

Our Tipping Point

I am drawn to the story of Gideon this morning. It's one of those remarkable stories set in the midst of one of the most depressing book in the Old Testament, the book of Judges. Judges follows immediately on the heels of Joshua; and the stories are set in stark contrast. The story of Joshua begins on the east side of the Jordan with Israel, the people of God, poised to take the promised land. As Joshua begins there is a glorious air of optimism. Faith and hope mark the nation which has just come out of her 40 year wilderness wandering. The wilderness spelt the end of the first generation that came out of Egypt, that rebellious generation, who although they saw the hand of God in the astounding plagues in Egypt and the Red Sea crossing, who although they ate manna from heaven and drank water from the rock, who although they trembled at the foot of Sinai as it heaved and quaked with the presence of God, refused to believe that the Promised Land was theirs. When Moses sent out the spies and they returned with the produce of the land in their hands and stories of its glory on their lips, the slave nation set free – fearful and faithless – could do no better than long to return to Egypt. And in so doing they spelled out their death sentence. That generation would die in the wilderness and their children would inherit the land. As the book of Joshua begins the faithless have perished and the faithful remain. Moses has seen the Promised Land from afar; Joshua and the nation that has learned faith in the wilderness will enter in.

Joshua 1:1–9 (NIV84)

1 After the death of Moses the servant of the LORD, the LORD said to Joshua son of Nun, Moses' aide: ²“Moses my servant is dead. Now then, you and all these people, get ready to cross the Jordan River into the land I am about to give to them—to the Israelites. ³I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses. ⁴Your territory will extend from the desert to Lebanon, and from the great river, the Euphrates—all the Hittite country—to the Great Sea on the west. ⁵No one will be able to stand up against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you.

⁶“Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their forefathers to give them. ⁷Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. ⁸Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. ⁹Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.”

With this statement of boldness and courage the book of Joshua begins. Spies are sent out again – this time not twelve but two. And this time instead of fear, faith marks the nation. The mighty Jordan turns back in response; Jericho bows down before them, and in a cascade of conquest God gives his people the land as he drives out the pagan nations before them.

More than 500 years earlier the Lord was tolerating the wickedness of the nations who dwelt in Canaan; more than 500 years earlier he had promised Abraham that when the sin of the Amorites reached its full measure the land would be given to his descendants.

Genesis 15:13–16 (NIV84)

¹³ Then the LORD said to him, “Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years. ¹⁴ But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions. ¹⁵ You, however, will go to your fathers in peace and be buried at a good old age. ¹⁶ In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.”

And now the sin of the Amorites *has* reached its full measure; what we read of in Joshua is both the execution of God’s judgment against the nations who have polluted the land with their idolatry and the fulfillment of his promises to Abraham’s descendants, the nation who found faith in the wilderness. When God makes his presence known among people of faith astounding things happen. The Jordan piles up in a heap, mighty Jericho falls, and evil scurries out of the way before the people of God. Joshua documents this story; the land is conquered and divided among the 12 tribes of Israel. As the book draws to a close we have this summary. And the nation stands at a tipping point.

Joshua 24:1–31 (NIV84)

24 Then Joshua assembled all the tribes of Israel at Shechem. He summoned the elders, leaders, judges and officials of Israel, and they presented themselves before God.

² Joshua said to all the people, “This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: ‘Long ago your forefathers, including Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the River and worshiped other gods. ³ But I took your father Abraham from the land beyond the River and led him throughout Canaan and gave him many descendants. I gave him Isaac, ⁴ and to Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau. I assigned the hill country of Seir to Esau, but Jacob and his sons went down to Egypt.

⁵ “ ‘Then I sent Moses and Aaron, and I afflicted the Egyptians by what I did there, and I brought you out. ⁶ When I brought your fathers out of Egypt, you came to the sea, and the Egyptians pursued them with chariots and horsemen as far as the Red Sea. ⁷ But they cried to the LORD for help, and he put darkness between you and the Egyptians; he brought the sea over them and covered them. You saw with your own eyes what I did to the Egyptians. Then you lived in the desert for a long time.

