



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

UNINTENDED HEROES

SERMON BY REV. DOUG PRATT ■ MARCH 11, 2018

COMMUNITY SERVANTS RECOGNITION

Introduction to Scripture

Today is a time to honor those among us who have made a difference. God created us not to live in isolation and competition, to fight alone against the challenges of life as if the law of the jungle and survival of the fittest was our human code. Rather, our Creator implanted within us a conscience that leads us to help and sacrifice for one another. And whenever a person gives up their own resources or comfort, whenever someone takes a risk to help another, we rightly label them “heroes.” Some of our heroes are given that job, along with special training, and they wear uniforms. Other heroes come from everyday life—our friends and neighbors. Sometimes our heroes are unintended. They just do in the moment what seems right.

A recent film, released last month, told the real-life story of three unintended heroes of humanity. The movie is titled *The 15:17 to Paris*, with Clint Eastwood as the director and starring the three young Americans themselves who were on vacation in France when their moment of heroism unexpectedly emerged. In gratitude for putting themselves in harm’s way to subdue a terrorist and save the lives of innocent people on that train, those young Americans were awarded medals by the French government. But none of them awoke that morning with the intent of being a hero.

We find recorded in the pages of Scripture some other examples of unintended heroes, and today we will look at one of them. His name is Gideon. No, his job was not putting Bibles in hotel rooms. He was

just a young farmer working for his dad. And times were very hard indeed. Gideon might well have been the last person in his family or his town or his country who would ever have been expected to be a hero. Let's read the background to his story:

The Israelites did evil in the LORD's sight. So the LORD handed them over to the Midianites for seven years. ²The Midianites were so cruel that the Israelites made hiding places for themselves in the mountains, caves, and strongholds. ³Whenever the Israelites planted their crops, marauders from Midian, Amalek, and the people of the east would attack Israel, ⁴camping in the land and destroying crops as far away as Gaza. They left the Israelites with nothing to eat, taking all the sheep, goats, cattle, and donkeys. ⁵These enemy hordes, coming with their livestock and tents, were as thick as locusts; they arrived on droves of camels too numerous to count. And they stayed until the land was stripped bare. ⁶So Israel was reduced to starvation by the Midianites. Then the Israelites cried out to the LORD for help.

⁷When they cried out to the LORD because of Midian, ⁸the LORD sent a prophet to the Israelites. He said, "This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: I brought you up out of slavery in Egypt. ⁹I rescued you from the Egyptians and from all who oppressed you. I drove out your enemies and gave you their land. ¹⁰I told you, 'I am the LORD your God. You must not worship the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you now live.' But you have not listened to me."

Judges 6:1-10 (NLT)

A Nation in Crisis

The nation of Israel is in crisis. It is being victimized by repeated raids by terrorists known as the Midianites. For historical comparison, think about the chaos and disruption to communities in Britain

and Ireland in the 9th century by the raids of the Vikings, or the oppression experienced by the people of Western Europe under Nazi occupation in World War II, or the terrible suffering of the common people of the city of Mosul in Iraq when the sadistic ISIS invaders swept over them in 2014. People were terrified, and felt powerless.

What the biblical text further reveals is that the problems of Israel were, to a large extent, self-inflicted. Because the people had strayed away from God, they had weakened themselves and had opened the door for the cascade of problems to come upon them. If we are brutally honest, we have to face the fact that some of the problems we deal with are created by our own poor choices—or by the poor choices of others that end up hurting us. The people of Mosul, for example, suffered under ISIS in large part because of the corruption of the government of Iraq and the withdrawal of the American military. But not every case of suffering is a result of our mistakes. When cancer strikes a person's pancreas, or a hurricane or earthquake strikes a community, that is not self-inflicted.

What God's prophet proclaims beginning in verse 8 is intended to humble His people and to show them that they need the Lord. Every problem we encounter, whether or not we did something to cause it, should remind us of the same truth: our dependence on God. Every trouble that comes to us should send us to our knees in prayer to seek His help and deliverance. The myths of invincibility and self-sufficiency are punctured when difficulties arrive. And that can prepare us to take a significant step forward spiritually.

