

The Sixteenth Week after Pentecost • August 30-31, 2008

St. John's Lutheran Church – Alexandria, Virginia

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Judges 7:1-23

“Portraits of Faith: Gideon – Against All Odds”

The Olympic games from earlier this month have now given way to the conventions of our nation's two major political parties. This past week, the Democratic National Convention was held in Denver, and the Republican National Convention will begin tomorrow in the Twin Cities of Minneapolis-St. Paul. It was very interesting to hear comments from African Americans as they anticipated and reacted to Barak Obama's acceptance speech on Thursday night. Coinciding with the forty-fifth anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King's famous "I Have a Dream" speech, several people were interviewed who were present with Dr. King on August 28, 1963, leaders in the Civil Rights movement. All of these people said that never in their wildest dreams did they imagine that an African American would ever be nominated for president. Against all odds, that dream is now unfolding before us. And with John McCain's announcement of Alaska Governor Sarah Palin as his vice-presidential running mate, this guarantees that either an African American or a woman will be in the White House for the first time in our nation's history. Whether we are Democrat, Republican, or Independent, we all must acknowledge that this is truly an historic time for our nation.

Against all odds, Gideon leads a tiny band of 300 warriors to victory against the much larger army of their Midianite enemies – we hear about this in today's Scripture lesson. And so we focus upon how God worked powerfully through his servant of old, the judge-deliverer, Gideon, in his generation. Our summer preaching series, "Portraits of Faith," comes to a close today. Over the past two months, we have looked at a variety of people from the Bible through whom God worked to extend his kingdom – people like Peter and Paul, Daniel, Hezekiah, Esther, Lydia, Bartholomew, Simeon and Anna, and others. Through the portraits of faith of these individuals, they become examples and models of faith for us today. And so as we focus upon God's work through Gideon, against all odds, may the Lord's rich blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus' sake.

First, a little bit of historical background: Israel was in a transition state. They had crossed over the Jordan River and were now living in the promised land of Israel, but they were very loosely organized around the twelve tribes of Israel. The great leaders had died; Moses and his successor, Joshua, were both gone. This was the age before the kings arose, and the closing words of the book of Judges tell us this: **“In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes”** (Judges 21:25). So who were these judges like Gideon? In truth, they were not judges as we think of them today. They were people, both men and women, raised up by God to deliver God's people from their enemies. They were more deliverers than judges. During the period of the judges, there was a recurring cycle that we are told about early on in the book of Judges: **“Then the Lord raised up judges who saved them [Israel] out of the power of those who plundered them. And yet they did not listen to their judges; for they played the harlot after other gods and bowed down to them; they soon turned aside from the way in which their fathers had walked, who had obeyed the commandments of the Lord, and they did not do so. Whenever the Lord raised up judges for them, the Lord was with the judge, and he saved them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge; for the Lord was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who afflicted and oppressed them. But whenever the judge died, they turned back and behaved worse than their fathers, going after other gods, serving them and bowing down to them; they did not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways. So the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel; and he said, “...I will not henceforth drive out before them any of the nations that Joshua left when he died, that by them I may test Israel, whether they will take care to walk in the way of the Lord as their fathers did, nor not”** (Judges 2:16-22).

So, that's the background and context – doesn't sound much different from our own day and age, does it? And the reason it sounds pretty much the same is that human nature is pretty much the same. Not much has changed from then to now. We, too, are caught up in individualism with every man and woman doing what is right in his or her own eyes. We, too, are prone to go after other gods, serving them and bowing down to them, refusing to drop any of our practices or stubborn ways, and in so doing we, too, kindle the anger of the Lord. God may go to extreme measures to get our attention in order to draw us back to himself. Like Israel of old, he may even allow us to be given over into the power of those who plunder us and hold us captive. Why? Does this mean God has abandoned us? That God no longer loves us? Not at all! What it does mean is that God loves us so much that he is grabbing us by the scruff of the neck in order to move our hearts to repentance; moving us to an "about face" so that he might be Lord and Master of our lives.

God raised up a deliverer in the person of Gideon, and against all odds, God delivered his people from their enemies with only 300 men. The Scripture lesson clearly tells us why as God says to Gideon: **"The people with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hand, lest Israel boast over me, saying, 'My own hand has saved me'"** (Judges 7:2). If Gideon had marched to victory with thousands of warriors, Israel would have claimed the credit for themselves. Gideon points us forward to that Great Deliverer whom God raised up, who also achieved victory through very strange means. And the number was reduced from 300 down to just one – Jesus Christ. The victory he has won came not through torches, trumpets and smashing clay jars, but through the shedding of his blood upon the tree of the cross. The sins of Israel, the sins of the world, our own sins, were what nailed Jesus to the cross. Through his death, we are given life – full and abundant life which begins now, and is brought to completion in the life to come. As with Gideon and his men, we can claim no credit here. Our own hand has not saved us. The glory and praise all belong to Christ. To God be the glory!

May Gideon's portrait of faith move us to deeper trust and faith in Christ Jesus, our Great Deliverer. Amen.