

“Partners in faith: Gideon”

Judges 6:36-40

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A sign from God is a very special blessing. Signs from God can communicate so many things, but perhaps the simplest message we receive from a sign is the realization God is watching over us, that God is with us, and that ultimately, God loves and cares for us. In the first book of the bible God gives a sign. After a long rainy season, forty days of nonstop downpour, a deluge that resulted in an epic flood covering the entire face of the earth, after a long rainy season, God gives Noah a sign. That sign is literally one of the most beautiful signs God has ever given. The sign is the rainbow. The sign was given to Noah, but God says the rainbow is a sign of God’s covenant with the whole earth. The rainbow is a sign of blessing for all people. And when there has been a rainbow in the sky, every conversation is filled with wonder and awe, “Did you see...”

Have you ever seen a rainbow? I love how a universal sign, a sign for the whole earth, a sign for all people, can also be very personal. In the spring of 1999, we were leading a trip in the Footsteps of St. Paul and we were spending the afternoon in the Greek city of Thessalonica. Thessalonica is in the area of Greece known as Macedonia. Macedonia once had a ruler who was so great he was named Alexander the Great. Thessalonica, down near the seashore, is home to a magnificent statue of Alexander the Great astride his horse. We had been hiding in a nearby shelter because of a storm, but when the rain stopped, we rushed out and surrounded the statue of Alexander the Great. As great as the Macedonian ruler was, we have an Alexander in our life whom we think is pretty amazing in his own right. Our youngest son is Alexander, so we had bought him a little figure of that other one who shared his name. Gazing up at that Alexander, and thinking of our own Alexander, you might be able to guess what happened. A rainbow filled the sky...and I mean it filled the sky. From one end to the other, in all the bright and vibrant colors of the spectrum. And to top it off, it was a double rainbow. Yes, God gave the rainbow as a sign to Noah. And yes, God

gave that sign to the whole world. And yes, on that day, at that particular moment, we felt like God had given that sign just for us.

Today we have a story about signs. It is the story of Gideon. Gideon receives several very clear signs from God. The signs were for Gideon. And yet, because the signs are included in this book, which is a witness for all people, we are right to say that the signs Gideon receives are signs for all of us. I hope and I pray, I hope and I pray earnestly and fervently that these signs will be for you, just for you, in a very real and personal way.

In Judges chapter six Gideon meets the Lord through the appearance of an angel. The Lord has a call for Gideon, something the Lord wants Gideon to do. Gideon is intrigued by the call, but he also has his doubts. Wanting to be sure it really is the Lord speaking to him, Gideon says, “If it is really you talking to me, give me a sign.” Gideon goes and prepares a meal with meat and unleavened bread. He places it before the Lord. The angel of the Lord touches the meat and unleavened bread and a fire flares up from the rock, consuming the meat and the bread. Gideon was seeking a sign. As the flames consumed the meat and the bread, Gideon had his sign. He realized it really was the Lord.

This is not the end, however, of Gideon seeking a sign. Right before he goes out to do the task for which the Lord is calling him, Gideon seeks another sign. This time Gideon takes a fleece. A fleece is the coat of wool from a sheep or similar animal. Gideon takes the fleece and lays it on the threshing floor. Gideon then says to God, “If there is dew only on the fleece and all the ground is dry...” then I’ll know that you are with me. Gideon went to bed, woke up, checked the fleece. The fleece was covered in dew...and the land was dry as a bone. It turns out Gideon still needs a little bit more of a sign. Now he says to God, “Don’t be angry with me, but I have one more request.” This time let the fleece be dry and all the rest of the ground covered in dew. Sure enough, the next morning all of the ground is covered in dew. The fleece, ah the fleece, is dry as a bone.

