

A sermon delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Epiphany 3, January 20, 2008, dedicated to Wallace Cannon and to the memory of The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and always to the glory of God!

“Judges in a Time of War”

Judges 11:29-40; John 1: 29-42

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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The Book of Judges is one of the most exciting, colorful and disturbing books of the Bible. It combines stories of political intrigue and assassination, lies and deception, rape and murder, courage and fear, great faith and idolatry, power and greed, sex and suicide, love and death, military victories and civil war. Caught between the leadership of Moses in the wilderness and Joshua in the initial conquest of Canaan and the Kings Saul, David and Solomon, Judges tells the story of more than 300 years of twelve warrior rulers, called “judges” who led ancient Israel for brief periods of military emergence and emergency. (drawn in large part from “The Book of Judges,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Volume II, Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN, 1998, p. 723).

As Judges opens, the story tells of the might and right of Israel over and against their enemies. It sounds straightforward. Israel has been given the land of Canaan by God and by God they will rule! There are other people living in the land, non-Israelites and the story clearly tells how they should be removed. Israel stands for righteousness and justice. Their enemies have a faith, which is

unacceptable and not sanctioned by God. But, we discover things are not quite that simple. We meet Othniel (1:13) whom we come to know as the first person to serve as a judge in a book filled with judges. He is seen as an exemplary judge and yet we discover that his name, Othniel ben Kenaz, meaning “Othniel, son of Kenaz,” makes him a Kenizzite, not an Israelite. So, our first judge of God’s chosen people is actually one numbered among the Israelite enemies. The lines between the righteous and wicked are blurred.

But the blurring continues throughout the book. The third judge, Shamgar, is not even Semitic, but rather associated with Anat, the Near Eastern Goddess of war who has no relation to the God of Israel (3:31, 5:6). Jael, a Kenite woman who is responsible for killing Israel’s enemies is a member of yet another people whose land has been given to Israel (15:19). So it goes down through the book until a careful reader begins to see that those who are the evildoers and those who claim to be the righteous ones cannot be separated. *“The binary conflicts the narrator is trying to set fail to cohere with the details of the story”*(quoted in Ken Stone’s, “Should We Read the Book of Judges in a Time of Conflict?,” Chicago Theological Seminary Convocation Address, September 13, 2006, page 7).

As Ken Stone, Old Testament theologian at Chicago Theological Seminary, points out:

...Judges has a complex history and was created by many different hands at different points in time. This I do not dispute. But, I am far more interested in other implications of such a messy text. For read as a mirror, might not the Book of Judges here expose our own attempts to divide the world into righteous and wicked as being every bit as strained as that found in Judges?...We too tell stories about our conflicts that attempt to draw clear lines between ourselves and our bad opponents. Such

lines can be drawn in many different ways: liberal vs. conservative; Democrats vs. Republican; black vs. white; gay vs. straight; laity vs. clergy . . .

While differences do exist in this world, from a careful reading of Judges, we can see that overstating the case against your opponent blurs the truth. It is dangerous in every imaginable way to use a sword to slash a separation between two sides when a pair of scissors could split the differences.

We learn even more about Judges. We find leaders who claim to be under the spirit of God. The book sometimes says they provide a “charismatic” model for leadership. Professor Stone points out in his speech on Judges that a closer look shows these judges judge with very poor judgement. They are not acting under the influence of the spirit of God. Gideon does great things with God’s assistance (6:34), but also creates an object that becomes the occasion for idolatry (8:24-27). Samson seems more interested in women and personal revenge than anything we traditionally associate with judging (13:25, 14:6,19, 14:14). And then there is Jephthah (11:29) who as Wallace Cannon read this morning, ends up sacrificing his daughter on the basis of a vow that he makes almost immediately after God’s spirit comes upon him (Stone, p. 8).

While we can interpret Judges many different ways and many sermons have and will be written about God using unlikely vessels to show God’s spirit, we have a problem in this book. The problem shows itself most clearly in Jephthah’s case. Here it is: You can be involved in a just cause and the fruits of God’s spirit can be manifest in you, but these are no guarantees against doing terrible and foolish things. In fact Jephthah’s story shows that those under the influence of God’s spirit are capable of sacrificing persons close to them while refusing to take responsibility for their own harmful

acts. Jephthah says, “*Alas, my daughter! **You** have brought **me** very low; **you** have become the cause of great trouble to **me**” (11:35). He shifts the blame away from himself and onto his daughter! (Reference Stone, p. 9).*

With a mirror in our hands as we read the text, I ask you, how many times have you and I been involved in a just cause and have used an alibi for sacrificing those close to us or refused to accept blame for bringing pain to others? How many times, like Jephthah, do we claim the spirit of God, but acting out of fear, act in ways which cause others close to us to pay the price for our actions?

