

Our first lesson today is from the Book of Judges, the seventh book of the Bible. Today is the only time our three-year lectionary cycle includes a reading from this book.

Why Judges? Why today? The short answer is this: today, in Judges, the time is roughly the 10<sup>th</sup> century Before the Common Era. The Book of Judges summarizes a time of political transition, a time when Israel was first emerging as a nation, just before the 12 tribes agreed to be ruled by a king. Next Sunday is the last in the season of Pentecost, otherwise known as Christ the King. The idea behind including this lesson today is to ask ourselves about the extent we are willing to let God rule our lives, both as individuals and as citizens of our nation. (I know, and you know, we've gotten this really wrong over time.)

In Judges we learn that this was a time (some 3,000 years ago) when "all the people did what was right in their own eyes," an activity that the Bible says results in political instability. Today, we might think that being able to do, each of us, what is right in our own eyes is a GOOD thing. The problem is that what we each think is right, even as Christians, is often not what God thinks is right.

For instance, is becoming wealthy a sign of God's favor, or a sign of having taken advantage of less fortunate people to obtain that wealth? There are sincere disciples of Christ Jesus who believe both of these things, that having a lot of money means God loves us, that having a lot of money means we have not loved our neighbor as ourselves.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. What God says is right are the functions the judges performed so long ago: exposing injustice, offering comfort and hope to the oppressed, saving the people from their enemies, preserving domestic relationships and peace, and protecting widows, orphans, and strangers.

All summer long we heard how God made and renewed a covenant with Abraham and his descendants to make them a people too numerous to count and give them their own land. God didn't give them these things immediately. Rather, he worked through human history, forming Abraham's descendants into a people with God's vision. We heard of them being formed and tested by:

- Barrenness, and having to rethink who is family.
- Slavery, teaching them empathy for the reversal of fortunes of others.
- Deprivation, such as lack of food and water, letting us know both that we can count on God to provide and that we need to share what we have.
- Homelessness, having to scramble to find a place to sleep each night and what having a rock for a pillow is like.

- Temptations to settle in the wilderness for less than promised, to worship false gods, gods who promised prosperity and ease rather than the stress of having to travel to a Promised Land.

In the time of Judges, the 12 tribes' neighbors were forming into nations. Nations with kings. Kings who could levy taxes, redistribute wealth, raise armies, and invade their neighbors' territories. These neighbors had learned how to make iron, how to forge iron weapons. But God's people hadn't yet mastered iron technology. So their neighbors had 900 iron chariots, 900 tanks, as today's lesson tells us. And they had none.

So the 12 tribes needed a king, too; otherwise they would be overrun, right?

OK, so that was a trick question. If God protected them, how could they be overrun? If God didn't protect them, how could they be safe, even with a king?

"Maybe," I was told this week, "it's easier to trust in God from within my own iron chariot." And that IS true of human nature. But the thing about these 12 tribes in the Promised Land is that God had brought them there and they were God's people. The judges were people who, ideally, shared God's vision and spoke for God.

In the telling of its own history, the Israelites created a sort of interpretive framework for describing this period and its judges. The framework is this:

- Israel forgot their God and each did what was right in their own eyes.
- God allowed their neighbors to oppress them.
- Israel remembered and called upon God to save them.
- God raised up a judge to deal with the crisis.
- The oppression ended, for a time.
- Israel again forgot their God.

The people kept forgetting God. The judges, all but one, had a character flaw of some kind. The exception was a most surprising person: Deborah, the only woman judge and a prophetess. So when the Canaanites approached with their 900 iron chariots, not to mention their iron swords and spears, Deborah—channeling Yahweh—called a war general named Barak to arms and called upon the 12 tribes to stand with him. Holding sticks and stones, so to speak. And imagine this: only two tribes responded. I don't know whether to be more surprised that ANY showed up, or that ALL 12 DIDN'T appear. Our lesson ends with Deborah telling Barak, "I will deliver [the Canaanite General to you]."

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Apparently Barak thought Deborah was speaking of herself, that SHE would deliver the enemy war leader, because he said he would undertake the mission only if Deborah went with him. But of course Deborah the prophetess had been speaking for God.

If we read further in Judges we learn what happened. Deborah accompanied the troops. God sent a great rain, the chariots got mired in the mud, and were routed, and the enemy general ended up with a spike through his head after an incident of intended sexual misconduct in his tent.

Improbably, the people were spared. But even this God-given victory takes a clear God-vision to understand that the rain didn't just happen, that the enemy general didn't just meet his deserved fate at an opportune moment for God's people. These weren't random events.

The people then asked God to give them a king. And so he did, reluctantly, but the kings turned out to be as fallible as the people and judges had been. If only there were someone without character defect, someone infallible, someone with our best interests at heart, who God would send to be with us always, to teach us how to see as God sees and to judge as God judges. If only that person, sent by God, could make a difference today in how we view each other as we struggle with our own time of political transition.