

We are in the middle of our “Sinners & Saints” series, where we are looking at Old Testament Bible characters who partnered with God to accomplish His purposes in the world. As we’ve gone through this series, each week we’re reminded that these saints and heroes of the faith weren’t called by God because of their perfection. Instead, we’ve seen that they were deeply flawed and imperfect people. Abraham and Sarah doubted God’s promises and took matters into their own hands to give themselves the child they thought God wouldn’t provide. Jacob was a deceiver who lied and cheated his older brother out of their father’s blessing. And Moses was a timid and reluctant leader who fled Egypt after killing a man.

But as Layne has quoted nearly every week of this series, Tyler Staton wrote in “Praying Like Monks, Living Like Fools” that “to call someone a saint is not to necessarily call them good; it is only to name them as someone who has experienced the goodness of God.” Each of these saints is not really remembered for their own goodness but for the ways God’s goodness was demonstrated in their stories.

This series has also been reminding me of something Jackie Peel shared with our young adults earlier this year. In the fall, our young adults were doing a series on the “Hall of Faith” from Hebrews 11, looking at the lives of the men and women considered to be heroes of our faith. Jackie spoke on the life of Abraham and how flawed he was. Often when we come across Bible stories of imperfect people like Abraham, it’s a comforting reminder that God can use us, too, but Jackie shared a fresh perspective that night: if God wants to work through people, all He has are flawed and imperfect people! By nature of being human, each saint and hero of the faith is also a sinner.

This morning, we are going to be looking at Gideon, whose story is found in Judges, chapters 6–8. The book of Judges is a tragic tale that tells the story of Israel’s descent into corruption, starting with their tribal leaders or “judges” and ending with the total failure of Israel as a whole. If you are not as familiar with the book of Judges or could use a refresher, The Bible Project has a great overview video available on YouTube.

Gideon was the fourth judge over Israel. Morally, he was definitely not the worst of the judges, but he also was not what you would consider an ideal military leader. When Israel called out to God, begging for help and salvation from the oppression of their enemies, they probably hoped He would provide a leader who was strong, brave, and ruthless to lead them into battle. Instead, God gave them Gideon, who was weak and a coward.

We’re going to enter Gideon’s story with verse 11 of Judges 6:

Then the angel of the LORD came and sat beneath the great tree at Ophrah, which belonged to Joash of the clan of Abiezer. Gideon son of Joash was threshing wheat at the bottom of a winepress to hide the grain from the Midianites. The angel of the LORD appeared to him and said, “Mighty hero, the LORD is with you!”

“Sir,” Gideon replied, “if the LORD is with us, why has all this happened to us? And where are all the miracles our ancestors told us about? Didn’t they say, ‘The LORD brought us up out of Egypt’? But now the LORD has abandoned us and handed us over to the Midianites.” – Judges 6:11–13

When we first meet Gideon, he’s threshing wheat in a winepress. The Midianites have destroyed all of the Israelites’ crops and stolen everything else they had to eat, so Gideon is performing a task normally done in the open air in a small in-ground enclosure to hide what little grain he has. It’s here that the angel of the Lord appears to him. What I find really interesting about this exchange is the way Gideon responds. The angel of the Lord has just appeared to him, called him “mighty hero,” and said that the Lord was with him. Now, when the angel of the Lord appeared to Moses in the burning bush, we’re told in the book of Exodus that Moses covered his face because he was afraid to look at God, but Gideon responded not with fear or reverence but with doubt and defeat—maybe even a little cynicism. As Gideon looked at the oppression of his people, he not only doubted that God was with them or even with him in that present moment, but he believed that God had completely abandoned them. He told the actual presence of the Lord that God had abandoned him and his people.

Here’s the conversation that immediately followed:

Then the LORD turned to him and said, “Go with the strength you have, and rescue Israel from the Midianites. I am sending you!”

“But Lord,” Gideon replied, “how can I rescue Israel? My clan is the weakest in the whole tribe of Manasseh, and I am the least in my entire family!”

The LORD said to him, “I will be with you. And you will destroy the Midianites as if you were fighting against one man.”

Gideon replied, “If you are truly going to help me, show me a sign to prove that it is really the LORD speaking to me. Don’t go away until I come back and bring my offering to you.”

