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June 23rd: Judges 6 & 1 Thessalonians 2:1-16

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The calling of Gideon. Presenting a trustworthy message.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Judges chapter 6 1 When the people of Israel cried out to the Lord on account of the Midianites, the Lord sent a prophet to the people of Israel. 2 And he said to them, Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, I led you up from Egypt, and brought you out of the house of slavery. 3 And I delivered you from the hand of the Egyptians, and from the hand of all who oppressed you, and drove them out before you, and gave you their land.

4 And I said to you, I am the Lord your God. You shall not fear the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. 5 But you have not obeyed my voice.

6 Now the angel of the Lord came and sat under the terebinth at Ophrah, which belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, while his son Gideon was beating out wheat in the winepress to hide it from the Midianites. 7 And the angel of the Lord appeared to him and said to him, The Lord is with you, O mighty man of valor. 8 And Gideon said to him, Please my lord, if the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us? 9 And where

are all his wonderful deeds that our fathers recounted to us, saying, Did not the Lord bring us up from Egypt? 10 But now the Lord has forsaken us and given us into the hand of Midian.

11 And the Lord turned to him and said, Go in this might of yours and save Israel from the hand of Midian. Do not I send you? 12 And he said to him, Please Lord, how can I save Israel? Behold, my clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house. 13 And the Lord said to him, But I will be with you, and you shall strike the Midianites as one man.

14 And he said to him, If now I have found favor in your eyes, then please show me a sign that it is you who speak with me. 15 Please do not depart from here until I come to you and bring out my present and set it before you. 16 And he said, I will stay till you return.

17 So Gideon went into his house and prepared a young goat and unleavened cakes from an ephor of flour, the meat he put in a basket, and the broth he put in a pot, and brought them to him under the terebinth and presented them. 18 And the angel of God said to him, Take the meat and the unleavened cakes and put them on this rock and pour the broth over them. And he did so.

19 Then the angel of the Lord reached out the tip of the staff that was in his hand and touched the meat and the unleavened cakes, and fire sprang up from the rock and consumed the meat and the unleavened cakes. And the angel of the Lord vanished from his sight. 20 Then Gideon perceived that he was the angel of the Lord.

21 And Gideon said, Alas, O Lord God! for now I have seen the angel of the Lord face to face. 22 But the Lord said to him, Peace be to you. Do not fear, you shall not die.

23 Then Gideon built an altar there to the Lord and called it The Lord is Peace. To this day it still stands at Ophrah, which belongs to the Abiezrites. 24 That night the Lord said to him, Take your father's bull and the second bull seven years old, and pull down the altar of Baal that your father has, and cut down the Asherah that is beside it, and build an altar to the Lord your God on the top of the stronghold here, with stones laid in due order.

25 Then take the second bull and offer it as a burnt offering with the wood of the Asherah that you shall cut down. 26 So Gideon took ten men of his servants and did as the Lord had told him. But because he was too afraid of his family and the men of the town to do it by day, he did it by night.

When the men of the town rose early in the morning, behold, the altar of Baal was broken down, and the Asherah beside it was cut down, and the second bull was offered on the altar that had been built. 27 And they said to one another, Who has done this

thing? And after they had searched and inquired, they said, Gideon the son of Joash has done this thing. 28 Then the men of the town said to Joash, Bring out your son, that he may die, for he has broken down the altar of Baal and cut down the Asherah beside it.

29 But Joash said to all who stood against him, Will you contend for Baal? or will you save him? Whoever contends for him shall be put to death by morning. If he is a god, let him contend for himself, because his altar has been broken down. 30 Therefore on that day Gideon was called Jerobael, that is to say, Let Baal contend against him, because he broke down his altar.

31 Now all the Midianites and the Amalekites and the people of the east came together, and they crossed the Jordan and encamped in the valley of Jezreel. 32 But the Spirit of the Lord clothed Gideon, and he sounded the trumpet, and the Abiezrites were called out to follow him. 33 And he sent messengers throughout all Manasseh, and they too were called out to follow him.

