

7/3/22 WORSHIP SERVICE

WELCOME – PASTOR CALEB YODER

Welcome to Alexanderwohl, including those of you who are joining on Zoom as well as here in the sanctuary.

On this humid July morning, we gather to worship our awesome God that we encounter most especially in the love of Christ.

Continuing a theme of celebrating the gifts that are among us, including the gifts that are part of the collaboration of this worship service.

There is a broad spectrum of gifts, so be assured that you already contribute something of tremendous value, or have potential for doing so, without becoming someone else that you are not.

CALL TO WORSHIP – 1 CORINTHIANS 12:4-7, 12A, 13A

Leader: Now there are different gifts,

People: but the same Spirit.

Leader: And there are different ministries,

People: but the same Lord.

Leader: And there are different results,

People: but the same God who produces all of them in everyone.

Leader: To each person the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the benefit of all.

People: For just as the body is one and yet has many members...so too is Christ.

All: for in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body.

INVOCATION PRAYER – ALCUIN, 8TH C. VT 860

Almighty God,

To you all hearts are open,
all desires are known,
and from you no secrets are hidden.

Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts
by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit,
that we may perfectly love you
and worthily magnify your holy name,
through Christ, our Lord. Amen

MORNING PRAYER – PASTOR LOIS HARDER

Loving God, on this July morning we're grateful for the rain. It greens the earth, fills the creeks and waterways, brings nourishment and life. We're grateful too for the sunshine, for the combination of moisture and warmth that brings growth and makes the earth productive. God, we thank you for the many good gifts we have from you – health and healthcare, meaningful relationships, plenty... of everything. We're grateful to be gathered here together to worship you, to learn of you, to hear the words from scripture and the words you've given Pastor Caleb for us this morning. Grant us sharp, thinking minds and open, humble hearts ready to be led by

your Holy Spirit. Thank you, God, for the gifts you've given to each person – those that are gathered here, and also each person that you created – everyone! We celebrate your creativity!

O God, because you created us and you love us, we put our trust in you and we bring our prayers before you. We pray for Eddie as he heads out to camp this week. Be with him and the other counselors and staff. Be with the children who will be there this week. Help them to have a safe and fun time – a time when they can all learn more about following Jesus.

We pray for safety and rest for all who are traveling these days. May they be restored and rejuvenated. Be particularly with Caleb and Beth and the boys as they drive this afternoon to Iowa. Be with Gloria and Galen, Caleb's folks, as Gloria faces health issues, doctor's visits and treatment decisions. Grant them your wisdom and peace. May Caleb and Beth's time there be Spirit-filled and meaningful.

Thank you, God that Lois Janzen was able to come home this past Thursday. We ask her healing and recuperation would continue and that she would feel better with each passing day. We pray for those who continue to heal from more long-term illnesses and their treatments. We pray for patience, for trust, for perseverance and for your comfort and peace. We pray for those who are struggling with covid or other illnesses today. We pray for your healing, God, for each one, that it would come quickly and be complete.

O Lord, in these uncertain and volatile times, we pray for wisdom and grace. May each of us, as you have gifted us, offer your healing, your peace with justice, your love and goodness as we live out each day. Hear us as we offer the prayer that Jesus taught us... Our Father, who art in heaven...

OFFERING PRAYER – Maker of heaven and earth, of land and of sea, giver of all good gifts, we thank you for your unending love and provision. Accept these gifts of money as well as the gifts that we offer of our time, our energy and passions, as we offer them back to you, with love and gratitude. Amen.

SERMON *COURAGE, LETTING GO, AND TRUST* – PASTOR CALEB
Judges 6-7

I'm grateful to these three readers for helping keep our attention through a long reading – and that is only part of the entire Gideon story. Gideon might seem like an unusual choice of a passage for talking about offering our gifts. It is the one that came to me, because of the themes the story brings up. Like Gideon, I have been timid, insecure, and unsure. Somehow this story speaks to me, and speaks to any of us needing the courage to use our gifts.

Since our continuing focus is about discovering and using our gifts, I'm reading the Gideon story with that lens. If you were hoping to draw insights from the Gideon story in order to lead a contingent of guerilla fighters, I can't help you there.

We don't tend to spend a lot of time in the book of Judges, but these are stories from the Bible that have been passed down to us as part of our faith heritage. So I go at this from the

conviction that even though these stories may feel remote from the world we live in today, they contain God-breathed wisdom for our challenges.

