



THE STORY



Date: October 28-29, 2017
Speaker: Paul McIlwraith
Scripture: The Story – Chapter 8

I am a bit of a news junkie. Part of my morning routine is to begin each day reading the local newspaper, the London Free Press. There were a series of articles published in the paper about a month ago, that caught my attention for all the wrong reasons. They were focused on the trial of an inmate who had beaten a fellow inmate to death at the Elgin- Middlesex Detention Centre (EMDC). I will spare you all the details, the crime was particularly gruesome but these articles did shed more light on the deplorable conditions in this, our local detention centre.

EMDC is a 450 bed maximum security jail located right here in south London. Concerns have been raised specifically over the last 3 years about overcrowding, which has led to increased violence and fighting. There have been four deaths at the facility in the last four months and there is genuine concern for the safety of the inmates, the prison guards and visitors. The smuggling of illegal drugs and alcohol into the facility is rampant and the correctional officers are grossly understaffed, underfunded and lack the necessary equipment to really turn things around. Rehabilitation programs have been cut which leaves correctional officers with little recourse but to lock inmates in their cells for extended periods of time which just creates boredom which causes frustration and tension which perpetuates the violence. It's a vicious cycle. And there is an outcry from those who are familiar with this facility.

One local politician stated that EMDC is a full blown crisis situation that if not addressed immediately could reach a tipping point. *How many deaths does it take for the government to take a serious look?* He asked.

A London Lawyer stated that, *Nothing short of a provincial inquiry will get to the root of the problems at what experienced inmates call Ontario's worst jail.*

Understandably, those in the know are outraged and calling for action from the top. How can such mayhem, disorder and evil acts occur when those at the top know what is going on and refuse to do anything about it? Seems ridiculous doesn't it?

You know we have been immersed in this wonderful adventure as a church over the last eight weeks, called The Story. And we have been tracking the unfolding of what we call God's upper story. We began, "In the beginning", with God creating the heavens and the earth. On the sixth day, he created humanity, his crowning achievement and God's plan from the beginning was for humanity to steward and govern over the earth and its' resources, flourish in the land and to be in relationship with our creator God.

But, very early in the narrative this plan goes off the tracks as humanity chooses to go their own way, disobey God, sin enters the picture and throws a huge wedge in the relationship between us and God. But as we have seen over the last several weeks, God does not slink off in a corner somewhere with his thumb in his mouth pouting, that his people don't like him anymore. He puts a plan in motion to bring us back to him. He begins by building a nation through Abraham and promises to bless them but still the people disobey. He saves them from a famine through Joseph but still the people disobey. He rescues them from slavery, through Moses, but still the people disobey. He leads them right to the border of a promised land flowing with milk and honey but still the people grumble and complain and disobey and their lack of faith causes a whole generation of Israelites from entering into their

inheritance, the land. But, when they finally have the faith to receive it, it marks some of the best years in the history of God's people. Oh, Joshua and his armies had to defeat over thirty barbaric Canaanite Kings and win over 20 battles but evil was eradicated from the land and hope was restored.

Joshua 21:44 or page 100

The Lord gave them rest on every side, just as he had sworn to their ancestors. Not one of their enemies withstood them; the Lord gave all their enemies into their hands.

Then as the book of Joshua concluded and chapter seven ends, we see the inheritance, the land is divided amongst the twelve tribes of Israel. The people renew their covenant and relationship with God and then Joshua, after a purposed filled life, dies and is buried in the Promised Land. Nice. You just want to close up the book and leave it with a warm, fuzzy feeling, don't you? But, I had to go and open chapter 8 this week. Did you get that same feeling when you were doing your reading?

When I make the drive to my hometown of Waterloo, I often tune into the local radio station. I sometimes catch a contest they run called the Big Bag of Cash. A listener can call in and the host presses a button which reveals what is in the first bag of cash. The listener can choose to go on to the next bag or take the money. The idea is that you could potentially win \$25 000 dollars if you continue to risk, and move on to the next bag and the next bag as the money continues to build. But there is always the danger that the next bag will sound a buzzer and you lose every. And I find myself, talking to the radio.

When the person has gone on to four, five bags, I am saying. *Okay, whoa. You are good. Take the money!* But inevitably, the person chooses to risk, take just one more chance and crash, they lose everything. That is kind of what I felt like as I began reading chapter 8 of The Story this week. *No, no, stop.* All the good news of chapter 7 seems to come unraveled in chapter 8.