And he sent messengers to Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali, and they went up to meet them. 34 Then Gideon said to God, If you will save Israel by my hand, as you have said, behold, I am laying a fleece of wool on the threshing floor. If there is dew on the fleece alone, and it is dry on all the ground, then I shall know that you will save Israel by my hand, as you have said.

And it was so. 35 When he rose early next morning and squeezed the fleece, he wrung enough dew from the fleece to fill a bowl with water. 36 Then Gideon said to God, Let not your anger burn against me.

Let me speak just once more. Please let me test just once more with the fleece. Please let it be dry on the fleece only, and on all the ground let there be dew.

And God did so that night, and it was dry on the fleece only, and on all the ground there was dew. In Judges chapter 6 we move on to a new judge, Gideon, and with him a new enemy of Israel. Ophniel fought against the king of Mesopotamia, Ehud against the Moabite king and his Ammonite and Amalekite allies.

Shamgar fought against the Philistines. Deborah and Barak against the Canaanite king from Hazor. And now the threat comes from the people of the east, from Midianites and Amalekites.

These deliverers were also based in different parts of the country. Ophniel lived in the territory of Judah in the south. Ehud was a Benjaminite.

Shamgar likely wasn't an Israelite. Deborah lived in the south of Ephraim in the middle of the land. Barak in the very north of Naphtali in the top of the country.

And Gideon is from the western half of the tribe of Manasseh. Once again we shouldn't

presume that these judges arose in succession, one after another. There were a number of different enemies oppressing different parts of the land, a land that had prior to the coming of the Israelites been occupied by several nations.

The Israelites' identity as a nation would be forged in part through the fact that the land had regions with very different terrain and enemies, occupied by different peoples and tribes. Successfully occupying the land required warding off predatory nations and peoples on various fronts and developing a shared identity as a people would depend heavily upon their recognition of a bond of brotherhood, coming together to each other's aid in times of trouble, and also upon their practice of shared worship. In times of oppression and apostasy however, one could imagine the shared identity of Israel being largely eclipsed as each region and tribe had to fight their own battles.

The threat of the Midianites was so severe that the Israelites had to hide in mountain dens and caves and strongholds. The Midianites are described like a plague of locusts descending upon the land, numerous like the locusts and voracious like the locusts. In chapter 8 an army numbering 135,000 people is described, an immense number that Israel could never hope to repel.

The Midianites seem to come on specific occasions. They devour the harvest and they take the livestock. The Midianites seem to descend upon Israel from the Jezreel valley down to the limits of their settlements in the south in Gaza, territory that would largely later be under Philistine control.

Israel was surrounded by a number of groups of people that were related to both closely related and more distantly related. The Edomites in the south were descended from Israel's twin brother Esau and the Horites. Moab and Ammon to the east were descendants of Lot.

The Midianites were descendants of Abraham by Keturah and here they are accompanied by the Amalekites who came from one of the lines of Esau's descendants. The Midianites had previously troubled Israel when in Numbers chapter 22 to 25 they had been involved in Balak and Balaam's actions against Israel. They seem to be enjoying many of the blessings promised to the descendants of Abraham, not least in their vast numbers.

Israel had been compared to locusts at the time of the exodus and the plague of locusts seems to be a symbolic presentation of Israel within the land of Egypt. They were a numerous people covering the face of the earth but now they face another such people. The Midianites lay waste to the land.

Like locusts, their intent does not seem to be to dwell in the land. Rather they are simply devourers of the produce of others. Israel is suffering the curses of the covenant that was mentioned in Deuteronomy chapter 28 verses 38 to 42.

Now in that reference they are probably referring to actual physical insects but these nations are compared to insects and they have a similar effect upon the produce of the people. Deuteronomy chapter 28 verses 49 to 52 takes things further. Israel is not here experiencing the full force of that curse but they do have some limited experience of it.

