

“The Tests of Faith, the Evidence of God”

A Dialogue with Rev. Elizabeth D. McLean and Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church

9-30-18

Based upon Judges 6:11-27, 36-40; Hebrews 11:1-3

The time of the judges was a time of uncertainty, change, and challenge for the people of Israel. From about 1200 to 1020 B.C.E., the Israelites, who had moved into the Promised Land under the leadership of Joshua, tried to live as a tribal confederacy, a “theocracy” with God as their invisible king. Their only human leaders were tribal “judges” who were supposed to enforce the law, protect the people, and encourage faithful covenant living. In practice most of them were more like military leaders than judicial or religious authorities, however. Some of the judges, including Ehud and Deborah, were very good. Most were not. As a result, the Israelites swung back and forth from being faithful to unfaithful to God, and the tribes were almost continuously at war either with outside nations that threatened them, or with the people who already occupied the Promised Land when they moved in.

When we pick up today’s story, the territory in which Gideon lived was currently under the control of a marauding desert tribe of Midianites, who rose to power thanks to the power vacuum the last good judge, Deborah, inadvertently created when she successfully conquered the Canaanites. Deborah’s successor had not yet been chosen, so there was no judge to protect the people from the Midianites’ violence and thievery. As a result, our story begins with Gideon in hiding, secretly threshing his wheat behind the wine press, hoping that the Midianites wouldn’t notice him there.

Then an angel of the Lord appears and changes Gideon’s life forever. “The Lord is with you, you mighty warrior,” the angel says by way of greeting. But before he could deliver his message to Gideon, the young man pounced on the angel’s words, throwing them back in his face disdainfully, saying, “Oh yeah? If the Lord is with us, then how come we are being oppressed by the Midianites? Where is God? Why has God allowed this to happen?” Effectively, right off the bat, therefore, we begin with a situation not unlike our own today, in which the circumstances of life are so dark and challenging that it is hard to believe in either the presence or goodness of God.

What kind of events or situations make it hard for human beings in general, or you specifically, to believe in God’s presence today? Have you ever asked, “Where are you God?”

The angel doesn’t provide Gideon with a direct answer to his question. Instead he responds to his theodicy question with a commission. “You say you have a problem with the Midianites? Well you’re God’s answer to that problem. Go deliver Israel from them.” “Are you kidding?” Gideon replies. “I’m the least powerful son of a family in the weakest of tribes. I’m no warrior.” “That’s OK,” the angel replies. “I will be with you.” This makes Gideon nervous. “*Who was this person promising to be with him?*” he wondered. He was concerned because in his day people believed that if you saw God face to face you would die. So just in case he really was

talking to God, he runs and makes an offering of meat and cakes, which the angel promptly sets on fire using his staff instead of a book of matches. This scares Gideon nearly to death because he realizes he is dealing with a divine power. But the angel, who is now the Lord, assures him he will be fine. Then he gives Gideon a trial assignment, to pull down the idols in his father's household.

Still filled with doubt about God's ability or willingness to protect him, Gideon does this at night. This gets him in trouble with the village, and also ultimately gets him a new name, Jerubaal, which means "Let Baal contend with him." But neither the complaints nor the new name stops God's plans for Gideon; instead, God works through him to help him call together an army to take on the real enemy, the Midianites. All the while this is happening, Gideon is plagued with doubts. He doesn't want to go to war without more assurance of God's power and protection. So, he puts God to the test in a very scientific way, using a fleece and morning dew as his tools. First, he wants the fleece to be wet but the ground to be dry. Then, as if realizing that that could still happen naturally if the dew on the ground evaporated before the wet wool, he asks God to do the opposite: make the ground wet, but the fleece dry.

Have you ever tested God in a conscious way? If so how? How do people test God today?

There is a trend in some non-denominational churches to encourage people to test God during the stewardship season. Several churches, including the New Spring Church in South Carolina, invite their congregants to do what they call "a 90-day-tithe challenge."¹ "Tithe to the church for 3 months," they say, "and if you aren't richly blessed for giving that money to God by the end of the time, we will refund your money completely." I can only imagine what a nightmare that presents to the financial secretary of those churches. But beyond the bookkeeping challenges, and the subjectivity of assessing whether one has been blessed by God or not, this practice raises some serious theological concerns about the nature of human beings' relationship with God, and God's purpose in our lives. God is not a vending machine, nor is our relationship supposed to be one of *quid pro quo*.

Do you think it is OK to test God? What kind of evidence would convince you that God exists, or to put it another way, what is your fleece?