[SLIDE: MAIN POINTS OF GIDEON STORY]

Gideon became a leader in a time when the Israelites had fallen into idolatry and were oppressed by another people group called the Midianites. Twice the Bible describes them as being like a “swarm of locusts” with more camels than can be counted.

They are a formidable enemy, causing the Israelites to retreat to the hill country, while Midianite raids make survival difficult. But when God calls Gideon, he is unsure. He first asks the angel how YHWH could allow all of this.

The answer is that God is sending Gideon – this is God’s response. *“Go in the strength you have and save Israel.”*

The question of going in one’s own strength versus depending on God is woven throughout the Gideon story and connects with our own lives. The Gideon story affirms that we need both: both a reliance on the Spirit, and also an esteem for our own gifts and strengths and the wherewithal to use them.

Gideon resists the call: “But how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest of my tribe and I am the least of my family.” In other words, he’s saying: I can’t do this. I’m too small. I’m not equipped.

In the course of conversation, Gideon offers an elaborate sacrifice and God burns it up completely. This is the first sign, and convinces Gideon that it is really God speaking to him. Gideon is emboldened enough to get some helpers in tearing down his family’s idols. But he does this at night, fearing his own family and the townspeople.

Meanwhile the Midianites set up camp in a valley not far from where Gideon lives. Suddenly the Spirit of YHWH (the God of Israel) comes upon Gideon, as if the Spirit is a special garment that Gideon can simply put on.

It’s like we have a different Gideon than the fearful Gideon we had met. Gideon blows a shofar (Ram’s horn) to quickly summon a giant army. Yet even now, Gideon needs a sign – not that it is God who has spoken to him, but that he can really count on God to liberate Israel through his efforts.

So he constructs an elaborate sign, asking for a fleece of wool to be wet with dew in a morning without dew, and a second time for the fleece to stay dry while the ground is wet. It reminds me of a time when I was a child – maybe something like 8 or 10, and I folded up a piece of paper and put it in a bottom of a drawer. I prayed that night that God would put a mark inside the paper to prove to me that God is real. The only thing was, by morning I felt guilty for asking, and was afraid to look. So I threw the paper away without looking.

With the spectacular sign, Gideon is ready with a formidable army of 32,000. But not so fast – it’s too big. If they attack Midian with this large of an army, then they will take the credit for

victory, rather than giving God the credit. So God asks Gideon to tell the army that anyone who feels afraid may leave. Over half leave, leaving 10,000.

Still that's way too many, so the next test is to have the troops drink water from a stream and observe how they do it. Just 300 lap the water like dogs. Dogs don't have positive associations in the Bible as they do for us. To be described as doglike probably isn't a complement.

300 will be no match for an enemy army as numerous as locusts. God allows Gideon to still feel afraid, and tells him to sneak down to the Midianite in the dark of night so that he can overhear the Midianites talking about how afraid they are of Gideon.

Now the moment has arrived, and Gideon has the needed confidence. Apparently on his own, he concocts an idea. The 300 Israelites attack at night with torches, blowing their rams horns and breaking jars. Their battle cry is "for the Lord and for Gideon" – both God and Gideon are acknowledged.

The 300 men basically engage in a kind of guerilla tactic of spooking the enemy. In their confusion, the Midianites start fighting each other and flee.

While there is plenty of violence in the broader context of the story, this battle is unique because the text does not mention the Israelites taking even one life. They simply spook the enemy. Like the crossing of the Red Sea, God's deliverance comes without the Israelites being involved in killing.

This is a high point of the narrative. Gideon both relies on God's strength, but also has confidence of his own. Yet as the narrative continues, we start to see a different Gideon.

Gideon takes revenge on fellow Israelites who didn't help his army. When the people wish to make him king, he declines, but he does collect enough gold from everyone to make a priestly garment called an ephod. The Israelites end up worshipping the ephod.

[SLIDE: EPHOD]

The ephod was a special garment that priests would wear. It is not clear if the word ephod always referred to the same thing, but it seems like he is trying to create a mechanical device to control God.

Either Gideon means to covertly act as King by claiming God's authority for what he does, or another interpretation is that Gideon doesn't want to take responsibility for his leadership, and wishes to hide behind this miraculous object that he has in his control.

[SLIDE: GIDEON AS COMPLEX CHARACTER]

Whatever the ephod in question really is, we don't have the same Gideon as at the beginning. He has changed from being timid, to becoming a bold general who pursues enemies and takes revenge. He goes from being an idol breaker to an idol maker. He goes from needing signs for assurance to no longer needing God, except the God he controls.

