

“Always we begin again.”

This four word phrase is attributed to St. Benedict and his steady, faithful approach to life, especially the spiritual life. Benedict knew the weaknesses of human nature and the systemic flaws present in human society. He knew that monks—and all of us—can get off track because of what we do or fail to do; or because of what happens to us.

According to Benedict, the cure for our condition is the grace of God we receive through faith in Jesus Christ as we pray and live together in community. That grace heals us over the course of our lives. It gives us the opportunity to grow in affection for each other; to forgive and ask for forgiveness; and to find ways to care for and serve each other in all stages of life. Remembering ***“Always we begin again”*** helps us as we keep moving toward God’s purpose for us as human beings: learning to love like Jesus.

Last Sunday, I told you that St. Benedict put limits on when his monks could read or hear books like Joshua and Judges because the violent stories could distract the monks from the spiritual life and cause them distress. So I thought it would be good to start with Benedict and his advice for a faithful life as we begin to reflect on the book of Judges.

In many ways, Joshua and Judges are closely connected works of sacred literature. Both cover the Israelites’ conquest—or attempted conquest-- of the Promised Land of Canaan. There are parts of each book that have memorable stories; and other parts that are difficult for us to appreciate and understand, especially as sacred Scripture.

Judges in particular can be difficult. It focuses on the struggles of the people of God. In Judges, the Israelites struggled because they repeat the same pattern—first, they abandon God; then they are defeated by their enemies; then they cry out to God for help; and then God rescues them by raising up powerful heroes called judges. After several chapters of reading the book of Judges, we can’t help but wonder, “When are they going to learn?” But they don’t seem to learn, do they?

These stories can be frustrating; but they can also remind us of Benedict’s advice, ***“Always we begin again.”*** I believe most people can relate to that. If you can’t, just pray for the rest of us. Our stories, hopefully, are not as bad or as colorful as some of those of the Israelites in the book of Judges. But the repeated pattern is familiar to us in our own lives and among our family, society, and the world. We can get off track. Based on Judges and my own experience and observation, we tend to get off track in two main ways.

The first way is when things are going really well. When every way I measure success and happiness is A+. In those seasons of life, there is a tendency to get over-confident. It begins as small lapses—not praying, not coming to church, and not staying in touch with honest, loving and faithful friends who keep us grounded. Those lapses become patterns and then ingrained habits. We fall into bigger and bigger gaps of not being faithful to God.

The second way we can get off track is when things are going badly. Something bad happens at work or with our family or with our health on a personal level; or we live in a society with deep divisions, injustice, or even war. When life is not going well, we can become afraid, frustrated, or angry about what is happening. Instead of turning to God and crying out for help, we double down on trying to do it our way and on our own. I am not sure about you, but that has never worked out well for me.

However we have gotten off track in life, we need to remember Benedict’s advice, **“Always we begin again.”** God’s grace is all around us and calls us to trust in the Lord. Fear and anger on the one hand and complacency on the other are barriers to God’s grace and the healing it provides to us and our network of relationships and our society.

In the book of Judges, that first way of getting off track is perhaps best captured in the story of Samson. He won so much—and against all odds—that he became over-confident and felt he could never lose; even if he gave up what made him special, his vowed faithfulness to God. Samson was something—killing a lion with his bare hands and a thousand people with the jawbone of an ass. He was like Superman without the cape. But he became complacent.

Throughout his life, there are different examples of when he would get off track. But it was when Samson met Delilah that things got worse. Samson was blind to how she was slowly guiding him away from his faith. He kept listening to her until he finally gave her what she wanted-- the secret to this strength, the symbol of his vow that consecrated him to God. The consequences were devastating to Samson and to his people. Their enemies were able to blind Samson and keep him from his role as champion of God’s people.

The second way we can get off track is revealed in most of the other stories from Judges and summarized in its last verse, “...all the people did what was right in their own eyes.” Their orientation was not toward God and faithful living but toward ways to get around the demands of faith without losing the blessings of it. They conspired to get what they wanted the way they wanted it. And it inevitably led to their defeat. The hopeful message in this seemingly hopeless pattern is that when they finally cried out to God, God always responded with grace.

In our reading for today, the people were crying out to God again and God gave them grace from an unexpected source—a woman who was both judge and prophetess. That was unusual in that time—heck it is still too unusual today. God raised up Deborah to rescue the people regardless of their views on women. The Lord provided a prophetess who was brave and wise and could lead the men of her day to do the right thing so the people could get back on track. It’s a great story!

So what do we do with the book of Judges? It depends to some degree on where we are in our lives.

Some of us are like Deborah. She is an example of how to stay on track. As a prophetess, she was a woman of prayer; a student, follower, and teacher of God's Law. She was deeply connected to her community and its issues. We're told the people went to her for justice. She knew God's ways and her people's needs. So when the Israelites faced a crisis, she could speak with authority. When the male leaders were hesitant and didn't know what to do, Deborah spoke clearly and faithfully and those who followed her words were successful.

If you are a Deborah—keep the faith. Do not forget what makes you strong—God's loving presence in you and your community of faith; and your deep desire to walk with God and do what's right. If you get discouraged or distracted—which can happen to even the most faithful among us-- remember to turn back to God. Even for Deborahs, it is good to remember, ***“Always we begin again.”***

For the rest of us, these very human stories from Judges can help during life's challenges. When we feel stuck in life, the first step of a new beginning is to realize where we are and acknowledge it. So the question for us is, “Where are we in our life?”

Perhaps we have done something we regret—we have harmed someone. If that is where you are, ask for forgiveness from God and if possible from the person you have harmed. Make restitution if it is appropriate. And then live with amendment of life-- prayer, study, service, and living in community with people who know and care for you. That will help you stay on track. The cure is simple—doing it requires us to be open to God's grace.

For others of us, it is not what we have done. Perhaps something has been done to us—someone or some system has harmed us. Perhaps we have a serious illness or addiction. Maybe we have lost our job or we are facing a serious financial problem. For some of us, it might be a devastating natural disaster, like what has happened in the Caribbean and other parts of our world.

Even if we are not to blame, the advice for us is the same— ***“Always we begin again.”*** Cry out to God. Seek help that includes inner strength from God's grace and a community of faith that supports and cares for you. When devastating things happen, as long as we live, God gives us resilience to not give up and help others not give up, too.

“Always we begin again.” Amen.