**SERMON 3-8-2020**

**Judges 6:12-16, 6:33-35, 7:2-8, & 7:16-22**

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| A man was enjoying a leisurely drive on I-68 in southwest Virginia.  Suddenly a young woman, driving well over the speed limit, passed him.  She was in a brand new, fancy Ford Thunderbird.  As she went flying past him, he felt like he was sitting still.  Several miles further up the road the man leisurely rounded a sharp curve.  There was that beautiful, shiny new Thunderbird            smashed up against the concrete barrier of a bridge.  The car was totaled.  He stopped and helped the woman out of the car.  One arm was obviously broken,            and she had several cuts and scrapes to her face and hands.  She was sobbing hysterically, and she kept saying,  “Why God? Why did you do this to me? Why did you let this happen?”  The gentleman tried to be soothing and comforting to the injured woman,  as they waited for the ambulance.  But all he could think was: "Lady, God didn't do this.            You did it to yourself driving like that."      We humans have not changed much down through the centuries.  When bad things happen in our lives, we, too, often ask:  “Why did God let this happen?”  Often bad things happen, problems build up in our lives, illness strikes without            warning, the money runs out, friends and loved ones die.  But there are also many times when problems and difficulties occur because            we are careless, or don't pay attention,            or don't live the way we know we ought to live.  Life was the same back in the time of Gideon.    They Israelites violated virtually every moral standard.  The last verse of Judges sums it up:            All the people did what was right in their own eyes.  But what they saw as right, wasn't.      Soon after Joshua died, the Israelites turned away from God.  This brought punishment – as they had been warned –            in the form of conquest by neighboring nations.  In the midst of their suffering, God raised up a "judge" –            a person with leadership qualities who led the people back to God and            delivered them from their enemies.  But as soon as this leader left the scene, the people turned to idol worship again.  This cycle – unbelief, punishment, repentance, deliverance –            occurs 7 times in the book of Judges.  Forgetting, or ignoring the Lord always led to disobedience and punishment.  Repentance resulted in God's sending a savior, a judge, to rescue them.  Victory brought relief and peace for a while, until the cycle began once more.          In the time of Gideon, the people were facing hard times, and were ignoring God.  The angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon and said to him:  “The Lord is with you, you mighty warrior.”      Gideon replied: "Pardon me, my lord, but if the Lord is with us,            why has all this happened to us?            Where are all his wonders that our ancestors told us about?            But now the Lord has abandoned us and given us into the hand of Midian."    Israel had again turned to worshiping pagan gods,            so God disciplined them by being enslaved by the Midianites.  Gradually Gideon began to trust God and obey him, but it was a slow change.  Often Gideon questioned and tested God.    God didn't give up on Gideon and led him to free the Israelites            from the oppression of the Midianites.  Gideon grew in his faith and worshiped and obeyed God.      We are often like Gideon.  We have questions and doubts.  God calls us to do his work here on earth, but we question and test God.      The sign in the window read: "Boy Wanted".  Young John Simmons, though he was lazy, saw his opportunity and applied.  He was quickly hired by elderly Mr. Peters.  The pace was leisurely so he enjoyed the job.  Toward the middle of the afternoon however, he was sent up to the attic,            a dingy place, full of cobwebs and infested with mice.  "You will find a long, deep box there," explained Mr. Peters.  “Please sort out the contents and see what should be saved.”    John was disappointed.  It was a large container, and there seemed to be nothing in it but old junk.  After a few minutes he went back to the ground floor.  Asked by the proprietor if he had completed his work, he replied,            "No, sir, it was dark and cold up there.            I didn't think it was worth doing."  At closing time he was paid and told not to return.    The next morning the old sign "Boy Wanted" appeared in its usual place.  Crawford Hill was the next to be employed.  When he was asked to tidy up the same box, however, he spent hours            separating the usable nails and screws from the things to be discarded.  Suddenly he raced down the stairs excited.  "At the very bottom I found this!" he exclaimed, holding up a 20-dollar bill.    At last the store owner had discovered a conscientious boy to whom            he could entrust his business when he retired.    Years later Mr. Peters said, "This young man, who is now my successor,            found his fortune in a junk box!"      Young Crawford Hill followed his employers instructions.  He didn't understand why Mr. Peters didn't simply throw            the whole box of junk away.  But he followed the instructions of his boss in spite of his doubts.  That simple act of obedience not only provided him with a job in his youth,            but also eventually provided him with business of his own.  The secret was simply obedience, even in the midst of his doubts.          The secret of Israel's survival was not military heroes or guerrilla tactics.  It was the persistent, unending love of God himself.  Though they forgot him, he did not forget them.  Again and again he sent judges to rescue them, and God himself led them.    The book of Judges reminds us that God can use even sinful, and doubtful,            and disobedient people to accomplish God's purposes.      Gideon made an unlikely fighter – hesitant and fearful.  Gideon was planning no heroics until the angel of the Lord            came to him with a battle commission.  Gideon was doubtful, trembling with paralyzing fears.  But God used him to free the Israelites from the Midianites.  God wanted to be sure the Israelites knew God won the battle for them.  He reduced his army from 32,000 to a pitiful 300.  If an army so outnumbered were to win, it would prove beyond a doubt            God really was in charge.  God knew Gideon's potential and patiently brought Gideon to the point of courage.  He encouraged him, directed him, transformed him.  Gideon became a strong and decisive general,            enabling his small band to scatter the enemy.  The little army devastated the scattered Midianites, and Gideon was triumphant,    The pattern is found not only in Judges.  Throughout the Bible, God used cast-off material.  God did not seek the most capable people, nor the most naturally good.  Throughout the Bible God chose the small, the weak, the untalented.  With unlikely material God did great things so the world            could see that the glory was his and his alone.    Gideon did not realize his potential until the angel appeared to him.  We often do not recognize our potential until God calls us perform some task.  God wants us to trust him, to be strong and courageous.  The Lord is with us everywhere we go.  Because he is with us, we can dare to obey him even when we do not understand,            and when we have doubts.  God often calls us to do what seems impossible.  He wants us to know he is the one calling us and sending us.  God wants us to rely on him, not ourselves.  Perhaps we ought to listen to him more often.    The story of Gideon is a great example of an ordinary man            who learned to trust God.    We don't have to be somebody special to do something special.  God does use only special people.  But God doesn't use us because we are special.  We are special because God uses us.    It is amazing what the Lord does with simple, ordinary people            who will believe they can be used by God            to do amazing and extraordinary things.    AMEN |  |  |