He answered, “I will stay here until you return.” – Judges 6:14–18

This exchange—and the story of Gideon, really—draws a parallel to when God called Moses to free the Israelites from Egypt. God reassured both Moses and Gideon that He would be with them, but both were timid and doubtful that they were the best people to lead and deliver God’s people to freedom. Moses’ first reply to God’s call was “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” Gideon’s reply was not “Who am I?” but “Don’t you know who I am? My clan is the weakest in the whole tribe of Manasseh, and I am the least in my entire family!” But again, God responded to both men with reassurance that He would be with them. And again, both responded with doubt and timidity. (Side note: I encourage you this week to read through the story of Gideon looking for these different parallels to Moses as both men respond to God’s call to deliver Israel out of oppression.)

In response to Moses and Gideon’s questions and doubts, God provided miraculous signs to reassure them of who He was and what He was capable of. And these signs are probably what you might be most familiar with from Gideon’s story. First, Gideon wanted a sign to prove that it was really God speaking to him, so he prepared a meal—a big deal, considering the Midianites have stolen and destroyed the Israelites’ entire food supply. And God proved it was really Him by causing the food to be consumed by fire. Then, Gideon wanted a sign to prove that God was really going to use him as promised. Now, it’s probably worth noting that he made this request after he had already been clothed in power by God’s spirit. But for this second sign, Gideon set a wool fleece out on the ground, and God made the fleece wet with dew while the rest of the ground was dry. And then Gideon asked for one more sign. Just to be sure that God would do as he promised, he set out the wool fleece again, and this time, God made the ground wet with dew and kept the fleece dry.

Now that he was reassured by all these signs, and clothed in power by God’s spirit, and accompanied by warriors from the rest of his clan and the tribes of Manasseh, Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali, maybe Gideon was feeling a bit more confident to go into battle. God had told him to go with the strength he had, and Gideon might have been feeling pretty strong. But God didn’t want Gideon and the people of Israel to feel confident and strong because of the size of their army but to be confident in the size and strength of their God. Here’s what we read in Judges 7:

The LORD said to Gideon, “You have too many warriors with you. If I let all of you fight the Midianites, the Israelites will boast to me that they saved themselves by their own strength. Therefore, tell the people, ‘Whoever is timid or afraid may leave this mountain and go home.’” So 22,000 of them went home, leaving only 10,000 who were willing to fight.

But the LORD told Gideon, "There are still too many! Bring them down to the spring, and I will test them to determine who will go with you and who will not." When Gideon took his warriors down to the water, the LORD told him, "Divide the men into two groups. In one group put all those who cup water in their hands and lap it up with their tongues like dogs. In the other group put all those who kneel down and drink with their mouths in the stream." Only 300 of the men drank from their hands. All the others got down on their knees and drank with their mouths in the stream.

The LORD told Gideon, "With these 300 men I will rescue you and give you victory over the Midianites. Send all the others home." So Gideon collected the provisions and rams' horns of the other warriors and sent them home. But he kept the 300 men with him. – Judges 7:2–8

Gideon's army started out with 32,000 troops, and God scaled them down to 300 men. For perspective, that's the same as starting out with everyone living in the Mechanicsburg Area School District and narrowing it down to only the people here this morning. As you can imagine, Gideon was afraid. Going into battle with 32,000 warriors seemed doable, but now with only 300 men, it felt impossible.

In response to Gideon's fear, God provided encouragement. He told Gideon and his servant to go down to the Midianite camp, and at that very spot and that very moment, Gideon overheard a conversation between two Midianite men. God had given one of them a dream about a loaf of bread tumbling into their camp and knocking down a tent, and the other man interpreted that dream as a sign that God had given Gideon's army victory over the Midianites. For Gideon's army of 300 to gain victory over the Midianites would have been miraculous enough, but here's what happened when they went to battle:

[Gideon] divided the 300 men into three groups and gave each man a ram's horn and a clay jar with a torch in it.

Then he said to them, "Keep your eyes on me. When I come to the edge of the camp, do just as I do. As soon as I and those with me blow the rams' horns, blow your horns, too, all around the entire camp, and shout, 'For the LORD and for Gideon!'"