At this point the Israelites cry out to the Lord for deliverance. For a second time in the book the Lord sends a messenger to Israel, this time a prophet who recounts what the Lord did for Israel and how they have rejected him and disobeyed his voice. They have disobeyed the most fundamental of the commandments.

Rather than obeying the voice of the Lord and worshipping him alone, they have served the gods of the Amorites. Gideon receives a call from the Lord. It's a call that's similar to that which Moses received back in Exodus chapter 3 and 4. There the angel of the Lord appeared to Moses who felt insufficient and inadequate for his calling.

Yet he received authorization and confirming signs from the Lord. The angel of the Lord comes to meet Gideon at the Terabinth in Ophira, sitting under the tree as Deborah sat under her palm. Gideon is beating wheat in the wine press to hide from the Midianites, far from the most ideal place to beat wheat.

At the end of the next chapter some of the enemy will be found hiding in a wine press, so the site where Gideon is found prepares us for the turning of the tables that will occur. The activity of threshing, separating wheat and chaff, maybe gives a sense of the activity for which Gideon is being set apart. He will thresh Israel and its enemies, dividing them as wheat from chaff.

The threshing floor can be described as a place of judgment in scripture, a judgment place for the enemies of the Lord. For instance, in Micah chapter 4 verses 11 to 13, the angel of the Lord greets Gideon with a surprising greeting, referring to him as a mighty man of valor. Gideon seems anything but this.

Gideon requests some explanation for the statement of the Lord's being with him. If the Lord is indeed with Gideon and Israel, why is the nation in such dire straits? Why do the great acts of the Lord for the deliverance of his people seem to be a matter of the past? Gideon requests a sign from the angel of the Lord. The identity of the angel of the Lord seems to be an important part of the story here.

The revelation that the angel of the Lord is some sort of divine theophany is a demonstration of the Lord's presence with Gideon and with Israel, much as the angel at the burning bush or the commander of the army of the Lord near Gilgal. Gideon's awareness of the identity of the angel only slowly dawns on him, however. Gideon is acutely aware of his own limitations.

He is from a weak Manassite clan and he is the least in his father's house. We later

discover that he has a son who is at least in his mid-teens. In chapter 8 verse 20 he also has at least 10 servants, so he's not a man altogether without resources, nor is he especially young.

However, relatively speaking, there are very many who are greater than him. Gideon has very weak faith. He requests a sign to which request the Lord consents.

He prepares a large meal which serves as a sort of peace offering. The angel of the Lord directs him to place the elements of the meal upon the rock and to pour the broth over it. The angel of the Lord then touches the meal with the tip of the staff that he is carrying and it is burned up as if an offering on the altar.

This is a sign of the Lord's acceptance of Gideon and his work. When the angel disappears, Gideon fears as he has seen the angel of the Lord face to face, but he is reassured by the Lord at this point. He builds an altar at the place where the Lord burned up his offering as it had already functioned as an altar and he names the altar the Lord is Peace to memorialise the event that had just occurred.

The Lord then instructed Gideon to take his father's bull. It isn't immediately clear whether there are one or two bulls involved here. It seems most likely to me that there was only one bull, described as the second bull, perhaps in reference to rites involving two bulls where the second bull served as an offering for the community, such as in Leviticus chapter 4 verse 21 or Numbers chapter 8 verse 8. The age of the bull is stipulated, seven years old.

Israel has been oppressed by the Midianites for seven years as a result of their idolatry. Now that bull must be used to tear the false altar of Baal down and then be sacrificed on the Lord's altar. The bull deals with the sin of Israel's idolatry for which they had suffered for seven years and then that bull is offered for atonement.

Gideon's own name means hewer and he hews down the Asherah pole. Again there's some poetic justice here. When Gideon's action comes to light in the next morning, Joash his father comes to his defence.

If Baal really is a god, he should be able to look out for his own interests and avenge himself. The result is an even greater humiliation of the false god Baal, whose impotence is demonstrated by his failure to destroy Gideon, who thereafter bears testimony to the humiliation of Baal in his own new name, Jerubaal. The Midianites and the Amalekites cross the Jordan and they camp in the valley of Shezreel again.

