

Struggling with the Inaction of God in an Agonizing Time  
Judges 6:11-14

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*Gideon answered him, "But sir, if the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us?"*  
Jgs. 6:13b

Advent is a time of waiting. This December I am using some atypical texts for the Advent season as a way of exploring the kind of spiritual waiting that is happening in and around us now. We are not simply waiting for Christmas; we are waiting for God to act in our day, and hopefully sometime soon.

The text I come to today tells of the Old Testament character Gideon. His story occupies three chapters in The Book of Judges. My focus just now is on the opening scene in the story of his life, which you can find on page 220 of the pew Bible under the heading "The Call of Gideon."

Gideon may or may not be represented among us today, but, as I describe him, you may find him to be very much like someone you know well. His story is very ancient. His situation is very contemporary.

*Gideon is a young man who sees his country is in disarray.*

Gideon and his people are farmers. They raise livestock and grain, chiefly on a subsistence level. It is not a great time for agriculture.

Gideon and his people are under threat. They are the victims of terrorist-like raids from the people of Midian, a neighboring country. Midianites hover over them, watching and waiting for the crops to ripen and the livestock to fatten. As soon as the crop is harvested, raiders from Midian sweep in to steal and to devour the grain. As soon as the cattle are raised, Midianites swoop down to take what their insatiable appetites want. Gideon and his people are left with nothing. This has happened to them before. That is why this year Gideon is processing the wheat harvest not by the granary – where the Midianites might expect to find it – but in the wine press. The raiders might not think to look there.

Gideon sees no hope for his generation. His people's economy is dying. Their way of life is starting to fade away. The family farm, no longer lucrative, is deteriorating and lying in disrepair. The nearby village is hardly sustainable. The country and the countryside are torn apart, and there is no leader in the land whom the people can trust. Once there was a Moses and then a Joshua to whom the people could turn for wisdom and guidance. But everything is disintegrating now and there is a void in leadership.

Do you see any similarities?

*Gideon is a young man who finds the religion of his elders useless.*

There had been a long line of faith-keeping going back into Gideon's heritage for generations. Parents and grandparents and whole communities, for as long as people could remember, said their prayers and offered their sacrifices. There were some, I suppose, who were still trying to keep the traditions and practices and spirit of the old faith alive.

Not Gideon. He is from a new generation, and he sees nothing of value in the faith of old. The departure from Egypt? The crossing of the Red Sea? The manna in the wilderness? The leadership of God in a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night? Those are all old stories. Gideon knows of them, even if he does not know them well. But, but what do they matter when your farm is going under and your family is under the threat of starving? His people might have known the voice of God and the mighty deeds of God decades and decades back in history, but that was then and this is now. And he doesn't see the old religion connecting with life as he experiences it.

Had Gideon known the passage, he might have quoted the 19<sup>th</sup> century Scotsman Thomas Carlyle who said, "God sits in heaven and does nothing."<sup>1</sup> That's what Gideon thought of God. He was working away, processing grain in hiding, and heard one of the clichés of faith: "The Lord is with you" (v. 12). Without so much as looking up from his winnowing tool, he feels disgust both at God and the cliché and says, "If the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all his wonderful deeds that our ancestors recounted to us . . . ?" (v. 13) Gideon is part of a generation that has lost interest in religion and given up on faith.

Do you see any similarities now?

*Gideon is a young man to whom God comes.*

The point I want to be making is that we are making a mistake if we think Advent – the coming of God to intervene – is something that happens exclusively in church.

The record of the Bible is that God comes to the nation that is broken and to the generation that seems to be lost to the church. Gideon's time is one of spiritual and moral decay (v. 1) and national decline. Gideon himself is one for whom religion seems a bygone thing. Yet Gideon is the one to whom God makes his Advent.

And mark this exceedingly well. The intervention of God in Gideon's life at that decisive and demanding period of history did not wait to begin until after Gideon came to God. It began when God came to Gideon. The angel of God – I take that to mean God himself- was right there under an oak tree beside the wine press where Gideon worked in frustration. God does *not* sit in heaven and do nothing. God does *not* come only to the devout and religiously active. God is right there, right where a disillusioned young Gideon is struggling to figure out his future.

See the similarities and make that contemporary!

*Gideon is a young man whose rejection of God is used by God.*

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Harry Emerson Fosdick, *What Is Vital in Religion* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1955), p. 12.

This is another major point I want to be making today. The thing about Gideon that God most uses is not faith. The thing about Gideon God most uses is his rejection of faith. "If the Lord is with us," Gideon snapped, "If the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us? . . . The Lord has cast us off." (v. 13) He just as much says that God does not exist and, if God does exist, God is useless and doesn't care.

And what do you suppose God says to that? Does he turn his back on Gideon? Does he throttle him with anger or take away any hope of blessing? No! Gideon strongly rejects God, and God says, "Go in this might of yours and deliver Israel . . . I commission you." (v. 14) What does that mean but this? There is something in the mindset of those who have given up on the faith of their elders which God can use to a mighty and useful purpose. They may have given up on God. But God hasn't given up on them.

I think this is close to the whole record of religion. Abraham and Sarah came to a day when they couldn't abide being in Haran any more. They had to get out of the traditions and confines of Chaldea. Was their rejection of the old the demise of all that was good? No, it was the breakthrough for a new beginning. Martin Luther, a young monk in Wittenburg, wasn't finding any satisfaction in the religion he was taught; it wasn't speaking to him; it wasn't answering his questions; it wasn't sustaining his life. Was that the end? No! It was the breakthrough of a new beginning that became the Protestant Church. Or here, locally, a group of Swiss families found they couldn't keep worshiping the way they had been; the old way wasn't working for them. Was that the end of their faith? Did that keep their descendants from being people of faith? No! It was the breakthrough that led to the start of this church, Salem United Church of Christ.

God finds some way to use the rejection of the old as a breakthrough for the Advent of the new.

So this is the Advent we are waiting through now. The setting is a country in disarray. The setting is a Christianity that seems to be losing its next generation. Strange to say, it is a setting in which we can have great hope, for God is accustomed to using just such a time as this and just such a people as this to make all things new.