



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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The Third Sunday after the Epiphany

January 21st, 2018

The Epiphany gospel lessons could easily lead one to believe that epiphanies took place solely in New Testament times. That's not so. People still come face to face with the risen Christ today – albeit not usually in the flesh like Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus, but when we encounter him in the Bible.

What's more the Old Testament is replete with epiphanies. God's revelation of himself to Abraham was, for example, one of the earliest epiphanies. And Moses' encounter with God in a burning bush just as much an epiphany as the three Wise Men's meeting with the infant Jesus in the Holy Family's home in Bethlehem.

Among the most dramatic epiphanies recorded in the Old Testament is Gideon's encounter with God at a time when the Promised Land was overrun by hordes of desert bandits called Midianites.

This epiphany took place only a century or so after the Israelites' miraculous victory at Jericho. God had first stopped the flow of the Jordan allowing the Israelite host to cross dry shod. Then he caused an earthquake to destroy down the city walls enabling the Israelites to take Jericho by storm.

By Gideon's time, however, the Israelites had completely lost the commonality of purpose that enabled them, against all odds, to conquer the Promised Land. Once the victory had been won, national unity evaporated and the people – tired of long years of austerity – had given themselves over to a wave of hedonism.

God – the sole author of the miraculous victory was forgotten. The Israelites no longer remembered that these remarkable achievements

had been owed solely to God's grace. They remembered only the costs of victory – lives lost, wealth spent and pleasures foregone. As a consequence, their society had started to come apart at the seams.

The Book of Judges warns us that it is far easier to recognize massive outside threats than symptoms of internal rot. For the Israelites, the symptoms of internal rot lay in their inability to deal with brutish, unsophisticated thugs rather like the ones who prey on law-abiding Americans today, notably – but by no means exclusively – on the streets of our inner cities.

The thugs that the Book of Judges talks about were called Midianites. They came from what we know today as Saudi Arabia. They were very much like our Hell's Angels: vicious, but undisciplined. Hordes of them mounted on camels – the Harley Davidsons of the day – would descend on Israelite communities, slaughtering the inhabitants and stealing their produce, livestock and anything else of value they could their hands on.

First the Midianites plundered the marginal communities that lay on the fringes of the Promised Land. But it wasn't until they started to terrorize the heartland that Israel's elite awoke to the danger engulfing the nation. By that time, things were so bad, Gideon, son of a wealthy and influential landowner, had been reduced threshing his grain in his vineyard to outwit the Midianites and prevent them from stealing it.

It was there he received God's call to save Israel. Even though Gideon was well aware of the great things God had done for his forefathers, and even though he had met God face to face, such was the state of apostasy in the land it took three

miracles for God to convince Gideon that he wasn't imagining things.

Gideon's skepticism is shocking. He knew the old story of the battle of Jericho by heart. As a child he probably knew men who had taken part in the storming of the city. And he must certainly have been well aware that the conquest of Canaan was history, not mere myth and legend. Even so, when Gideon, himself, was called by God to lead his people, he demanded miracles by way of proof.

One lesson from Gideon's story is that it's impossible to restore justice, decency and equity to society without moral reawakening. Self-indulgent, immoral leaders lead to self-indulgent, immoral societies. Thus the first thing God ordered Gideon to do was to restore morality, at least in the area where he lived. In practical terms, this meant restoring the worship of the One True God. This meant destroying the altars of the false gods the Children of Israel were worshipping.

Smashing the altars of Baal and his divine consort Ashteroth was as warmly welcomed in Canaan three millenia ago as, say, advocating chastity as a sexual norm would be today. It's an apt simile. Services at the temples of Baal took the form of sex orgies and putting them out of business didn't win Gideon any popularity contests.

First, his neighbors tried to kill him. Finally, they grudgingly went along with him because they were in a desperate situation, and Gideon was offering a possible way out.

Chapter 7 of the Book of Judges relates that eventually 32,000 men flocked to his banner, but God told Gideon to send home everyone who was afraid. "There are too many people for me to give you victory," God told him, "If I were to do that the Israelites would say 'I saved myself by my own hand.' " God told Gideon to send most of the volunteers home.

One can't help thinking that there was a practical side to God's drastic reduction in force. Tens of thousands of raw recruits would probably have complicated the task of destroying the gangs of Midianite thugs. A horde of ill-trained, fearful draftees would have been more of a liability than a battlefield asset. After God's first RIF (the military acronym for "reduction in force") only

10,000 men were left. But they were still too many for his purpose.

So God ordered Gideon to take the remaining 10,000 to the river to quench their thirst before combat and to keep only those who didn't take off their side arms to drink, but knelt down lapped like dogs. God wanted to retain only the services of the most disciplined and resolute.

Gideon followed God's strategy to the letter, and the 300 soldiers who remained secured a resounding victory. The wrath of God came on the Midianites in a flash of light and blaring trumpets. The strategy for victory – the smashing clay pots containing torches and the sounding trumpets – symbolizes God's revelation of his Word to the world.

The Book of Judges tells us God did things this way to demonstrate that his care and love for his people. But there are also practical lessons to be learned from the episode. Gideon's victory over enormous odds graphically demonstrates that it doesn't take a vast army and bottomless pockets to impose peace and tranquility to our city streets. All it requires is wholesome values and a small number of people resolute enough to uphold them.

It also teaches that Christian jurisdictions and denominations share common interests that are far greater – and far, far more important – than our differences. After all Gideon's story demonstrates that societies based on Christian principles abandon those principles at their peril. Proof of this lies in the destruction of Christian societies, including – Rome and Byzantium.

The consequence of turning one's back on one's animating faith is a loss of common vision and common sense of purpose and this in turn leads to anarchy and social disintegration. After all, as the Nobel Prize winning economist, Milton Friedman so presciently observed: "If you subsidize a thing, you get more of it."

Jesus put it rather more eloquently in Matthew 12:25: "Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation; and every city or house divided against itself cannot stand." The Midianites' invasion of the Promised Land shows Jesus words are a warning we would be wise to take seriously. *Amen.*