⁸ “ ‘I brought you to the land of the Amorites who lived east of the Jordan. They fought against you, but I gave them into your hands. I destroyed them from before you, and you took possession of their land. ⁹ When Balak son of Zippor, the king of Moab, prepared to fight against Israel, he sent for Balaam son of Beor to put a curse on you. ¹⁰ But I would not listen to Balaam, so he blessed you again and again, and I delivered you out of his hand.

¹¹ “ ‘Then you crossed the Jordan and came to Jericho. The citizens of Jericho fought against you, as did also the Amorites, Perizzites, Canaanites, Hittites, Girgashites, Hivites and Jebusites, but I gave them into your hands. ¹² I sent the hornet ahead of you, which drove them out before you—also the two

Amorite kings. You did not do it with your own sword and bow. ¹³ So I gave you a land on which you did not toil and cities you did not build; and you live in them and eat from vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant.'

(Here's the tipping point...)

¹⁴ "Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshiped beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. ¹⁵ But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD."

¹⁶ Then the people answered, "Far be it from us to forsake the LORD to serve other gods! ¹⁷ It was the LORD our God himself who brought us and our fathers up out of Egypt, from that land of slavery, and performed those great signs before our eyes. He protected us on our entire journey and among all the nations through which we traveled. ¹⁸ And the LORD drove out before us all the nations, including the Amorites, who lived in the land. We too will serve the LORD, because he is our God."

¹⁹ Joshua said to the people, "You are not able to serve the LORD. He is a holy God; he is a jealous God. He will not forgive your rebellion and your sins. ²⁰ If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, he will turn and bring disaster on you and make an end of you, after he has been good to you."

²¹ But the people said to Joshua, "No! We will serve the LORD."

²² Then Joshua said, "You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen to serve the LORD." "Yes, we are witnesses," they replied.

²³ "Now then," said Joshua, "throw away the foreign gods that are among you and yield your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel."

²⁴ And the people said to Joshua, "We will serve the LORD our God and obey him."

²⁵ On that day Joshua made a covenant for the people, and there at Shechem he drew up for them decrees and laws. ²⁶ And Joshua recorded these things in the Book of the Law of God. Then he took a large stone and set it up there under the oak near the holy place of the LORD.

²⁷ "See!" he said to all the people. "This stone will be a witness against us. It has heard all the words the LORD has said to us. It will be a witness against you if you are untrue to your God."

²⁸ Then Joshua sent the people away, each to his own inheritance.

²⁹ After these things, Joshua son of Nun, the servant of the LORD, died at the age of a hundred and ten. ³⁰ And they buried him in the land of his inheritance, at Timnath Serah in the hill country of Ephraim, north of Mount Gaash.

³¹ Israel served the LORD throughout the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him and who had experienced everything the LORD had done for Israel.

With that sentiment we enter into the book of Judges, a book wholly unlike the book of Joshua. Here we have not a story of faith but of faithlessness. Judges documents Israel's failure to live up to her oath to serve the Lord and obey him. Over and over again in a nauseating cycle Judges documents Israel's seemingly incurable heart of rebellion.

Early in Judges the stage is set. We're taken back to the glory of Joshua's generation – the generation that witnessed the glorious crossing of the Jordan and the fall of Jericho – and we are introduced to the next generation, a faithless generation marked not by glory but by shame.

Judges 2:6–20 (NIV84)

⁶ After Joshua had dismissed the Israelites, they went to take possession of the land, each to his own inheritance. ⁷ The people served the LORD throughout the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him and who had seen all the great things the LORD had done for Israel.

⁸ Joshua son of Nun, the servant of the LORD, died at the age of a hundred and ten. ⁹ And they buried him in the land of his inheritance, at Timnath Heres in the hill country of Ephraim, north of Mount Gaash.

¹⁰ After that whole generation had been gathered to their fathers, 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. ¹² They forsook the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed and worshiped various gods of the peoples around them. They provoked the LORD to anger ¹³ because they forsook him and served Baal and the Ashtoreths. ¹⁴ In his anger against Israel the LORD handed them over to raiders who plundered them. He sold them to 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.