We have now moved on to the book of Judges in the Old Testament.

Judges 2:10-13 or page 103

After that whole generation had been gathered to their ancestors, another generation grew up who knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel.¹¹ Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord and served the Baals. ¹²They forsook the Lord, the God of their ancestors, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed and worshiped various gods of the peoples around them. They aroused the Lord's anger ¹³ because they forsook him and served Baal and the Ashstoreths.

Once Joshua died, the next generation forgot God. There was a failure of one generation to teach the next generation how to love, obey and follow God.

I officiated at the funeral of a 100 year-old woman on Friday. And there was one common theme that was shared about this woman by her children and grandchildren. She was a woman of faith. She loved her family and faithfully served and loved her God. That is what they remembered about her. That is what defined her life. And that was the legacy she passed onto her family.

Parents, Grandparents do you see why it is so vitally important that our Christian faith is taught and lived out in the home, for our children and grandchildren. We can't just leave this one up to the Christian schools or the pastors and Sunday school teachers once a week. When God is not regularly presented as that to which we praise and worship and turn to in both the joys and sorrows of life, the next generation will choose to turn somewhere else. They will find something else to put their hope and trust in even if it is fleeting. They are called idols. Anything that takes the place of God in our life is an idol. That is what is happening in chapter 8 of The Story and the book of Judges in the bible. The people have replaced Yahweh, the God of Israel, who saved them and rescued them and provided for them and instead they are bowing down and worshipping Canaanite idols. This generation of Israelites abandoned the faith of their parents and instead worshipped the gods of their neighbours.

And before we become too judgmental of these Israelites, I think we need to ask ourselves, as we look back on our week, or maybe the past month,

where are we putting our hope and trust? What is it that gets our praise and worship these days? What gets the best of our time and talent and money? It is God, capital G or gods, small g? What are our idols today because we live in a culture that is just as capable of neglecting God, who saved us and provided for us, through his son, Jesus and instead worship the gods of our culture?

Here is the interesting thing. All the various forms of 21st century idolatry seem to have one thing at their core: self. We may no longer bow down to idols and images made of bronze or stone. Instead, our North American culture specifically worships at the altar of the god of self and this brand of modern idolatry takes various forms. Maybe it's materialism. Which feeds our need to build our egos through the acquisition of more "stuff." Our homes are filled, our garages are filled, our storage containers are filled. We stand in line all night to buy the newest gadget or cell phone on the day it is released. But have you noticed, we never seem to be content indulging our materialistic desires. Maybe because it's the evil one's trap to keep our focus on ourselves and not on God. God, the only one that can actually fill that void in our lives. But we keep stuffing things into it!

Maybe our idol is our careers and jobs. Many of us spend 60-80 hours a week working. Weekends, (too busy for church) and even vacations, our laptops are humming away and our minds are preoccupied with thoughts of how to make our businesses more successful, how to get that promotion, how to get the next raise, how to close the next deal. In the meantime, have you noticed? Our families and marriages are crumbling. We fool ourselves into thinking we are doing it for them, to give them a better life. But the truth is we are doing it for ourselves, to increase our self-esteem by appearing more successful in the eyes of the world. Do you know what King Solomon called that type of activity in the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes? Meaningless. A chasing after the wind. And unfortunately some of us may wake up one day and discover how true that sentiment is.

I could go on to other idols, drugs, alcohol, food, sex, porn. What are your idols? What is replacing God in your life? I think if we really analyze it, doesn't it all come down to a preoccupation with self?

We are determined to make ourselves the god of our lives and that type of thinking goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden, doesn't it? When Satan tempted Eve to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, do you remember his words to them? If you eat, *you will be like God*. This is the sin that has followed humanity ever since- the desire to be our own god and look at where it has gotten us. Look at where God's people are.

Judges 2:14-15 or page 103

In his anger against Israel the Lord gave them into the hands of raiders who plundered them. He sold them into the hands of their enemies all around, whom they were no longer able to resist. ¹⁵ Whenever Israel went out to fight, the hand of the Lord was against them to defeat them, just as he had sworn to them. They were in great distress.

And that surprises us doesn't it. We gasp. The Lord got angry! He gave his people into the hands of their enemies. His hand was against them when they went into battle. How does this jive with what we looked at last week when God said, *I will never leave you nor forsake you?* Or if *God is the same, yesterday, today and forever* which it states in scripture, how does this seemingly vengeful God align with the God of love picture in the New Testament? Have you ever wondered about that?