Now the story continues:

Then the angel of the LORD came and sat beneath the great tree at Ophrah, which belonged to Joash of the clan of Abiezer. Gideon son of Joash was threshing wheat at the bottom of a winepress to hide the grain from the Midianites. ¹²The angel of the LORD appeared to him and said, "Mighty hero, the LORD is with you!"

¹³“Sir,” Gideon replied, “if the LORD is with us, why has all this happened to us? And where are all the miracles our ancestors told us about? Didn’t they say, ‘The LORD brought us up out of Egypt’? But now the LORD has abandoned us and handed us over to the Midianites.”

¹⁴Then the LORD turned to him and said, “Go with the strength you have, and rescue Israel from the Midianites. I am sending you!”

¹⁵“But Lord,” Gideon replied, “how can I rescue Israel? My clan is the weakest in the whole tribe of Manasseh, and I am the least in my entire family!”

¹⁶The LORD said to him, “I will be with you. And you will destroy the Midianites as if you were fighting against one man.”

Judges 6:11-16 (NLT)

A Hero in Hiding

For the first time we encounter our young hero Gideon. And he is looking anything but heroic right now. In fear of those nasty Midianites, he is in hiding. A farmer of the ancient Middle East would have ordinarily threshed his wheat harvest in the open air, where the breeze could blow away the chaff and leave the grain to be ground and packaged. But it was much harder and more time-consuming to thresh at the bottom of a wine press.

The angel of the Lord appears to him and addresses Gideon with a most surprising title: “Mighty Hero.” Really? Is the angel mocking him? Or is it possible that God sees in Gideon what neither he nor anyone who knows him has seen so far? Perhaps God alone can see his inner potential, as yet unrealized.

What we find in the dialogue that follows, between Gideon and the angel, is a fascinating exchange. In verses 13 and 15 we find two of the natural, common responses of human beings to a time of suffering or disaster. And in verses 14 and 16 we find God’s two responses to us. Let’s look at them.

A Fascinating Exchange

Gideon's excuses for his hiding, his fearfulness and his passive response in the face of the troubles of the Midianites are: (1) It's God's fault for letting this happen; and (2) there is nothing he can do about it; he's powerless and helpless. The angel responds or counters with these two promises from the Lord: (1) You, Gideon, have all you need to do what I am calling you to do; and (2) I, the Source of all spiritual power and strength, will be with you.

The rest of the story, which we don't have time to read, confirms that, in fact, God's vision of Gideon as a great hero of faith will be fulfilled. It will not happen instantly. Gideon has to overcome his own doubts, and he has to take a few "baby steps" of faith in order for that faith to strengthen and mature. But from the moment of his encounter with the angel he begins to chart a new direction for his life—and ultimately he will have a profound impact for good upon others.

When we read it in the context of our common human struggle against enemies and difficulties and challenges, we find profound truths in this account. Our natural reaction to tragic or painful things that happen is often, like Gideon's, to mistakenly blame God. Every time a man-made disaster occurs (such as a terrorist attack or a random shooting) the media will be filled with people who blame God (when they're not trying to capitalize on it for their political purposes). And every time a natural disaster (an earthquake or flood or storm or wildfire or plane crash) occurs, people will demand to know why God didn't prevent it.

Called and Equipped

Where in the Bible is it promised that life will be pain-free? Doesn't scripture teach us exactly the opposite? It is a dangerous world in which we live, filled with evil people and with random events that follow natural processes far beyond our ability to predict and control. But rather than intervening constantly, to block people's free-will actions and to interrupt nature, God has sent His Spirit into the world to call and equip people to respond to whatever comes.

When Gideon wants to protest by saying, “Lord, why haven’t you done anything about our problems?,” God answers by saying, “I have. I am sending you.” And when Gideon wants to protest that he’s powerless to make a difference, God answers by saying, “You have my strength within you. You are not alone.”

On this day we remember and thank those of our community who weren’t content to be passive and say “there’s nothing I can do about the problems.” We honor those heroes, even the unintended ones, who have done what they can. And we are also reminded that, every day, we have opportunities to make a positive difference for someone. And God is with us to help us see and act on those opportunities. ■