Jephthah’s story sits right in the middle of the 21 chapter book. There are ten chapters on each side. As I pointed out, the book opens with conflict between Israelites and non-Israelites. By the final chapters, Israel is engaged in an all out civil war. Mistrust between Israel’s tribes festers early in the texts and the external conflict we see at the beginning blows up as an internal conflict by the end. Those engaged in a just cause end up fighting with one another. Conflict which has come to their nation from outsiders turns in the end to conflict on the inside of the nation. By the end of the story, it is impossible to tell who is just and unjust. It is impossible to separate the righteous from the unrighteous. The shift is complete and the messiness of the story is complete as well.

Are you seeing what I am seeing? I feel like when I hold a mirror up to this Book of Judges, I see what can happen to any nation. It can happen to any movement for justice. It can happen to any denomination. It can happen to any congregation. It can happen to any family. It can happen within the souls and spirits of any one of us.

As I hold a mirror to this story of Judges, I see it playing itself out in our nation today. On September 11, 2001, as four planes crashed into the twin towers in Manhattan, the Pentagon and a field outside Shanksville, PA., the whole world watched in horror, united around us, and offered help. We had been attacked and in the midst of the terror that struck, we declared war on this amorphous character and clandestine international militia known as terrorists. We were righteous in our anger and our seeking after justice for those murdered in the attacks. As such, our nation's leaders set to war. It seemed so clear then. *It is not clear now.*

In the midst of going to war against terrorism, we set in motion a politics of fear. We struck Iraq out of misguided fear. And now almost five years later, the *New York Times* reports on January 17, our President is setting in place agreements, which will tie the next Presidents hands there and keep our troops committed to the battle in Iraq through 2018 - a full 15 years of war and military presence in that nation. To begin with, all of this preemptive war was engaged by fear. Fear has taken over our leaders and, as such, our foreign policy. In this war those sacrificed are not the leaders' children, as with Judges, but the children of America, our coalition forces and the children of Iraq.

As former Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright wrote in *The Washington Post*, Tuesday, January 8, 2008:

Fear, of course, has its place. Seven decades ago, the world did not fear Adolph Hitler enough. Today, Iraq remains a power keg. Afghanistan a struggle. Iran a potential danger and North Korea a puzzle not yet solved. Pakistan combines all the elements that give us an international migraine. Al-Qaida and its offshoots deserve our most urgent attention because when people say they want to kill us, we would be fools not to take them at their word. Still, we have an overdose of fear in recent times.

She goes on to say that: “Our fears have inspired us to be less protective of our Constitution, less mindful of international law, less respectful of toward allies, less discerning in our search for truth and less rigorous in questioning what our leaders tell us. The White House has exhorted us to embrace a culture of fear, which has driven and narrowed our foreign policy while poisoning our ability to communicate with others.”

Fear drives something else in a person and in a nation. **It creates a dangerous lack of self-awareness.** We tell others they should have no nuclear warheads while we possess the world’s largest arsenal by ten times. We tell others to establish laws in their lands and respect those laws, while we disregard the Geneva Conventions. We declare to others, “you are either with us or against us,” while ignoring the impact of our actions on Turkey and the Middle East. We tell others to keep their hands off Iraq while our troops occupy Baghdad. We warn others to watch out for China while we are spending as much on military armaments and defense as the rest of the world combined. We tell others to honor the future, while refusing to sign and abide by the Kyoto Accord and other treaties for climate control (drawn from Albright’s essay).

Judges read with a mirror, teaches us to see ourselves as others see us, not as we would like to be seen and remembered. Make no mistake about it, this is as true in international relations and it is true in personal relationships. After all, it was while acting as judge of his nation, that Jephthah acted horribly in relation to his daughter. None of us escape the mirror. Not one.

The time is long overdue for a new way forward based on diplomacy, honesty and faith in who we are and whose we are.

In his 1967 Christmas day sermon on peace (preached just 100 days before his assassination), the Associate Pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., preached these words about a way forward:

It really boils down to this: that all life is interrelated. We are all caught up in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. We are made to live together because of the interrelated structure of reality . . . This is the way our universe is structured, this is its interrelated quality. We aren't going to have peace on earth until we recognize this basic fact of the interrelated structure of all reality. (“A Christmas Sermon on Peace,” A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr. , edited by James M. Washington, Harper Collins, San Francisco, CA, 1986, p.254).

We need to be completely aware of this interconnected web of which we are apart. As Buddhist peace activist Thich Nhat Hanh suggests, *“Those who seek for nonviolence need to be mindful of the seeds we sow and water in our individual and collective consciousness on a day-to-day, moment-to-moment basis. If we sow seeds of conflict and violence, we will reap these seeds someday. After all, “We are all caught up in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.”* (reference from Stone’s piece).

As we read Judges in a time of war, we should tremble, not over their ways but because of our own. Amen.