Do you mind if I take a few moments to address this theme of why it appears that God actually condones acts of violence, some have even said genocide, throughout the Old Testament? I think to gloss over it would be easy but unfaithful to The Story of God. I confess that I certainly do not know all of the answers and there are many parts of this that stump me, as well. But let me make a few points.

First, let me remind you of God's vision for creation and for humanity right from the beginning. His desire was to come and be with humanity in a beautiful garden of his creation. The triune God desires to do life with humanity. To be in relationship with us. And it would only make sense that God would want to ensure that we, humanity embraced that same vision and passion as well. That we too, desired to be in relationship with him. He did instill in us through our early ancestors, Adam and Eve, the capacity to choose. Unfortunately, they

chose to disobey God, and sin and evil enter their lives and it has been with us ever since.

Sin and Evil destroy relationship with God, do you see that? But God's deepest desire is to be in relationship with us. So, doesn't it make sense that God would do anything to eliminate sin and evil from the world? What would we think of a God who would stand back and do nothing?

Think back on that story I shared at the beginning of this message about the Elgin Middlesex Detention Centre. The overcrowding, violence, drug and alcohol abuse. The deaths. The lack of funding for proper equipment for the correctional officers to clean things up and retain some semblance of law and order. Didn't it raise a question in you? Why isn't someone doing something? Why aren't those in charge doing something to correct this situation? To do nothing is at best, negligent at worst, criminal. Isn't it?

So why do we think any differently about God. He created this world. This all belongs to God. He set the rules, the guidelines. We are his creation, he is not ours. What would we think of a God who wasn't fiercely protective to maintain all that he has created?

Psalms 145:8

*The Lord is gracious and compassionate,
slow to anger and rich in love.*

These are qualities of God. Gracious, compassionate, slow to anger, rich in love. So, if a quality of God is that he is slow to anger, you have to figure that any part of scripture that says that God was angry, it must have taken an awful lot to get him to that point, agreed?

Do you know those people in your life, they are slow to anger? When they do reach that point of being angry, you know...something major must have happened. I would say, my wife, Carolyn is slow to anger. But, at those odds times when she has reached her boiling point. There is usually a good reason. And usually that reason is, Me! I take note of it. To change my behavior. I want to be in loving relationship with my wife!

When things went off the rails right away with Adam and Eve, God could have blown up the whole thing and started again, but he didn't. It got to a

point in Genesis 6, when evil was so pervasive that God regretted he even made humanity. So, he sent a flood, but he didn't destroy everything, he saw something good in Noah and spared him and his family and some animals.

But once the earth was repopulated after the flood, that sin and evilness spread again. The term, Canaanites is a bit of a catch all in the bible that represents the various Pagan tribes and nations that inhabited the land at this time. Specifically, the Promised Land. And they were a brutal people. Archeology gives some hints about what the Canaanites did. This is where I give the warning, *some of this content may be disturbing* but it is important for us to understand.

In one of the places of Canaanite idol worship, archeologists found several stone pillars and great numbers of jars containing remains of newborn babies. When a new house was built by a Canaanite, a child would be sacrificed and its body built into the wall to bring good luck to the rest of the family. Firstborn children in Canaanites homes were often sacrificed to Molech, a giant hollow bronze image in which a fire was built. Parents placed their live children in its red hot hands and the babies would roll down into the fire. The sacrifice was deemed invalid if a parent displayed grief. Instead mothers were supposed to dance and sing. Even the Israelites, God's own people, later copied this practice in a valley near Jerusalem called Gehenna. See how this evil spreads. Hundreds of jars containing infant bones have been found there. It may not be surprising that in the gospels, Jesus used Gehenna as an illustration for hell.

There was also a great deal of sexual sin among the Canaanites. They believed that cultic prostitution was important to please their gods so that the land would be fertile and rain would come. Sexual disease was rampant in this society. Young people were forced into prostitution and abused to the point of death. The brutality and debauchery was so evil that God said about the Canaanites, in

Leviticus 18:25

the land vomited out its inhabitants.

Yet, in spite of all this and so much I haven't even described, God did not hurry to judge the

Canaanites. He was slow to anger, gracious, compassionate and rich in love.