¹⁶ Then the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the hands of these raiders. ¹⁷ Yet they would not listen to their judges but prostituted themselves to other gods and worshiped them. Unlike their fathers, they quickly turned from the way in which their fathers had walked, the way of obedience to the LORD's commands. ¹⁸ Whenever the LORD raised up a judge for them, he was with the judge and saved them out of the hands of their enemies as long as the judge lived; for the LORD had compassion on them as they groaned under those who oppressed and afflicted them. ¹⁹ But when the judge died, the people returned to ways even more corrupt than those of their fathers, following other gods and serving and worshiping them. They refused to give up their evil practices and stubborn ways.

And so the nauseating cycle begins. The first judge God raised up to rescue his rebellious people is Othniel and his brief account sets the stage for all the rest.

Judges 3:7–11 (NIV84)

⁷ The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD; they forgot the LORD their God and served the Baals and the Asherahs. ⁸ The anger of the LORD burned against Israel so that he sold them into the hands of Cushan-Rishathaim king of Aram Naharaim, to whom the Israelites were subject for eight years. ⁹ But when they cried out to the LORD, he raised up for them a deliverer, Othniel son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother, who saved them. ¹⁰ The Spirit of the LORD came upon him, so that he became Israel's judge and went to war. The LORD gave Cushan-Rishathaim king of Aram into the hands of Othniel, who overpowered him. ¹¹ So the land had peace for forty years, until Othniel son of Kenaz died.

And you can guess what the next line in the text is. “Once again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord.” This is a consistent refrain in the book of Judges. Towards the end of the book a different refrain is highlighted in the midst of the nation’s ongoing chaos. We first hear it in Judges 17:6.

Judges 17:6 (RSV)

⁶In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes.

This in fact is the same line the book of Judges closes with.

Judges 21:25 (RSV)

²⁵In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes.

But this nauseating cycle of rebellion is not the hallmark of Judges. This is not what draws me to the book today. What draws us to Judges is not the faithlessness of the people of God but the faithfulness of the God of the people. Again and again the people turn and rebel against the Lord. It’s causes us to shake our heads in disbelief. But again and again the Lord turns back to his people and rescues them. And that ought to have us shaking our heads in wonder! It is one of these glorious stories of God’s rescue in the midst of an era of rebellion that has my attention. It is a remarkable story of what God, it seems, delights in! God loves to do his most astounding things through the most unlikely of circumstances, indeed through the most unlikely of people. The Gideon story begins in Judges chapter 6. We’re going to read it this morning. I want us, as we read, to attempt to hear this as our story. It’s a story of an insignificant man and an insignificant people being used by God to do astounding things. Church, I believe I am at a tipping point in my ministry; and I believe we are at a tipping point as a church. And what we choose to do now will make all the difference in the world as to what our future looks like. We are small and we might be afraid and the world might look at us as utterly insignificant. But this, my friends, is one such moment that God delights to work in. This is our story.

Judges 6:1–7:25 (NIV84)

6 Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD, and for seven years he gave them into the hands of the Midianites. ²Because the power of Midian was so oppressive, the Israelites prepared shelters for themselves in mountain clefts, caves and strongholds. ³Whenever the Israelites planted their crops, the Midianites, Amalekites and other eastern peoples invaded the country. ⁴They camped on the land and ruined the crops all the way to Gaza and did not spare a living thing for Israel, neither sheep nor cattle nor donkeys. ⁵They came up with their livestock and their tents like swarms of locusts. It was impossible to count the men and their camels; they invaded the land to ravage it. ⁶Midian so impoverished the Israelites that they cried out to the LORD for help.

⁷When the Israelites cried to the LORD because of Midian, ⁸he sent them a prophet, who said, “This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: I brought you up out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. ⁹I snatched you from the power of Egypt and from the hand of all your oppressors. I drove them from

before you and gave you their land. ¹⁰ I said to you, 'I am the LORD your God; do not worship the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you live.' But you have not listened to me."

¹¹ The angel of the LORD came and sat down under the oak in Ophrah that belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, where his son Gideon was threshing wheat in a winepress to keep it from the Midianites. ¹² When the angel of the LORD appeared to Gideon, he said, "The LORD is with you, mighty warrior."

