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Series: Heroes of Faith

Title: *Gideon: The Fight of Faith*

Preacher: Mark Adams

Scripture: Hebrews 11; Judges 6-8

That was beautiful Rachel and Judi! Thank you for using the amazing talents God has given you that help to remind us of His truly amazing grace.

Many years ago, I served a church in northern Delaware and my responsibilities included discipleship. It came to my attention that one of our children's SS teachers had a behavior problem with the kids in her class. It wasn't because she didn't prepare her lesson properly, it's just that her group happened to have a lot of PK's and DK's and MK's---Preacher's Kids, Deacon's Kids, Missionaries' Kids. Just kidding. They were just an especially rowdy group of 2nd graders.

Well, the solution to our problem was this teacher's husband. You see, he was BIG---VERY BIG---well over six feet tall and well built. Think Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson with a Bible. This big guy's name was Jed and the moment he walked into the classroom the children stopped misbehaving. Jed's huge presence was just too intimidating. In fact, the teacher learned that with Jed at her side, she had no reason to fear losing control of her kids. All she had to do was to nod to her husband. Jed would stand up, and when he did, towering over those kids, they would get right back into line.

This morning we are studying another Hero of the Faith in Hebrews 11. A man named Gideon. Gideon's life illustrates the fact that one of the keys to victory in life is our understanding that we have Someone like Jed---only much bigger---at our side. Of course I'm referring to our Heavenly Father, and with Him at our side---well, like those rowdy little ones, the problems of life get right back into line. Gideon's life story is recorded in chapters 6-8 of the book of Judges. Open your Bibles to those pages and keep them open. Gideon lived during a sad chapter in the history of Israel that spanned seven repeated cycles. The people would rebel against God, begin to worship the pagan gods around them, suffer the painful consequences of that, cry out to God for help, and He would respond by sending a judge who would deliver them. For a while the people would return to God but when the judge died, they would rebel against God again and the cycle would start over.

Gideon was the fourth of these judges and his ministry began with the same phrase that got all the other judges started. It's in the first verse of chapter 6: ***"[Once] again, the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord."*** This time the consequence of worshiping false gods came in the form of a group of people known as the Midianites. And their mode of attacking the Israelites was unique. They used something called a camel. Now, that may not sound like much of a threat. We are familiar with sophisticated weapons of war like smart bombs, chain machine guns, and stealth bombers. But in the 12th century B.C., camels gave the Midianites an enormous military advantage. I mean, not only were they ugly enough to scare the bravest soldier, but camels also gave the Midianites a mobile, long-range, swift, attack-capability against the Hebrews, who were entirely dependent of foot soldiers. You see, a camel can travel for three or four days with a heavy load on its back, and cover about 300 miles without food or water. So, instead of invading and occupying Israel, they simply waited until harvest time. They would move in from the desert, cross the Jordan in huge numbers, like a plague of locusts, stripping it bare of grain, vegetables, fruit, and livestock. Then, with their camels loaded down with spoils, they would cross back into the desert and live there until the next harvest time.

They did this for seven years and left Israel in a desperate situation. People were reduced to hiding food in mountain dens and caves. This was incredibly humiliating to Israel. They knew they were vulnerable and that

an attack could come at any moment so not only were they constantly hungry, they lived in constant fear. Verse 6 puts it this way, ***“They were brought very low because of Midian.”***

Then, Gideon appears on the scene. His name means “hacker” or “hewer” which would seem to be a name for a man of great strength and courage. But, when we get our first look at Gideon, he’s anything BUT that. He’s cowering under a tree, threshing grain in a wine press. Normally a man would do so on a wooden threshing floor, in an exposed place so that the wind could carry away the chaff. He would use a threshing sledge pulled by oxen. But Gideon was trying to separate the grain from the chaff by walking on it in his bare feet. And he was doing this hidden under a tree for fear of the marauding Midianites, which is why I’m preaching out here, hidden behind one of the pine trees next to the Youth Barn.

Well, as Gideon was doing this a man approached, sat down under the tree, and watched. Actually, it wasn’t a man---it was the angel of the Lord. And that phrase is used in the Old Testament to refer to Jesus Himself, before His incarnation, taking the form of an angel and visiting the earth.