But this time the spirit of the Lord comes upon Gideon and he summons the Abiezrites by sounding the trumpet and then gathers people from Manasseh, Asher, Zebulun and Naphtali. Gideon clothed by the spirit is a rather different Gideon from the Gideon that we first encountered. But Gideon once again requests a sign.

Gideon's faith remains weak but the Lord doesn't rebuke him for requesting a confirming sign. The Lord can be gracious to people of weak faith, helping them with their unbelief. And as a sign there was probably some meaning to be discerned in it.

It's a fleece laid out on a threshing floor, much as Gideon himself was threshing at the beginning of the story in the winepress. The first night God's dew falls upon the fleece only, leaving it sodden, while the rest of the threshing floor is left dry. And at this point Gideon requests a second sign.

In the second sign the fleece is completely dry while the surrounding ground of the threshing floor is wet with the dew. Here the fleece might symbolise the acceptable sacrifice of the Lord while the threshing floor is Israel. That's something that James Jordan claims.

But I would suggest that the fleece is the spirit-blessed leader. It represents Gideon himself. As the anointed leader is then wrung out, the whole nation is washed in the same spirit.

The threshing floor here becomes the site of the heavenly dew of blessing. The two stages of the sign represent first of all the spirit coming upon Gideon and then through Gideon as Gideon is wrung out in his service, the entirety of the nation being drenched with the dew of the spirit. A question to consider.

At how many points in this account do we see the Lord making accommodations to Gideon's hesitancy, his uncertainty and his fear? What lessons could Israel take from this? And what lessons can we take from it? 1 Thessalonians 2 verses 1-16. So we speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts. For we never came with words of flattery, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed.

God is witness. Nor did we seek glory from people, whether from you or from others, though we could have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children.

So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God, but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us. For you remember, brothers, our labour and toil, we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. You are witnesses, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct toward you believers.

For you know how, like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory. And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you receive the word of God, which you receive from us, you accept it not as the word of

men, but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers. For you, brothers, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews, who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out, and displeased God and opposed all mankind, by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved, so as always to fill up the measure of their sins.

But wrath has come upon them at last. Moving into chapter 2 of 1st Thessalonians, Paul continues his discussion of the way that he and his fellow missionaries acted among the Thessalonians when they were with them. Through elaborating the nature of their ministry among the Thessalonians, Paul can contrast them with the sorts of false teachers that might come along to the Thessalonians afterwards.

There are four successive four statements in which Paul does this. The first begins in verse 1, the second in verse 3, the third in verse 5, and the fourth in verse 9. Paul reminds the Thessalonians of the manner of their arrival there. They had been badly treated at Philippi, where they had been mistreated and imprisoned.

However, when they came to the Thessalonians, their coming was not in vain. Their message was characterized by great boldness, even in the midst of conflict. Paul is here most concerned that the Thessalonians appreciate the way that their behavior as missionaries served properly to showcase the message that they declared.

Gordon Fee helpfully presents Paul's argument in the form of a series of related not, nor, and but statements. Our appeal was not based on error, nor on impure motives, nor on trickery, but, as those approved by God we speak, not as people-pleasers, but before God. For we did not use flattery, nor wear masks to cover greed, nor seek praise from human beings, but we were innocents like babes among you.

Paul's intent here is by careful description to demonstrate the guileless and self-giving character of their ministry, a ministry faithful to the message that it served. In such a way, Paul can distinguish himself from other teachers and philosophers. Paul describes himself and his fellow missionaries as driven by a strength beyond their own.

Despite fierce persecutions, they have courage in God to declare the gospel against great opposition, knowing that its effectiveness depends not upon their own force of personality or rhetorical skill, but upon the power of the God who entrusted them with it. As Paul describes the situation elsewhere, as the emissary of the gospel message, he is less the bearer of a message than one born along by it, as God leads his marvellous apostolic co-workers in triumphal procession through the world. In 2 Corinthians 2 verses 12-17, Paul proceeds to present the unfeigned and pure motives from which they acted in declaring the gospel to the Thessalonians.