¹³ "But sir," Gideon replied, "if the LORD is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all his wonders that our fathers told us about when they said, 'Did not the LORD bring us up out of Egypt?' But now the LORD has abandoned us and put us into the hand of Midian."

¹⁴ 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 "But Lord," Gideon asked, "how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family."

¹⁶ The LORD answered, "I will be with you, and you will strike down all the Midianites together."

¹⁷ Gideon replied, "If now I have found favor in your eyes, give me a sign that it is really you talking to me. ¹⁸ Please do not go away until I come back and bring my offering and set it before you."

And the LORD said, "I will wait until you return."

¹⁹ Gideon went in, prepared a young goat, and from an ephah of flour he made bread without yeast. Putting the meat in a basket and its broth in a pot, he brought them out and offered them to him under the oak.

²⁰ The angel of God said to him, "Take the meat and the unleavened bread, place them on this rock, and pour out the broth." And Gideon did so. ²¹ With the tip of the staff that was in his hand, the angel of the LORD touched the meat and the unleavened bread. Fire flared from the rock, consuming the meat and the bread. And the angel of the LORD disappeared. ²² When Gideon realized that it was the angel of the LORD, he exclaimed, "Ah, Sovereign LORD! I have seen the angel of the LORD face to face!"

²³ But the LORD said to him, "Peace! Do not be afraid. You are not going to die."

²⁴ So Gideon built an altar to the LORD there and called it The LORD is Peace. To this day it stands in Ophrah of the Abiezrites.

²⁵ That same night the LORD said to him, "Take the second bull from your father's herd, the one seven years old. Tear down your father's altar to Baal and cut down the Asherah pole beside it. ²⁶ Then build a proper kind of altar to the LORD your God on the top of this height. Using the wood of the Asherah pole that you cut down, offer the second bull as a burnt offering."

²⁷ So Gideon took ten of his servants and 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.

²⁸ In the morning when the men of the town got up, there was Baal's altar, demolished, with the Asherah pole beside it cut down and the second bull sacrificed on the newly built altar!

²⁹ They asked each other, "Who did this?"

When they carefully investigated, they were told, "Gideon son of Joash did it."

³⁰ The men of the town demanded of Joash, "Bring out your son. He must die, because he has broken down Baal's altar and cut down the Asherah pole beside it."

³¹ But Joash replied to the hostile crowd around him, "Are you going to plead Baal's cause? Are you trying to save him? Whoever fights for him shall be put to death by morning! If Baal really is a god, he

can defend himself when someone breaks down his altar.”³² So that day they called Gideon “Jerub-Baal,” saying, “Let Baal contend with him,” because he broke down Baal’s altar.

³³ Now all the Midianites, Amalekites and other eastern peoples joined forces and crossed over the Jordan and camped in the Valley of Jezreel.³⁴ Then the Spirit of the LORD came upon Gideon, and he blew a trumpet, summoning the Abiezrites to follow him.³⁵ He sent messengers throughout Manasseh, calling them to arms, and also into Asher, Zebulun and Naphtali, so that they too went up to meet them.

³⁶ Gideon said to God, “If you will save Israel by my hand as you have promised—³⁷ 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.”³⁸ And that is what happened. Gideon rose early the next day; he squeezed the fleece and wrung out the dew—a bowlful of water.

³⁹ Then Gideon said to God, “Do not be angry with me. Let me make just one more request. Allow me one more test with the fleece. This time make the fleece dry and the ground covered with dew.”⁴⁰ That night God did so. Only the fleece was dry; all the ground was covered with dew.

7 Early in the morning, Jerub-Baal (that is, Gideon) and all his men camped at the spring of Harod. The camp of Midian was north of them in the valley near the hill of Moreh.² The LORD said to Gideon, “You have too many men for me to deliver Midian into their hands. In order that Israel may not boast against me that her own strength has saved her,³ announce now to the people, ‘Anyone who trembles with fear may turn back and leave Mount Gilead.’” So twenty-two thousand men left, while ten thousand remained.

⁴ But the LORD said to Gideon, “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.”

⁵ So Gideon took the men down to the water. There the LORD told him, “Separate those who lap the water with their tongues like a dog from those who kneel down to drink.”⁶ Three hundred men lapped with their hands to their mouths. All the rest got down on their knees to drink.