Now the purpose of all these signs is very important. God did not just show up to show off, with flames and fleeces. God had a purpose for Gideon. God was calling Gideon to lead the people of Israel into battle against the Midianites, who had been oppressing God's people. After these three distinct signs from God, Gideon is ready to go. Here in Judges, as we come near to Gideon, we discover an important thing about signs. Signs are not just some opportunity for God to show off. And signs are not just some opportunity for human beings to test God. Once Gideon receives the signs, it is incumbent on him that he obeys the call of the Lord. Now, after the three signs, Gideon is ready. Gideon gathers an army of 32,000 soldiers and lines them up for battle. Okay, Lord, let's do this.

At this point we discover God is not quite ready to send Gideon into battle. Not with 32,000 soldiers. God realizes that if Gideon goes into battle with 32,000 soldiers and wins, he and the Israelite army might say, "We did it, through our own strength and power." And that's not the lesson God wants Gideon and the Israelites to learn. Before the battle, God thins out the troops. Gideon, announces to the troops that anyone who trembles with fear can turn back right now. That huge sucking sound is the immediate vanishing of 22,000 men, who all bailed out at the exact same time, leaving Gideon with a mere 10,000 soldiers. God surveys the situation, these remaining 10,000 soldiers, and says words that must have caused Gideon's heart to stop. "Still too many. We need a smaller army, a much smaller army." What follows is a lesson I can't say I completely understand, but everyone is led to the water and those who drink the water by lapping it into their mouth with their hand are chosen to remain, and when Gideon counts the number of those who are chosen to remain, his mighty army of 32,000 soldiers has been whittled down to 300. And yet with those 300, Gideon leads the army of the Lord to victory, a victory that is clearly and unmistakably due to the power and provision of the Lord. The signs ultimately result in Israel giving all glory and honor and praise to God.

I want to highlight another aspect of the signs given to Gideon. When we meet Gideon, he is threshing the wheat for his family in a winepress. The passage makes it known that he was doing this out of

fear. He was hiding as he threshed the wheat, because if the Midianites discovered him, they would take the wheat. Later Gideon is commanded to tear down the altar that has been erected by his own father, an altar to the false god of Baal. Gideon tears down the altar, but he does it at night, because he was afraid. When we meet Gideon, he is neither brave nor bold. The signs of God's presence strengthen him and make him brave and bold. Signs are not just some opportunity for God to show off. And signs are not just some opportunity for human beings to test God. The signs show God's power and God's presence, and those very signs serve to strengthen Gideon, to make him brave and bold.

Gideon is given signs from God. Were the signs effective. Yes indeed the signs were effective. Gideon became brave and bold and fought for the Lord. So, clearly, the signs were effective. If only that were completely true. You see, later in his life, after the battles, Gideon collects gold from the people and makes the gold into an ephod, which is described as a pagan object associated with idols. He places the ephod in his hometown and all the people prostitute themselves by worshiping that golden ephod. The signs raised up within Gideon the bravery and the boldness to go to battle for the Lord. But the signs did not have the lasting impact of leading Gideon, or the people, to trust God completely. They bowed down to an idol. Gideon made that ephod later in his life. We might say that the further Gideon got from the signs, the further Gideon got from God.

Does that mean our faith is dependent on God giving us signs constantly and continuously? Why, yes. But how God gives us signs constantly and continuously, now that is something worth thinking about. Is it realistic to expect God to give us signs constantly and continuously? I don't think it is unrealistic. In fact, that has to be one of the central purposes behind God giving us his written word, the bible. When we read the bible, there is almost no page we can turn that will not lead us to encounter a sign from God. I just finished reading the Old Testament a few weeks ago. 39 books. 39 books filled with an amazing array of signs. Each time I read one of those signs, it wasn't just a sign from the past. It wasn't just a sign for someone else. This is our book. This is for the people of God. I have just been through the Red Sea, and

I admit I wandered forty years in the desert, but boy, that daily bread sure keeps you going. Dry as a bone in the sweltering heat of that vast wasteland, the water that gushed from the stone quenched my thirst and renewed my spirit.