According to the synoptic gospels, when Jesus was tempted in the wilderness by Satan or "the Adversary," he said, "Thou shall not put God to the test," quoting *Deuteronomy* 6:16. Yet there are stories in the Bible that show that God does indulge our human need to test occasionally, especially in cases when God is calling someone to do something difficult or to believe something difficult. Moses tested God as well as Gideon. The prophets Isaiah and Malachi invited people to ask God for specific signs, (2 Kings 20:8-11; Mal.3:11), and Jesus' disciple, Thomas, famously insisted that he needed to touch the wounds of the risen Christ before

¹Shellnutt, Kate, "When Tithing Comes With a Money-Back Guarantee," CHRISTIANITY TODAY, June 28, 2016, retrieved from <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2016/june-web-only/faithful-tithing-now-comes-with-money-back-guarantee.html>.

he would believe in the truth of the Resurrection. (John 20:24-29). God wants us to believe, and even calls those who can believe without seeing “blessed.” But God also understands that sometimes we need evidence. That’s why, according to the *Gospel of John*, Jesus did miracles—to provide the people with signs which revealed his true identity.

Do you think God still gives us signs today? What evidence of God has strengthened your faith?

Some of us have been blessed to be given supernatural signs, and others of us have not. But most of the time the signs God gives us are not in the form of miracles, they are in the form of other people—especially when we are living through bad times. Just the other day in the WASHINGTON POST there was an article about the folks in the Carolinas trying to recover from the hurricane, and the people who risked their lives trying to help them. A pastor in the area of a Mount Olive Pentecostal Holiness Church told the rescuers as they gathered in the midst of the storm, “It’s going to be hard to see Jesus, any peace, any hope, in what’s happening today... But those people you are rescuing, you are their peace... You are their hope. You are their salvation.” This is effectively what God said to Gideon and says to us as well. “You’ve got a problem down there. Fix it. I will be with you to help you do that, and you will be the way that others will believe in me.”²

Think for a minute about the tough times you have had in your life. Who are the people who got you through them? Who or what assured you that you were loved, or gave you strength or hope for the future? Just say their names out loud.

You have in your bulletin a statement of faith. It doesn’t look like one at first; it looks like just the opposite. The statement is meant to be read in two directions. From top to bottom, it is a statement of doubt or atheism; from bottom to top, it is a statement of faith.

Let’s read it together:

I live my life according to these beliefs.

God does not exist.

It’s foolish to think

That there is an all-knowing God with a cosmic plan.

That an all-powerful God brings purpose to the pain and suffering in the world.

It is a comforting thought, however

It is only wishful thinking.

“The more you have, the happier you will be.”

Our existence has no grand meaning or purpose.

In a world with no God

There is freedom to be who I want to be

² Wilson, Scott, and Kaplan, Sarah, “Evacuations and Water Rescues on the Increase as N.C. Faces New Threats,” THE WASHINGTON POST, Sept. 17, 2018, A1, A6.

**But with God
Life is an endless cycle of guilt and shame.
Without God
Everything is fine.
It is ridiculous to think
I am lost and in need of saving.³**

I wanted you to have the statement because I think most of us go through life swinging back and forth between preferred directions, almost like the Israelites did. Sometimes it's hard to believe. Other times, by God's grace, our faith is strong. But in those moments when you are having a hard time believing, like Gideon did, keep in mind that God is not absent. You just need a little fleece. That's one of the purposes of the Church. We are supposed to be the fleece for each other. I forgot who said it, but a theologian I admire once said that the Church is the place where we can go after a bad week to be strengthened by being with other people who also believe in goodness, love, generosity, and peace. In other words, it's the place we can go that keeps us sane when the rest of the world is going crazy. We all need that because our world is crazier than ever these days, and it's overwhelming. We all need that because even though "faith is the conviction of things unseen," sometimes in order to have faith, or to maintain our faith in the face of adversity, you need something or someone you can see and touch to remind you of the truth of all those unseen things that matter so much.

Today we are going to be reminded of God's loving presence, and be reminders for each other, by passing pieces of fleece to each other. When the fleece comes to you, take a moment to pat it. Feel just as Gideon did that the fleece is dry. Then, remembering that God in Christ has answered our theodicy questions with a commission, pass the fleece to your neighbor saying, "I am God's fleece. Trust and believe that God is with you." You can say this even if you don't feel God with you one hundred percent, or even if your faith is unsure, because we know through Christ that what you are affirming is true. God is with us all, in times of testing and of grace. He is with us when we don't believe and when we do, and can enable us to serve as fleece without even knowing it. Thanks be to God! Amen.

³ Original source unknown. Edited from various internet sources. One version is available on Youtube at <http://youtu.be/jgFU5Ak88-k>.