Earlier I said the stories of the Bible contain God-breathed wisdom for our challenges today. Yet the story of Gideon isn't directly written to the question of how to discover our gifts or use our gifts in the church, which is what we are concerned about. Like much of the Bible, there isn't one obviously right interpretation with a very straightforward application for our present.

Sometimes Christian leaders can be tempted to turn the Bible into something like Gideon's ephod. They either use it to avoid taking real responsibility for challenging discernment, or they use it as a cover for the covert exercise of religious power.

But we've seen in Gideon's story that we need both reliance on the Spirit as well as our own strength and agency. Reading the Bible isn't passive or a one-way street. We have to avoid reading our own ideas into the Bible but we do have to reflect on our own lives and challenges while listening for the wisdom a biblical passage can teach us.

This way of reading the Bible means we have to take full responsibility for the conclusions we reach. Rather than being like a parent or coach being over your shoulder telling you exactly what to do or think, reading the Bible is more like remembering the advice of that coach or mentor and applying that wisdom to a new situation for which you still have to take full responsibility.

So from here, what are some of the lessons we learn from Gideon, and how do they apply to how we use our gifts?

[SLIDE: LESSONS OF GIDEON]

The first lesson is to find the courage to identify and use our gifts, just as Gideon needed to develop the self-assurance to lead. Fortunately, God accommodated his doubts.

Even when we have a sense of what gifts we have to benefit the church and God's reign of justice and peace, it can be hard to find the courage (or motivation) to offer them. It is too easy to talk ourselves out of it. We may fear we won't be good enough. We may fear the judgment of others or we may be hamstrung by our own self-rejection.

Believe in yourself. Know yourself to be loved by God and called.

The second lesson is that less can be more.

One of the major points of the Gideon story is the reduction of the army from the 32,000 to just 300. One of you shared a podcast episode called "when less is more" which showed that it is counterintuitive for people to take anything away. Whenever we want to improve something, we only think about adding, never subtracting. No one remodels a home and removes square footage of useable space.

Yet sometimes the key is to take something away. Each of us has to evaluate what are the most important things to say yes to. Sometimes we have to let go of some good things to make room for better things.

Covid forced us to let go of some things as a congregation, even though we've returned in some ways to the earlier normal. Letting go doesn't mean de-valuing what we did in the past. We can celebrate ministries of the past and the gifts that were offered while recognizing we may be faithful to God by recalibrating in the present.

The third theme is that we need both reliance on God's Spirit and full responsibility for our own wisdom, our own gifts, and our own actions. The story of Gideon seems to suggest that there is a balance. Gideon began at one extreme but he ended up at the opposite extreme.

His hesitancy led him to seek God's guidance, but later he tried to formalize the divine connection with the ephod in such a way that the ephod became an idol.

There is an individual journey involved in discerning how to best use your gifts, and at the same time, our gifts come together as a church. In our church, and any church, we will never get away completely from a specific structure with certain positions, jobs, and tasks that go with it.

Like the balance of responsibility and dependence on God, there is a balance between **structure** and **re-imagining**. Sometimes we need to start something new or get involved in ways there isn't a current structure for. It can be hard to get started, but I have seen it happen here. Many of the long-standing ministries that we have began as new initiatives at one time.

As we each reflect on the gifts that we bring, we may need the courage to step up and get involved in a way that we haven't before. We have to make choices, and serve from the center of our energy.

I want to give a word of thanks and celebration for the gifts that are among us. Gifts of strong leadership, gifts of stewardship and skilled labor, technical skills, gifts of teaching, of deep thinking, of pedagogy and relating to different ages.

Gifts of music, of visual arts, aesthetic beauty, and of creating space for worship. Gifts of service, of ministering, of befriending. Gifts of awareness of the broader world and of where to plug in in mission and peacebuilding. Gifts of prayer, of expressing faith, encouragement, and hope.

We do not have a deficiency of gifts. Yet God is always doing a new thing and inviting us to be a part. May God give us each the measure of courage that we need like Gideon, so that we come to understand our gifts better and be both bold and humble in offering them for the building up of the church.

BENEDICTION

Voices Together 1067

God of power,
may the boldness of your Spirit

transform us,
may the gentleness of your Spirit

lead us,
may the gifts of your Spirit
be our goal and our strength,

now and always.

The Anglican Church in Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia, *A New Zealand Prayer Book*,
1988