You are a part of this. We just read opening sentences that reminded us the heavens declare the glory of God. Read Psalm 19. Look at the heavens. The signs are there every night and every day. Every night and every day, God's wonder and handiwork are on display. When I wondered if I was alone God sent Jacob's ladder down and I climbed it, and sure enough, every rung goes higher and higher...and soon I felt like I was in the presence of God. I heard the still small voice as I sat with Elijah in that lonely cave, and I climbed out of the fiery furnace with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. When you and I read God's word we encounter the signs of his presence, of his power, and of his peace time and time and time again. When we read God's word, we are brought face to face with God's signs constantly and continuously.

God did all these signs for his people, and then he said, "Do not let this word be far from your heart." Read it day by day by day. Teach it to your children. Bind it on your forehead and put it over the doorframe of your house. Hold tightly to these signs that I have given you.

The further Gideon got from the signs, the further he got from God. It seems to me there is the unavoidable conclusion that Gideon did not treasure the word of the Lord in his heart. He became preoccupied with...only about a hundred thousand things that preoccupy the human heart and mind and spirit when we are not occupied with God's word, with God's will, and with God's way. And in the same way, maybe Gideon let the memory of the signs God had given him drift further and further away. However it happened, we are left with the distinct impression that the further Gideon got from the signs, all the signs God had given, the further Gideon got from the signs, the further Gideon got from God.

I don't want to get further from the signs God has given. I want to get closer to the signs God has given. I believe when I get closer to the

signs, I get closer to God. The signs show us God is at work in this world, at work in our lives, and that we can put our trust in God no matter what, no matter where, and no matter when. Yes, we can use signs to test God. Or God can use signs to help us trust God. Think of all the signs God has given in the bible to help us trust.

Like Gideon, I think there is the good possibility God has given us unique signs, individual signs, personal signs to help us trust God. The rainbow...it is for everyone, for all people, a sign for all humanity. With a nod of your head, has God ever used the rainbow to give you a sign, to take your breath away, to cause you to look up, to look heavenward, to look to your Maker and say, "Thank you Lord. That is just what I needed."

My brother called me up this week. A while back he was asked to serve in a major leadership role with the YMCA Y's Men International, to be the President of the western region of the United States. He was on the fence. They asked if he would serve. He had a pocket full of excuses, too busy, too committed, stretched too thin. Around the time he was wrestling with his decision, we happened to be in California. It was two years ago. I preached at a local church. My brother came to hear me preach. I talked about the great cloud of witnesses who hear God's call and answer yes. He went home from that sermon and accepted the nomination. He went home and said yes. He hasn't let me forget that. This week he called and said the installation will be in June. It will be by zoom. He asked if I would speak at the installation. He said, "After all, you got me into this." No, I didn't get him into this. But God gave him a sign. Not to show off. God didn't give him the sign to show off. God gave him a sign to call him to a place of service, and he will do a fine job. My brother believes God gave him a sign. And his response is to trust God. And I have a Zoom meeting on my calendar which I am really looking forward to, when Danny Eberly will be installed as the President.

A dear friend here at Dunn's Corners left church a couple of weeks ago and said, "I need help. I'm asking for help. It is hard for me, but I am asking for help." I had just preached about having an Aaron and a

Hur. She literally needed an Aaron and a Hur. She had some heavy furniture she needed moved out of her house. While she waited for me to make some phone calls and get her an Aaron and a Hur, she went to the transfer station here in town. A nice young man helped her at the transfer station. He was so nice she told him how she was looking for help moving some heavy furniture. He smiled and said he and a friend would be glad to do it. A day or two later the doorbell rang, the young men walked in, the furniture was carried out. When I sent an email this week asking you if you had seen any signs, she immediately wrote back and said, "When God provided me with an Aaron and a Hur." You take a sign like that and you tuck it in your spiritual memory bank. It won't happen every day. But every day, you can look back on how God gave a sign and let the memory of that sign lead you to trust God with whatever new challenges you face.