Now, if I didn’t know the Lord better, I might think that He was mocking Gideon with the first words He spoke. He said, ***“The Lord is with you, Oh VALIANT warrior!”*** I mean, Gideon was anything but valiant at this point. He was more of a cowardly, beleaguered victim. I’m reminded of the old story of the man who came to his psychiatrist with a problem. He said, *“Doctor, you must help me. Everything’s going wrong. I feel worthless. My friends tell me I have a terrible inferiority complex. Can you help me?”* So, the psychiatrist told him that he would give him some tests and evaluate him. A week later, the man came back and the psychiatrist said, *“Friend, I have some good news and some bad news for you. The good news is that we have proved you DO NOT have a complex. There is no doubt about that. The bad news is you ARE inferior.”*

Well, that could have been Gideon. He WAS inferior---at least in the judgement of his peers---and in verse 15 he pointed this out to God. He said that he was of the tribe of Manasseh, which was the lowest and weakest tribe in all Israel. Then, he said that his family was the lowest and weakest family in the tribe of Manasseh. Further, he was the lowest and weakest member of his family. So, he was the lowest and weakest member of the lowest and weakest family of the lowest and weakest tribe of all Israel! Pretty low! I mean, Gideon was not a “big” guy in any sense of the world. He was no Samson, no David---definitely no Jed!

Well, God’s reply to all of Gideon’s excuses of inferiority was this: ***“I will be with you.”*** That’s the main point that I want us to take from his faith story. You see when it comes to dealing with the struggles of life it’s not a matter of who you are---but rather Who’s with you. And Gideon definitely needed help in understanding this because in his mind God was a little, distant, not very caring, not very powerful, faraway God. And, when you and I make the mistake of thinking of God in that flawed way; well, we live in a world where, like Gideon, we are always facing defeat. We have to settle with a “threshing wheat in a winepress” kind of life, because the Midianites of our world---including the PANDEMICS---are too big for us. In our minds, all we can do is strive to survive.

Well, God told him, ***“Gideon, go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian’s hand. Am I not sending you?”*** ***“But Lord,” Gideon asked, “How can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh and I am the least in my family”*** (Judges 6:14-15).

Now, how did God respond to that? Did he say, *“No Gideon! You’re not little and incapable! Your natural charm and good looks are utterly sufficient for the task! You CAN do this!”* Did God say that? No. Look at verse 16 where God said to Gideon, ***“I will be with you and you will strike down the Midianites as if they were but one man.”*** (Judges 6:16).

This is the hinge on which everything turns; not just for Gideon, but for us. You see, what is unthinkable and undoable on our own becomes unstoppable when we realize that GOD is with us. God was teaching Gideon, and He is teaching us, that we don't have to be afraid of the "Midianites of life." God is GREAT; greater than anything we face and He is always with us.

Gideon began to understand that in the first task God gave him. He was to tear down an altar to Baal in his neighborhood. Now, the Midianites and many other people in ancient Mesopotamia worshiped this false god. And that worship involved using immoral sexual acts to supposedly make the earth fertile. It also included infant sacrifice. In short, the worship of Baal was evil, wicked, and satanic. It had to end, and God chose Gideon to do that by tearing Baal's altar down.

But here's the kicker: this altar was not built by the Midianites. It was built by the Israelites. Worse yet, it was built by Gideon's own father. Now, how often do you think Gideon had stood up to his dad? I'm thinking NEVER which is why the Bible says, ***"Gideon did as the Lord told him. But because he was afraid of his family and the men of the town, he did it at night rather than in the daytime."***

Well, the cool thing is when Gideon's dad found out what happened he responded by saying, ***"If Baal is really God, Baal can take care of himself."*** Apparently, Gideon's big-God faith was contagious.

But then God called Gideon to go up against the camel-riding Midianites to free his people. He was understandably afraid and responded to God's command by saying, ***"Lord, if,"***---not when, but--- ***"if You will save Israel by my hand as You have promised—look, I will place a wool fleece on the threshing floor. If there is dew only on the fleece and all the ground is dry, then I will know that You will save Israel by my hand, as You said."*** This is where the practice of "setting out a fleece" as a way of discerning God's will started. And I want to make sure you realize that this fleece deal is not a positive thing. God had already promised Gideon he was going to save Israel. So, the fleece was not an expression of trust---it was an expression of immature "walk by sight" faith. I'm reminded of the story about a guy who is driving down the road, sees a bakery, and says, ***"Alright, Lord, if there's a parking space in front of that bakery when I drive by, then I'll know it's Your will for me to go inside and eat a donut."*** Sure enough, on his fifth time around the block, he found an open parking space.