⁷ The LORD said to Gideon, “With the three hundred men that lapped I will save you and give the Midianites into your hands. Let all the other men go, each to his own place.”⁸ So Gideon sent the rest of the Israelites to their tents but kept the three hundred, who took over the provisions and trumpets of the others.

Now the camp of Midian lay below him in the valley.⁹ During that night the LORD said to Gideon, “Get up, go down against the camp, because I am going to give it into your hands.¹⁰ If you are afraid to attack, go down to the camp with your servant Purah¹¹ and listen to what they are saying. Afterward, you will be encouraged to attack the camp.” So he and Purah his servant went down to the outposts of the camp.¹² The Midianites, the Amalekites and all the other eastern peoples had settled in the valley, thick as locusts. Their camels could no more be counted than the sand on the seashore.

¹³ Gideon arrived just as a man was telling a friend his dream. “I had a dream,” he was saying. “A round loaf of barley bread came tumbling into the Midianite camp. It struck the tent with such force that the tent overturned and collapsed.”

¹⁴ His friend responded, “This can be nothing other than the sword of Gideon son of Joash, the Israelite. God has given the Midianites and the whole camp into his hands.”

¹⁵ When Gideon heard the dream and its interpretation, he worshiped God. He returned to the camp of Israel and called out, "Get up! The LORD has given the Midianite camp into your hands." ¹⁶ Dividing the three hundred men into three companies, he placed trumpets and empty jars in the hands of all of them, with torches inside.

¹⁷ "Watch me," he told them. "Follow my lead. When I get to the edge of the camp, do exactly as I do. ¹⁸ When I and all who are with me blow our trumpets, then from all around the camp blow yours and shout, 'For the LORD and for Gideon.' "

¹⁹ Gideon and the hundred men with him reached the edge of the camp at the beginning of the middle watch, just after they had changed the guard. They blew their trumpets and broke the jars that were in their hands. ²⁰ The three companies blew the trumpets and smashed the jars. Grasping the torches in their left hands and holding in their right hands the trumpets they were to blow, they shouted, "A sword for the LORD and for Gideon!" ²¹ While each man held his position around the camp, all the Midianites ran, crying out as they fled.

²² When the three hundred trumpets sounded, the LORD caused the men throughout the camp to turn on each other with their swords. The army fled to Beth Shittah toward Zererah as far as the border of Abel Meholah near Tabbath. ²³ Israelites from Naphtali, Asher and all Manasseh were called out, and they pursued the Midianites. ²⁴ Gideon sent messengers throughout the hill country of Ephraim, saying, "Come down against the Midianites and seize the waters of the Jordan ahead of them as far as Beth Barah."

So all the men of Ephraim were called out and they took the waters of the Jordan as far as Beth Barah. ²⁵ They also captured two of the Midianite leaders, Oreb and Zeeb. They killed Oreb at the rock of Oreb, and Zeeb at the winepress of Zeeb. They pursued the Midianites and brought the heads of Oreb and Zeeb to Gideon, who was by the Jordan.

An insignificant man and an insignificant people and God does his astounding work – the nation is revived!

We stand at a tipping point church; I stand at a tipping point. There are real choices before us. It is time for us to come together like we have never come together before. It is time for us to cast all of our burdens upon him; it is time for us to say goodbye to our idols and give him all that we have. I believe that God has brought us to this place for a reason; and I believe that God has something glorious in mind for us. I need you to stand with me filled with his presence to help me discern the way forward. Our strength will be found in the measure of our surrender. It is time for us to be one. It is time for us to bear each other's burdens and carry each other's loads. It is time for us to confess our sins one to another. Jesus dwells in the midst of his people. It is time for you and I to utterly give ourselves to his work in our lives and in our midst. And it begins with us giving ourselves to one another. "Where two or three are gathered, there I am." You want Christ? You want to hear from him? You want to experience his transforming work in your life? Then we must give ourselves to one another. I need to hear from him through you and you need to hear from him through me. It's time. We begin this journey next Sunday at our Congregational Meeting. Please be there. I need you.