It was just after midnight, after the changing of the guard, when Gideon and the 100 men with him reached the edge of the Midianite camp. Suddenly, they blew the rams' horns and broke their clay jars. Then all three groups blew their horns and broke their

jars. They held the blazing torches in their left hands and the horns in their right hands, and they all shouted, “A sword for the LORD and for Gideon!”

Each man stood at his position around the camp and watched as all the Midianites rushed around in a panic, shouting as they ran to escape. When the 300 Israelites blew their rams’ horns, the LORD caused the warriors in the camp to fight against each other with their swords. Those who were not killed fled... – Judges 7:16–22

God sent Gideon to lead Israel to freedom and told him to go with the strength he had. And what did he have? 300 men, a ram’s horn, a clay jar, a torch, and encouragement from God. There was no training montage, where Gideon spent the next year of his life secretly lifting weights and doing push-ups in the winepress or preparing his men for combat with all kinds of drills and exercises. God didn’t tell Gideon to gather up enough strength so the Israelites could win the battle on their own. God didn’t even tell Gideon that he and his army were stronger than they thought, that he just needed to stop being so insecure and believe in himself. For Gideon to go with the strength he had just meant showing up as he was and trusting that God’s strength would be sufficient to give them the victory that had been promised. And when it came to the actual battle, Gideon and his men didn’t even enter the enemy’s camp or raise a sword, yet God gave them victory over the Midianites.

Gideon—with all his insecurities, fears, and doubts and seemingly inadequate resources—simply showed up, and God did the rest. Gideon became a saint and a hero of the faith not for his own goodness but because he experienced the goodness of God.

While Gideon’s story isn’t one I grew up hearing as often as the stories of Noah or Abraham or Moses, it’s one of my favorites. His story of feeling insecure and inadequate when faced with God’s calling is one I’ve been able to relate to on multiple levels. Several years ago in the young adult ministry, I spoke on Gideon’s story and how it reminded me of the insecurity I felt related to music and leading worship. Last fall, when each of us on staff shared parts of our personal stories, I shared how Gideon’s story reminded me of the inadequacy I felt when it came to prayer—how I felt unqualified to pray for others and doubted that God would ever use my prayers the way I’ve seen him work through others. But God demonstrated His power in mighty ways despite my feelings of inadequacy.

And Gideon’s story is one I continue to relate to. This spring at the women’s retreat, those of us who were leading or serving in some capacity were invited to arrive early for a special time of prayer and worship. Pastor Susan invited each of us to go up to the table at the side of the room, which had been set up with a whole array of objects: paintings, pictures,

figurines, and sculptures. She instructed us to see which object the Holy Spirit was leading us to and then take a few minutes to listen to what God wanted us to hear as we reflected on that object. I stood by the table, looking at all of the different objects, like a big painting of a mighty lion, a portrait of Jesus, a small sculpture of a lamb and its shepherd, different kinds of crosses, and a crown of thorns.

I watched as woman after woman chose her object and sat down to pray and journal. I wasn't really sure what object God was leading me to, and then I noticed on the table among all the objects a single Q-tip. I laughed because it seemed so out of place, so I turned to Pastor Susan to ask if it was supposed to be there—she said yes. I picked up the Q-tip, mostly because I was intrigued by the absurdity of it, and found a quiet place to sit down.

Almost immediately, God began to reveal the significance of the Q-tip to me. It was this ordinary, everyday item—a purely functional object—surrounded by all of these beautiful, artistic, and overtly spiritual symbols of Jesus. And I had been seeing myself the same way. On Sunday mornings, while I refill the mints in the bathroom and make sure we have enough tissue boxes in the worship center, the other pastors on staff are preaching, teaching, praying, and leading worship. I saw myself and my role as purely functional while the others had overtly spiritual responsibilities. Among our staff full of Jesus portraits and lion paintings, I thought I was the Q-tip.

As the women gathered back together, I shared these reflections with them and added that while the Q-tip was ordinary compared to the rest of the objects, God had reminded me that it still has a purpose—lots of different purposes, actually!—and it was put there on purpose. Pastor Susan then shared that as she prepared for the retreat, collecting objects for the table was a task that she had delegated to Doris Barr. She told Doris to gather whatever objects she wanted to—she just had to make sure to include a Q-tip. When Susan prayed for the retreat and this special time of ministry for the leaders, the Q-tip was the only item that God specifically told her should be on the table. So not only did the Q-tip have purpose and was put there on purpose, but it had been specifically chosen.