Well, as you see here in Judges, God was gracious. He did with the fleece as Gideon requested---twice. And with that fleece stuff behind him, Gideon was finally ready to go. In chapter 7 Gideon and his men went to war against the Midianites. Gideon recruited 32,000 soldiers to join him. The Midianites had an army of 135,000 so Gideon was outnumbered by a ratio of four-to-one. God came to Gideon and said something like this: ***"The enemy has 135,000 troops. You have 32,000. You've got number problems."*** I'm imagining Gideon saying, ***"God, I'm so glad to hear you say that! I was afraid you were going to make me go into battle outnumbered four-to-one!"*** But God replied: ***"No, Gideon. That's not your number problem. The issue is you don't need as many soldiers as you have, because this is My battle. I want you to send home everyone who's afraid."***

Well, it turned out the majority of his troops were afraid. Twenty-two thousand troops went home, leaving Gideon with 10,000 soldiers meaning Gideon was now outnumbered more than thirteen-to-one. God came again to Gideon and said: You've STILL got a number problem! ***"There are still too many men. Take them down to the water, and I will sift them for you there. If I say, 'This one shall go with you,' he shall go; but if I say, 'This one shall not go with you,' he shall not go.*** (Judges 7:4) ***Separate those who lap the water with their tongues like a dog from those who kneel down to drink."*** How many lapped with their hands to their mouths? Right! Only 300. All the rest got down on their knees to drink. The Lord said to Gideon, ***"With the three hundred men that lapped I will save you and give the Midianites into your hands."*** (Judges 7:7)

Have you ever wondered why God chose the dog-lappers? I've heard people say they were picked because they proved themselves more attentive to the enemy if they were going to be attacked. That could be it, but I don't think so. You see, in the Bible, any time someone is compared to a dog or referred to as a dog, it's always derogatory, never complimentary. I know that makes all you cat people happy. The point is the Bible is not sentimental about dogs like we are with our dogs today. We love our dogs; we care for our dogs.

By the way, I have a new grand-dog. Andrew and Becca bought an Australian Shepherd puppy. They named him Dallas after Becca's favorite Christian author: Dallas Willard. He's so cute. His hair is so soft and he loves to play. He even loves to pray, here he is at his kneeling bench.

Last week, Dallas swallowed two grapes and when Becca and Andrew found out grapes are very poisonous to dogs, they rushed him to the vet. The doc charged him hundreds of dollars for the treatment to save the little guy, but they happily paid it because they love Dallas. And I bet most of you would do the same thing, perhaps even you cat people.

Well, dogs are not looked at that way in the Bible. They are always pictured as a dirty, detestable thing; right down there with rats, so to compare Gideon's 300 men to dogs was not a compliment.

Doug Stewart puts it like this: *"Most likely, the idea is that the guys who lapped water like dogs, drank in a way we would consider geeky—unclean—nerdish. In short, these were not the elite troops. The whole point of God winnowing the troops down was to make clear that victory was God's alone. So God left Gideon with 300 dog lappers—300 geeky guys who would trip over their own swords."*

Well, now the Midian soldiers outnumbered the Israelites 450-to-1. To reassure Gideon, God gave him one more sign in the form of a Midianite soldier's dream. That gave Gideon the courage to fight; he did and miraculously, the Midianites took off running. Israel was free, and they knew Who freed them; it wasn't those 300 dog-lappers. No, it was the one True ALMIGHTY God.

You know like Gideon and his peers, we all deal with fear. I came across an article in the New York Times that says the scientists working on the human genome project have identified what they call "the worry gene." It's the SLC 684 gene on chromosome 17q12. People who have the short version of that gene are apparently especially prone to worry. I bet that right now many of you are afraid you have the short version of that gene! See? Worry just gets in all our hearts, doesn't it?

The thing we have to remember is that no matter how short our SLC 684 gene is and no matter how long our worry lists are; God is enough, MORE than enough. This is why the Apostle Paul said: *I can do all things. I can sit in a prison cell and face anything life has to throw at me though Him Who gives me strength—through Jesus.* If you do not know Jesus personally then hear this: He is bigger than your problems, bigger than your failures. He is bigger than your regrets, bigger than your sin and guilt. The empty tomb that Peggy talked about this week proves He is even bigger than death itself. If you ask Him to, He will forgive you and come into your life FOREVER. You will never face a struggle alone again. God---almighty God---will be with you wherever you go.

Let's pray.