sign. And God, entertains this request, honors this request, and gives Gideon a sign.

I want to recap what we have seen so far. Israel is oppressed, again, rebuked by a prophet, but not forgotten by God. God sends an Angel to call Gideon into his service. Gideon makes excuses because he's weak, and then demonstrates that he is also weak of faith and request a sign from God. God honors this request, though I would point out does not approve of this request. So, we have determined so far that Gideon is weak, not only in status, but also in faith.

That night, God speaks to Gideon, and tells him to tear down his father's altar to a false God, and build a new altar and sacrifice to God on it. But Gideon, being afraid, does it at night and not during the day. So that he is not seen. – This is not the superhero that we would hope for it, is it? But God seems intent on using him.

Gideon then ask God for more signs. Gideon and God go back and forth putting out a lambskin, and asking for dew to either be on the skin or not. And God, honors these requests. These request represent a

completely lack of faith in God. And I have to be honest, as I was reading this account I was just getting more and more frustrated with Gideon. I mean, God's talking to you, he's sent an angel to you, and you keep doubting and questioning him. If God was speaking to me directly... I'd listen. I think.

The time has come, Gideon has tested God in numerous ways. It is time for the battle against the Midianites. Somehow, Gideon manages to assemble an army 32,000 Israelites. And God looks at the army, and says, *You have too many men. I cannot deliver Midian into their hands, or Israel would boast against me, 'My own strength has saved me.'*

God does not want Israel to take credit for her rescue. So God has Gideon dismiss anybody who is afraid. Out of the 32,000 people, 22 thousand are afraid leaving Gideon with 10,000 men.

But God decides that there are still too many men. So he takes them down to some water, and he has the men drink. Gideon is told to take only the soldiers who put their head in the water and lap it up like a dog, rather than the men who cupped their hands. This leaves Gideon 300 men.

Now God does something interesting, he tells Gideon to take a servant and go down to the enemies camp and eavesdrop. Verse 13:

¹³ Gideon arrived just as a man was telling a friend his dream. “I had a dream,” he was saying. “A round loaf of barley bread came tumbling into the Midianite camp. It struck the tent with such force that the tent overturned and collapsed.”

¹⁴ His friend responded, “This can be nothing other than the sword of Gideon son of Joash, the Israelite. God has given the Midianites and the whole camp into his hands.”

¹⁵ When Gideon heard the dream and its interpretation, he bowed down and worshiped. He returned to the camp of Israel and called out, “Get up! The LORD has given the Midianite camp into your hands.” ¹⁶ Dividing the three hundred men into three companies, he placed trumpets and empty jars in the hands of all of them, with torches inside.

¹⁷ “Watch me,” he told them. “Follow my lead. When I get to the edge of the camp, do exactly as I do. ¹⁸ When I and all who are with me blow our trumpets, then from all around the camp blow yours and shout, ‘For the Lord and for Gideon.’”

¹⁹ Gideon and the hundred men with him reached the edge of the camp at the beginning of the middle watch, just after they had changed the guard. They blew their trumpets and broke the jars that were in their hands. ²⁰

The three companies blew the trumpets and smashed the jars. Grasping the torches in their left hands and holding in their right hands the trumpets they were to blow, they shouted, "A sword for the Lord and for Gideon!" 21 While each man held his position around the camp, all the Midianites ran, crying out as they fled.

22 When the three hundred trumpets sounded, the Lord caused the men throughout the camp to turn on each other with their swords.

This is a crazy story. The people of Israel, the entire nation, has been oppressed. Their oppressors have caused famine. Gideon, against all odds, rallies an army of 32,000 men. God whittles that Army down to 300. And then, this army of 300, doesn't even fight. Look at verse 22. The Lord caused the men throughout the camp to turn on each other. The 300 Israelites have some trumpets and jars. And their leader? This isn't David. This is Gideon. A man who questions and doubts God at every turn. A man who is weak and has no influence. Gideon is not just an unlikely hero, he's a deeply flawed hero. Later on in the rest of the story, we see that Gideon continues to get things half right. After this victory, and his next one, the people want to make him King. And he responds, Only God's king. Right.

But then we see him live a life that basically indicates he's functioning King of Israel. His behavior doesn't represent his words.

Nobody reads the story of Gideon, and aspires to be just like him. No, we read the story of Gideon and we aspire to be better. We want to be Superman, not Gideon.

But here's the thing. God doesn't need Supermen. God uses Gideons.