In Genesis 15, God tells Abraham that he will give the Canaanites, who are inhabiting the land that God is going to his people, 400 years to turn from their evil ways before the Israelites take the land. But nothing changes.

In Chapter 7 of The Story, we found out that the people of Canaan knew Israel was coming, to take the land God had given them. In fact, Rahab, a Canaanite, says in,

Joshua 2:9 or page 91

"I know that the Lord has given you this land and that a great fear of you has fallen on us, so that all who live in this country are melting in fear because of you.

Once God's people stepped into the land, the Canaanite city of Jericho had six additional days to turn from evil ways while the Israelites marched circles around it. Still nothing. So judgment finally came on the seventh day, when it all came tumbling down. God judges *swiftly* when He finally acts, but He patiently warns and allows time for repentance.

Those who wished to leave had time and opportunity. The point was to destroy the evil Canaanite *culture* rather than the individual Canaanite *people*. Only individuals who stubbornly refused to leave were destroyed with military force. Yes, that included children but they did not have a hope to survive without their parents in this depraved culture. But, God gave no instructions to hunt down and kill Canaanites who left the land peacefully. Later in the Bible, Canaanite individuals like Uriah the Hittite show up as righteous character. Rahab herself, a Canaanite prostitute turned from her evil ways and escaped the city of Jericho before it was destroyed. She is listed in the gospel of Matthew as being in the lineage of Christ, himself. God's judgment was not based on racism or favoritism.

God is never arbitrary or unjust, despite how some events appear at first glance. The same people who are angry because God doesn't do anything about all the evil in the world are the first to cry foul when He exacts judgment. But, you can't have it both ways.

As I said earlier, there are still many questions I have, things I don't understand. But this much I do know. I have given my life to Jesus and chosen to trust and obey God. As hard as it may be for me to understand sometimes, I do believe God knows all the background and all mitigating circumstances. The Upper Story. I do not. His patience and forgiveness are immense. He *waits* for us to turn to him. He gives us an opportunity to choose to be in relationship with him. He gave us Jesus. But the bible says, he won't wait forever. Judgement is coming. He will eradicate evil. Anything that stands in the way of his vision for humanity.

Now after that rather lengthy caveat, let's return to Chapter 8 of The Story, the Lord is angry with his people, his hand is against them and they are in great distress. But notice once again, God does not leave them there.

Judges 2:16 or page 104

Then the Lord raised up judges, who saved them out of the hands of these raiders.

The Lord does not leave them in the plight that they created for themselves. He raises up Judges. These are not judges in the legal sense that we know them today but judges in this day were leaders of the people. Throughout the book of Judges and chapter 8 of the Story, we see that God appoints a series of 12 judges. Each time it is in response to his people losing their way, turning their back on God and worshipping idols. God gives them into the hands of their enemy. They get in trouble. They cry out to God to deliver them. God raises up another Judge to save them. When that judge dies, they go back to worshipping idols. It is a vicious and pathetic cycle all throughout this chapter.

Of the twelve judges, there are men and a woman. Some meet with more success than others. Some lead for a short time, others lead for years. Some are household names, Deborah and Samson others are more obscure, Jair and Tola. Most of chapter 8 in The Story describes the events surrounding two judges in particular. Deborah and Gideon. If you were around in the summer, you might remember I preached a message on Deborah.

If you have forgotten, I will give you a hint to refresh your memory. I had a hammer, a tent peg

and a watermelon head. Remember?! Go on our app or web site and have a listen if you weren't here. But in these last few moments I just want to say some things about Gideon.

In Judges 6 or page 108 in your books, we see that the Israelites have again gotten themselves in trouble. They cry out to God and he hears their cries once again and he sends them a leader, a judge. His name is Gideon. Now I don't know what you look for in a leader but in times of trouble and despair, when the enemy seems to be advancing. You need someone who is going to take charge, right? Someone who instills some hope in you. Like Superman or Wonder Woman or Winston Churchill. Someone brave, confident and assured. And God sends his people, Gideon. Let's look at his credentials.

Judges 6:14-15 or page 108

*The Lord turned to him and said, "Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian's hand. Am I not sending you?"
15 "Pardon me, my lord," Gideon replied, "but how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family."*

Anyone in here remember back in the day, we use to play sandlot baseball or road hockey and you'd have to pick teams. The two best players are the captains and they proceed to pick teams, who do they pick first? The next best players. All the way down to the last picked. Who gets picked last? It's the worst players. The weakest of the weak. I know I just took a few of you back to some pretty miserable memories of childhood but that is Gideon.

