

God Calls Us to Carry Out His Mission

In spite of the objections
With the promise of his presence

⁷ When the Israelites cried out to the Lord because of Midian, ⁸ he sent them a prophet, who said, “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.”

¹¹ The angel of the Lord came and sat down under the oak in Ophrah that belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, where his son Gideon was threshing wheat in a winepress to keep it from the Midianites. ¹² When the angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon, he said, “The Lord is with you, mighty warrior.”

¹³ “Pardon me, my lord,” Gideon replied, “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.”

¹⁴ The Lord turned to him and said, “Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian’s hand. Am I not sending you?”

¹⁵ “Pardon me, my lord,” Gideon replied, “but how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family.”

¹⁶ The Lord answered, “I will be with you, and you will strike down all the Midianites, leaving none alive.”

Tell me, have you ever faced a task that felt like it was more than you could handle? Something that was downright daunting. Something you didn't know how you would ever accomplish. Maybe you're looking at months of chemotherapy and you don't know how you're going to get through it. Or you are buried under a mountain of student loans and you don't know how you're going to pay them off. Or maybe you just lost your job or your spouse and it's like now you have to start all over. And it just feels overwhelming. Or maybe the challenges you face

are not so much particular circumstances in your life, but rather, the expectations that God has for you as a Christian. Things that seem to come easy for others are hard for you. Things like devoting yourself to prayer, or reading the Bible on a daily basis, or inviting someone to come to church with you. Sometimes even the little things can feel so hard to put into practice.

My friends, if you face challenges that are bigger than you can handle, if you feel like you're not up to the task at hand, you're not alone. Over 3,000 years ago, a man by the name of Gideon found himself in a similar situation. His country was being overrun by enemy forces. Scripture says that the invading men and camels were without number. They were like swarms of locust that devoured everything in sight and left the people of Israel absolutely impoverished. And all people could do was to cry out to the Lord for deliverance.

And so, that's what God did. In his love and mercy, God answered their prayers by sending a deliverer, what the Bible calls a judge. Today we might call him a warrior or even a hero, someone who God was sending to lead them into battle and rescue them from their enemies. And in Gideon's day, the judge chosen by God was...Gideon! The trouble is, Gideon didn't see himself as qualified for that role. He didn't see himself as a hero. He didn't think he was up to the task. And so what did God do? He gave Gideon everything he needed to carry out the mission that God had for him. And you know something? God does the same thing for you and me today. Our theme for today is simply this:

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With the promise of his presence

Our text for today comes from the Old testament book of Judges. Judges covers a period of about 350 years from the time that the nation of Israel entered the promised land of Canaan to

the time that God raised up kings to rule his people. It was during this period of transition from a theocracy to a monarchy that the nation of Israel went through a cycle that repeated itself again and again and again. Scripture says that after the death of Joshua, who had led them into the land of Canaan, *another generation grew up who knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel. Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord and serve the Baals* (that is, the local false gods of the land). (Judges 2:10-11) And how did God respond to their open idolatry? Scripture tells us. *In his anger against Israel the Lord handed them over to raiders who plundered them. He sold them to their enemies all around, whom they were no longer able to resist. (Verse 14)*

Well, it was during one of the phases of rampant idolatry in Israel and subsequent oppression by their enemies, that the account of Gideon takes place. The holy writer sets the stage with these words. *Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord and for 7 years he gave them into the hands of the Midianites. 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. Midian so impoverished the Israelites that they cried out to the Lord for help. (Judges 6:1,4,6)*

And so, once again, in love for his people, God provided that help, first of all, in the form of an angel, in this case The Angel of the Lord, which is another name for the pre-incarnate Christ, that is, the second person of the Trinity, before he took on a human nature. We read in verse 11, *The angel of the Lord came and sat down under the oak in Ophrah that belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, where his son Gideon was threshing wheat in a winepress to keep it from the Midianites. When the angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon, he said, “The Lord is with you, mighty warrior.”*

Tell me, do you sense a touch of irony in the angel’s words? Gideon sure did. I mean here

is Gideon threshing wheat in a wine press. In other words, instead of being out in the open driving a pair of oxen to thresh out the grain as usually was done, Gideon was hiding in what amounted to a big bathtub, beating his grain with a stick. And why was he in a wine press? Because he was afraid. He was terrified that the Midianites were going to come and steal what little grain he had left. It's to this man, trembling in fear, that the angel of the Lord says, "*The Lord is with you, mighty warrior.*" Gideon is probably thinking to himself, "Who you talk'n about? Do I look like a mighty warrior, hiding in this wine press?" But it's not just the title of "mighty warrior" that Gideon objects to. He also objects to the other half of the angel's statement, namely, that the Lord is with him. How does Gideon put it? ¹³ "*Pardon me, my lord,*" Gideon replied, "*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.*" (Judges 6:13)

If you think about it, Gideon is falling into a trap that we sometimes find ourselves in. Gideon is drawing conclusions about whether God is with him on the basis of how well things are going in his life. If he's forced to crush wheat in a wine press, it must be because the Lord has forgotten about him. If you or I run into a financial crisis or are diagnosed with a terminal disease, we're tempted to think, "God, where are you? How can you let this happen?" This was the objection that Gideon was raising.