A very special person experienced a devastating loss. Her grandson died suddenly. Oh, her heart was broken. Her grandson had faced some difficult struggles in his young life. As she mourned, and those of you who have lost a young person, a young friend, a child, a grandchild, you know how deep and dark those days of mourning can be...as she was mourning, she was out in her yard. She said a bird flew into the yard and flew around her three times, as if her grandson was saying to her, "I'm free, I'm free, I'm free." No, God doesn't give us signs to show off. But he does give us signs to help us trust, to trust that even when we have lost someone so special to us, that lost one is not lost from God.

I told you a fleece, like the fleece in Gideon's story, can be wool from a sheep. How many of us see a sheep and that sheep stirs within us a sign, a precious sign from God? If a shepherd loses one sheep, he searches for that sheep until he finds it, lifts it up on his shoulders, carries it home, and calls his friends to come and celebrate. Rejoice, for this sheep of mine was lost and now it is found. Driving in the countryside, stopping by a petting zoo, visiting a farm, we see a sheep, dirty, disheveled, drifting along aimlessly. We see a sheep, but we see so much more than sheep. We see a sign from God that not a one of us can ever get away from his love. He will find us. He will wrap us up. He will

bring us home. And he will celebrate. God will celebrate because God loves us.

The sign of the sheep is for all people, because all people are loved by God. And yet even though the sign is for all people, the sign of the sheep holds a sweet and tender spot in our hearts. Our daughter Hayley had a birthday party when she was four or five. Julie arranged to have the party at a farm where there were sheep. All the kids got to go out and play with the sheep. Oh, it was messy and it was chaotic, and it was beautiful. Well, the party ended, Julie gave all the kids a party favor and sent them home with happy hearts. Hayley decided she needed a party favor. Yes, she had already received numerous birthday presents, but she needed a party favor. We have a photograph of this little girl, four or five years old, missing her front teeth, holding in her arms a sheep that is twice as big as her. That was her party favor, and it took all we had to convince her the sheep needed to stay with the others. But the look on her face, holding her lamb, her prized lamb, well if the joy on her face is even one bit like the joy on the face of Jesus when he holds his precious lambs, we know that in the arms of Jesus we are wrapped up in eternal and everlasting love.

Ah the signs, the signs, the big and the little, the extraordinary and the very ordinary, the signs that bring a smile and the signs that cause us to well up in tears...the signs. We don't seek signs to test God. God has proven himself far too many times for us to test God. But the signs, the signs, the tender touches of God, the tap on the shoulder, the wink of the eye, the knowing smile, the heart that is warmed, the spirit that is lifted, the signs are not there because we want to test God. The signs are there to help us learn over and over and over again, we can trust God.

Two men were in desperate need of a sign. Their dear friend Jesus had died. Like all the disciples, they had thought Jesus was the one who would save the people of God. Now Jesus had died. They were walking to a place called Emmaus, but in a real way they were going nowhere. Every hope, every dream, every plan, every purpose had been shattered. Their hearts were heavy. Their spirits were broken. Boy, if two people ever needed a sign, it was those two weary travelers on the road to

Emmaus. A stranger met them and walked a while with them. As they walked and they talked the stranger somehow started to speak words that cut through the fog. This man told them that God's chosen servant had to suffer, and that his suffering would be the very means to bring salvation. When they stopped by a place to have a meal, they begged the stranger to join them. It was at the meal that the stranger gave them a sign. At the meal, the stranger took bread, and blessed it, and then broke it. As the stranger broke the bread it was like the dark cloud of despair was swept away. Their eyes were opened. They realized the stranger was none other than Jesus himself...Jesus, who was not dead...Jesus who was alive and risen from the dead. Jesus was alive and Jesus was with them. That sign was just for those two travelers. And yet that sign is for all of us. Whenever we break the bread with Jesus, he opens our eyes. He sets our hearts on fire. The sign was just for those two travelers on the road to Emmaus. But the sign was also for all of us, for all of humanity, because God's love is for the whole world. And today, that sign is for you. This sign is for you. Jesus has a sign for you...just for you. He is offering you the bread. He is offering you the cup. He is saying to you, "This is my body, this is my blood, given for you." Given for you because God loves you.