It can be easy to view myself—or the Q-tip or Gideon—in comparison to all the other available options. Why choose a Q-tip when there's a beautiful cross and a portrait of Jesus? Why choose Gideon when there are others who are stronger and braver? Why choose me when there are others with better education and more experience? It can be easy for me to feel insecure, doubtful, or inadequate in this role just as Gideon was in his—to be specifically chosen and reassured of God's presence with me, yet still wonder if there is someone else who is better qualified or capable to take my place.

But isn't that the point of Gideon's story and the stories of all these sinners and saints? When we read Gideon's story, we're not in awe of his combat skills or leadership abilities. Our attention is drawn to God and his supernatural ability to turn a coward with a clay jar into an overwhelming victory. When we read the story of Moses, we're not impressed by his skills in communication and public speaking but by the signs and wonders God provides to speak to Pharaoh when he wouldn't even listen to Moses and Aaron. We're drawn to the power, sufficiency, and goodness of God because of the weakness, inadequacy, and flaws of the saints He chose to work through.

The Apostle Paul puts it this way in 2 Corinthians 4, from The Message paraphrase:

Remember, our Message is not about ourselves; we're proclaiming Jesus Christ, the Master. All we are is messengers, errand runners from Jesus for you. It started when God said, "Light up the darkness!" and our lives filled up with light as we saw and understood God in the face of Christ, all bright and beautiful.

If you only look at *us*, you might well miss the brightness. We carry this precious Message around in the unadorned clay pots of our ordinary lives. That's to prevent anyone from confusing God's incomparable power with us. As it is, there's not much chance of that. You know for yourselves that we're not much to look at. – 2 Corinthians 4:5–7

There was no confusing God's power with Gideon's. He was as ordinary and unimpressive as the clay pot he brought into battle. By human logic and reasoning, any one of the 300 men in Gideon's army probably would have been a better military leader, and a ram's horn, clay jar, and a torch would have been foolish to take into battle. But that's what made God's strength and power that much more evident in the Israelites' victory.

It may feel discouraging to think of ourselves as unadorned clay pots when most of us would rather be impressive, but it's our ordinary-ness that lets people more clearly see the brightness and beauty of who God is and what He is capable of. Sometimes we try to dress up the outside by hiding our weaknesses or pretending to be stronger than we really are, but the more adorned our vessel becomes, the more it competes with the treasure inside. It's like how in big cities, it's harder to see the stars because of all the street lights competing with the night sky. But the further you go into the countryside or the desert, as the glow of artificial lights grows dimmer, the stars seem to shine brighter and more clearly.

To be content with being ordinary clay pots is to go as God called Gideon to: with the strength we have—however much or how little that may be. We go where God calls us—to our workplaces and schools, our neighborhoods, and our families—knowing that we go for his praise and glory, not our own. We show up as we are with our ram's horns and clay jars, our insecurities and inadequacies, because going with the strength we have allows us to point to the strength of who God is.

And Gideon's story shows us that God is present. In the winepress and in the battle, God assured Gideon that He was and would be with him. We see that God is merciful and gracious. When Gideon questions and tests God, asking God to prove himself, God doesn't scold or reprimand Gideon for doubting Him. He doesn't say, "You know, you're right. I should have chosen someone else" or even "Why don't you trust me?" Instead, He graciously responds with encouragement and reassurance that He would be with Gideon and give them the victory. And we see that God is powerful. From dew on the fleece and the dream of the Midianite man to the Israelites miraculous victory, God demonstrated his ability to do what only He can do.

So how is God leading you to respond to Gideon's story? For me, I'm led to respond in a couple different ways. I'm led to consider and surrender the areas of my life where going in my own strength and trusting in the strength of God feels like an impossible challenge—where I'm tempted to pretend I'm stronger than I really am or where I want to avoid going where God is calling me to until I feel 100% qualified. I'm also led to awe and gratitude for the ways God has been present and powerful in my life. I'm thankful for moments like sitting down with the Q-tip and am in awe of how He gave meaning to an ordinary object in a way I couldn't make up on my own. However God is leading you to respond, let's worship Him as a God who is present, merciful, gracious, and powerful.