But notice that the Lord is undeterred by Gideon's objection. *The Lord turned to him and said, "Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian's hand. Am I not sending you?"* Unfortunately, that still wasn't enough for Gideon. He offers one more objection. He says, "*Pardon me, my lord, but how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am*

the least in my family.”

In a sense, Gideon was right. In and of himself, he couldn't save his nation. He was a sinner, a poor, miserable one, at that. Gideon had all kinds of flaws and failings, just like you and I do by nature. But the fact is, God wasn't asking Gideon to save Israel all by himself. In fact, he wasn't asking him to do anything all by himself. Instead, God counters Gideon's objection with a promise that will make all the difference in the world for Gideon and for us. The Lord simply says, *“I will be with you.”*

You see, when God sends someone on a mission that he has given them, he does so...II. With the Promise of His Presence. Isn't that right? In Gideon's case, the Lord first made it clear that the task of delivering Israel from the Midianites was not an idea that Gideon hatched in his own mind. It was not a self-promotional campaign. No, the Lord makes it clear who it is who was calling Gideon into action. God says, *“Am I not sending you?”* In other words, this isn't Gideon's mission for God. It's God's mission for Gideon.

But not only is God the one who is sending Gideon. God is also the one who is promising to go with Gideon. God clearly says, *“I will be with you.”* Doesn't God do the same thing for you and me today? For example, when God gives us the great commission to “go and make disciples of all nations,” we might be thinking, “Whoa, that's a pretty daunting job. I don't know if I'm up to that task.” And so, what does Jesus do in the very next verse? He makes us the promise, *“Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”* (Matthew 28:20) I have to tell you that that passage has always had a special meaning for me, ever since I was assigned fresh out of the Seminary to serve a mission congregation in Houghton, MI. It was a comfort to know that as I carried the mission God had given to me, he was going to be with me, not only to the end of the age, but to the end of the earth. But isn't that an awesome promise? To know that

as we take on the tasks that God has given us in whatever our vocation in life, be it a pastor or a parent or a student or a child, we have God's promise that he will be with us. Whether we're in good times or bad, we can say with King David of old, *Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil. Why not? For you are with me. (Psalm 23:4)*

My friends, that's a promise that empowered Gideon to carry out the mission that God had given to him—and it does the same thing for you and me today, whether the mission is raising your children in a Christian home, or it's sharing your faith with a co-worker who's searching for answers, or it's letting your light shine in a world darkened by unbelief. But just because God promises that he will go with us, doesn't mean that we don't sometimes ask for some further assurances of that fact. Isn't that what Gideon did? You maybe remember how Gideon asked God to give him a sign that he in fact was going to go with him into battle. Gideon laid out on the ground a piece of sheepskin and asked God to cover the fleece with dew and leave the ground dry. And so, to bolster the faith of this man, God did exactly that. And then Gideon went so far as to ask God a second time to do the opposite, that is, to cover the ground with dew and leave the fleece dry. And as an act of pure grace, God did that, too. God wanted to further assure Gideon of his divine power and presence.

Now do you and I have to be laying out sheepskins to figure out whether God is with us today? No, God gives us much better proof if he was really present, that he has connected us to himself, that he's made us part of his body, the church. He gives us that proof right here in the sacrament of Holy Communion and right there in the sacrament of Holy Baptism. Do you want proof that God is with you? Then remember your baptism, when God washed away the sins that once separated you from God, the baptism by which God adopted you into his family. You want proof that God is not only for you, but he's also with you, in fact, that he's in you? Then listen to

your Savior say, “Take and eat. This is my body which is given for you. Take and drink this is my blood which is shed for you.” If you think about it, it's really amazing that an all holy, all powerful, God of the universe would choose to step into our world and connect himself to sinners like us. And now that he's reconciled us to himself, now that he's promised that he will never leave us or forsake us, now he also calls us to be his disciples, to be his followers, to be his students, his evangelists, his stewards.

And even when that mission seems a little overwhelming, even when we feel that we're not up to the task, we can still stay with the psalmist of old, *“Where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.”* (Psalm 121:1) Or in the words of the apostle Paul himself, *“I can do everything through him who gives me strength.”* (Philippians 4:13)

3000 years ago, a man hiding in a wine press was called by God to carry out the mission laid out for him with a promise that God would be with him. Things haven't changed in three millennia. God still calls people like you and me to carry out his mission. And he accompanies the call with a simple promise, “I will be with you.” Believe it. And live it. For Jesus' sake. Amen.