In his apostolic ministry, Paul was not driven by a desire for personal gain or for public

praise, but by a weighty responsibility to God, who had committed the gospel message to him. He declares himself to be a tried and true servant, one whose heart is tested by God, whose ministry is approved, presumably through the many trials and forms of persecution that he endured. Unlike the charlatans, who were characterised by the vices of deceit, impure motives and trickery, Paul and his companions were the genuine article.

Summoning both the Thessalonians and God as his witnesses, Paul insists that he was unmotivated by a desire for human praise or material gain. His only intent was to acquit himself well as a servant pleasing to the God who sent him. Consequently, the message of Paul and the missionaries with him to the Thessalonians was not marked by the artful flattery typical of sham teachers, nor perverted by attempts to use his message as a means of personal gain.

Indeed, even though he was in a position that would have enabled him to make self-serving demands of them, Paul's actual conduct was in the most startling contrast to such exploitative behaviour. Rather than taking advantage of his power in relationship to the Thessalonians, Paul and his team not only went to considerable lengths to avoid placing any demands upon them, but also gave of themselves in ways that invite the most arresting imagery. There is a difficult textual issue at this juncture as some Greek manuscripts have a word meaning infants while others have a word meaning gentle.

The weight of the arguments on both sides are quite finely balanced and the liveliness and fluidity of Paul's imagery in this context is something that's worth noting. He moves from comparing himself and his team to nursing mothers in verse 7, to fathers in verse 11, to orphans in verse 17 in their relation to the Thessalonians, all in the span of a few verses. This makes the possibility that he might be referring to themselves as infants more likely than it might have been elsewhere.

If this were the meaning, it would powerfully illustrate the gullibility and the completeness of their self-bestowal to the Thessalonians. In a striking comparison, Paul likens his missionary team to nursing mothers. The Apostles' surprising use of such a maternal image for their ministry is not unique to this context.

In Galatians chapter 4 verse 19, Paul speaks of himself as a mother struggling to give birth to her children again. The image is a fitting one. It expresses the Thessalonians' dependence upon Paul and his fellow workers and the loving self-donation of the missionary team to the infant believers.

Paul is not merely conveying a message but is like a mother begetting, nursing and cherishing the children formed by that message who have the most intimate of bonds with him. The image also represents Paul's longing for and intimate involvement in the Thessalonians' well-being and growth. While the charlatan might value the self-serving praise of men or the wealth that might be deceitfully gained from them, Paul values the

Thessalonians themselves as a mother values her own infants.

As he expresses it in verse 19, for what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? From the image of the maternal affection and bond, Paul later progresses to one of the father in his role of preparing the child for life in the wider world. Using both the maternal image and the paternal image that succeeds it in verse 11, Paul demonstrates the depths of his personal investment in the life, the health and the growth of the Thessalonian Christians. Paul's representation of his ministry in these opening chapters of Thessalonians dramatically challenges many of the assumptions that we can bring to acts of communication.

While our understanding of the acts of communication can often very sharply distinguish between senders, messengers and the recipients, Paul systematically unworks each of these oppositions in relationship to the gospel message. Drawing the minds of the Thessalonian Christians back to the founding events of their church, Paul speaks of the gospel as God's self-communication by the Spirit, of God working through and in his messengers, of the emissary of the gospel as one born along by the message that he bears, of the message as something that is powerfully at work in its recipients, and of the recipients as children of the message, begotten and nourished by the messenger. At each point, Paul reveals that the oppositions that can serve as occasions for deceit, for perverse motives and for distrust are destabilised by the very character of the gospel.