15 "Pardon me, my lord," Gideon replied, "but how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family."

Can you imagine, it is like this last player picked for the baseball team is the one that is going to step up and hit the home run to win the game. That almost never happens. God chooses, Gideon, a lowly farmer, as the unlikely and improbable leader to save the Israelite people from their enemies. Do you remember the theme we have seen emerging in God's story over the last several weeks?

God chooses unlikely people, the ones that we probably wouldn't. Not the smartest or best looking but those with hearts set on him, to do the most unlikely things.

If you are sitting here today and wondering whether God can use you. There is precedent, it seems that everything, every person God called to be the conduit of his work and power in the bible was the most unlikely and they even had doubts themselves. Did you notice how God answered Gideon's natural self-doubt? *how can I save Israel?* He used five words. Five words that every one of us should have written down and referred to often. Do you know what they are?

Judges 6:16 or page 108

"I will be with you."

How are you going to do it? *I will be with you.* You won't be going it alone, Gideon, I will be with you. We are in this together when you rely on me.

Let me ask you something, what enemy are you facing today? What circumstance is looming large in your life right at this moment? Maybe you are being called to take on some big challenge and you just don't feel ready, competent or equipped. Just like Gideon. Remember these 5 words from God, *I will be with you.* If you are familiar with Gideon's story. Not only did God call a relative newbie to lead his army into battle against the enemy. God started to reduce his troops. Gideon went from a robust army of 32 000 to a meagre 300. Three hundred, against approximately 200 000 enemy soldiers. That would be like a team of 5-6 year old Tim bit hockey team playing the Austin Matthews led Toronto Maple Leafs. It would be a slaughter. But Gideon's faith and confidence is growing in God's promise, *I will be with you.* And God gives him a stunning victory.

But let's be clear, this victory belonged to God. He used a man, the lowest man, in the lowest tribe of Israel, to lead a miniscule army of 300 of God's people against a formidable enemy. God provides victory in response to the faith and obedience of Gideon. Do you know that there are times when God give us, you and me, an enemy, an obstacle to demonstrate areas of our lives where we are trying to go it alone, live independently from Him? We indulge in things that maybe make us feel good for

a time or worship things, idols that are temporary and fleeting. But God does not leave us there, if we turn to him, cry out to him. *I will be with you*, he promises. He loves us too much to leave us sitting there. He does everything that he can to get us to take our attention away from what the world offers and instead refocus on Him. To cast out, yes even slaughter the sin and evil that seeks to destroy our lives so that we can find life anew in relationship with Him. *I will be with you*.

Do you ever have fears? So did Gideon. So do I. Do you ever wonder if you have enough resources? So did Gideon. So do I. Do you ever wonder if you have what it takes? So did Gideon. So do I.

But as he was with Noah, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Joshua and Gideon. So, God is with us. *I will be with you*. May you rest in that assurance, God is with you, no matter what obstacle, and no matter what enemy you face today as you turn into him and not away.

I will be with you. Does that trigger anything in you? Anything else you may have read that Jesus said in the New Testament? Just after Jesus' death and resurrection and just before he ascended into heaven, Jesus says to his followers gathered around him we have become known as the Great Commission.

Matthew 28:19-20, he calls them to their life mission,

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

I will be with you. That is what communion is all about.

Points to Ponder

THE STORY

A Few Good Men...and Women

Chapter 8

With a friend, your family or in your small group, discuss the following questions.

1. What reasons can you give for why the Israelites kept repeating their downward cycle of sin?
2. Discuss idol worship in our 21st century culture. What are the things that can take the place of God in your life? Does our devotion to these things constitute idolatry? Why or why not?
3. What have been your experiences with the anger of God? Do you consider God, slow to anger?
4. God used Israel's enemies to turn them back to himself. Have you ever had a painful or dangerous experience that led you back to God?
5. What would you think of a God that didn't act to eradicate evil in the world? What do you think of a God that seems to condone violence in the Old Testament?
6. What does God's choice of Deborah as judge during this time reveal about God's view of women?
7. If you have ever felt uncertain about your gifts and abilities, how could the story of Gideon encourage you?

Prayer and Action Item

Pray for one another out of the key points that were discussed. Pray for those who have a struggle with the violence that God seems to condone in the bible. Pray for understanding of God's upper story in the midst of His love and compassion for his people.