In the gospel, there is the tightest of possible connections between the one who sends the messenger and the messenger themselves, between the messenger and the message and the one who sends the message and the message, and then between the recipients and the ones who bring the message to them, and then the message and the sender. All of these things are tightly bound together in a way that makes them inseparable. One of the most significant features of Western society today is the breakdown of public trust in various authorities, in politicians, in governments, experts, scientists, in church leaders, in journalists and the media, in constitutional documents, national principles, governmental agencies, and sometimes even the very basic principles of our society themselves.

And this loss of trust penetrates down to the very founding events and principles of our societies and nations, events and principles that are deemed fatally corrupted by guile, deceit, self-serving power, and all these other corrupting forces. Once we strip away the mask of our feigned values, what we find is dishonesty and untruth and attempts just to bolster power. Scandals, revelations of abuse, manifest corruption, incompetence, self-interest in office, and all these sorts of things lead to growing distrust, and that metastasizes into more general suspicion.

As the healthy movement of truth in the body of society depends upon a circulatory system of trust, the breakdown of trust will produce the crisis of truth that we currently

face. Arresting the progress of this disease is an immense challenge. Reaction against dysfunction seldom straightforwardly yields healthy functioning, after merely producing new or exacerbated problems in the place of those it once opposed.

Without a clear vision and a model of genuine, forthright, and trustworthy discourse, and of the sort of robust and healthful social relations that can bear the weight of truth, it can be very difficult to address such social sickness. Yet this vision of society, marked by the strength of trust and truth, is what Paul is presenting us with in 1 Corinthians chapter 2. This is a society seen in God's entrusting of his truth to human messengers, who entrust themselves in turn to the recipients of their announcement. It's a society seen in, and revelatory of, the power of the communication of truth itself as a social bond.

The genuine communication of the truth requires the communication of ourselves, reinforcing the trust that allows it to circulate. Just as untruth and distrust can cause a society to disintegrate, so truth and the mutual trust and entrusting it produces are health to society's flesh and marrow to its bones. To those who might have accused Paul of using his message as a mask for greed, he reminds the Thessalonians of the way that he and his fellow missionaries worked tirelessly so as not to place a burden upon the converts.

In Acts chapter 18 verse 3 we discover that Paul was a tent maker, which seemed to be a way in which he supported his missionary work so as not to put a burden upon converts and to protect himself from the false charge that he was engaged in his missionary labours for personal gain. Paul and his fellow missionaries were marked by unimpeachable character among the Thessalonians and also by holy conduct. They acted towards the Thessalonians like a father with his children, exhorting, encouraging and charging in a paternal manner.

If they were like nursing mothers in sharing and giving their very selves to the converts as a woman might give her breast to her infant, they are also like fathers in their authoritative paternal guidance, their direction, their encouragement and their oversight. The power that a father has to encourage and build up his son, to give his son confidence, was something that they showed towards the Thessalonians along with the authoritative instruction and direction that fathers can provide. Paul renews his expression of thanksgiving for the Thessalonians conversion at this point.

This is something that confirms his ministry among them. When they received the gospel from Paul and his companions, they received it as a word from God, not merely as a word of men. In verse 6 of chapter 1 Paul described the Thessalonians becoming imitators of Paul and his companions and of the Lord.

Here he speaks of them becoming imitators of the churches in Judea. Much as the Judean churches were persecuted by their Jewish compatriots, so the Thessalonians were persecuted by the Gentiles around them. Jew and Gentile Christians are here united in a

shared experience of suffering for Christ's name.

Paul lists the sins of the Jews which had been brought to a climax in the crucifixion of Christ, after their killing of the prophets. They had also rejected the message of the spirit through the church and had sought to prevent that message from being brought to the Gentiles. In the gospels, Jesus spoke of Jerusalem filling up the full measure of its sins and full judgment falling upon that generation.

Paul here describes the same thing. Jerusalem and Judea faced God's wrath at last in the coming destruction of AD 70. A question to consider.

Paul closely connects the truth of the gospel message with the guileless and trustworthy way in which it is brought by the Lord's ministers. How can we make the truth of the message of the gospel clearer by the ways in which we present it?