



November 1, 2015
Pastor Mark Toone
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church

The Story: Finding the Scarlet Thread
A Few Good Men
Judges 4

I want to introduce to you the newest member of the Chapel Hill family. Michael Reed Hackman, son of Pastors Larry and Megan Hackman, born last Sunday at 2:34pm, weighing in at 9 pounds 3.6 ounces! Megan gave birth to a toddler! I got to rock him this week... and had to get physical therapy for my shoulder afterwards. He's huge!

It is a wonderful kindness of God that Reed was born at the end of a week of painful loss and shortly after our St. Andrews celebration when we remembered those who have gone to be with the Lord. With every birth, God reminds us that He is not yet done with his people... that he is sending another generation of believers to carry on His work in His world. So, welcome Reed... and Bennett Palmer... and Ezra White. What a blessing!

We continue in the Story. Last week, God fulfilled his promise to give His people a land of their own. Joshua leads them into Canaan. Through one hard battle after another God uses the Israelites to bring judgment upon the wickedness of those in the land and to establish a foothold for the Jews. How many read chapter 7?

We ended with Joshua's declaration of faith. "Choose for yourselves this day which gods you will follow... but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord!" Let me remind you of their response. Joshua 24:16: Then the people answered, "Far be it from us to forsake the LORD to serve other gods! Joshua warns them again in 20: If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, he will turn and bring disaster on you and make an end of you, after he has been good to you." The people reply: "No! We will serve the LORD."

That's how Joshua ends. The people promise to throw away foreign gods and to serve the Lord only. And things look good for a while. This week's reading, Judges, opens with these words: ⁷"The people served the LORD throughout the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him and who had seen all the great things the LORD had done for Israel." Unfortunately, it didn't last.

¹⁰After that whole generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation grew up, who knew neither the LORD nor what he had done for Israel. ¹¹Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD and served the Baals. ¹²They forsook the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought

them out of Egypt. They followed and worshiped various gods of the peoples around them. They provoked the LORD to anger ¹³because they forsook him and served Baal and the Ashtoreths.

¹⁴In his anger against Israel the LORD handed them over to raiders who plundered them. He sold them to their enemies all around, whom they were no longer able to resist.

¹⁵Whenever Israel went out to fight, the hand of the LORD was against them to defeat them, just as he had sworn to them. They were in great distress.

¹⁶Then the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the hands of these raiders.

¹⁷Yet they would not listen to their judges but prostituted themselves to other gods and worshiped them. Unlike their fathers, they quickly turned from the way in which their fathers had walked, the way of obedience to the LORD's commands.They refused to give up their evil practices and stubborn ways....

⁵The Israelites lived among the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. ⁶They took their daughters in marriage and gave their own daughters to their sons, and served their gods. ⁷The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD; they forgot the LORD their God and served the Baals and the Asherahs.

If you think back to your Sunday school classes, you might remember hearing about Baal. Baal was actually a collection of different gods but they were often represented by the image of a bull. Asherahs were goddesses but, ironically, were represented by poles set on hills; huge phallic symbols. Baal represented virility; Asherah represented fertility. And the worship of these "gods" was highly sexualized. In fact, their "temples" were actually brothels and "worship" meant having sex with temple prostitutes.

Listen again to the last verse I read: ⁷The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD; they forgot the LORD their God and served the Baals and the Asherahs.

In other words, instead of representing God as a "holy nation," they were being absorbed into the sexualized culture surrounding them. Seven times in Judges we read the following: "The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord..." which is shorthand for saying that they abandoned Yahweh and began to "whore after other gods." When this happened, God would lift his hand of protection from them, the Israelites would be invaded by a foreign power and suffer terribly. Finally they would repent, cry out to the Lord and, in his incredible faithfulness, he would hear their cry and send a judge to save them. This cycle repeated itself again and again.

When we hear “judge,” we think of someone in a robe dispensing justice. But these judges were more than that. They were spiritual leader, prophet and warrior all wrapped up in one. Each was called by God and anointed by his Spirit to rescue his people. There were 12 judges over a 400 year period. About some we know nothing more than their names: Tola, Jair, Elon. Others are described with a few juicy tidbits. Like Ehud who assassinates the fat Moabite king, Eglon. (Doesn’t that sound like a character out of Star Wars?) He stabs him with a short sword that was swallowed up by Eglon’s enormous belly.

But three of the judges are more familiar to us. I want to tell you about one of them. Deborah. Deborah was a prophetess at a time and in a culture when women were not usually spiritual leaders. But she was so anointed of the Lord and so well known for her wisdom that people came from far and wide to seek her counsel. At that time, the Hebrews were oppressed by the Canaanite army led by Sisera. He had 900 iron chariots and for 20 years, treated the Jews with great cruelty. But under the Lord’s anointing, Deborah called for Barak, the leader of the Israelite army, and told him God was ready to destroy the Canaanites. Barak reluctantly agreed and a great battle took place at the base of Mt. Tabor. The Hebrew army gathered for battle and Sisera ordered his chariots to mow them down. But the ground was wet, the chariot wheels got stuck and Sisera’s army was routed.

Sisera ran away, leaving his men to be slaughtered by the Israelites. He took refuge in the tent of a man named Heber. Heber’s wife, Jael, invited Sisera inside. She comforted him, gave him a cup of warm milk, tucked him in for a nap under a blanket, and while he was sleeping, took a tent peg and hammer, and drove the peg into his temple all the way into the ground. Two things happened as a result of the heroism Heber’s wife, Jael. First, the Israelites were delivered from the hand of the Canaanites for forty years. Second, Jael’s husband, Heber stopped taking naps. They didn’t do much camping after that, either.

As you will read, Judges is engaging... and disturbing. You would hope that the judges would be virtuous. In fact, all of them were deeply flawed. Gideon was timid and in the end, led his own people back into idolatry. Samson was an unrestrained horn dog who couldn’t keep his zipper up. Only Deborah is unwavering. But how is this different from the rest of the Story so far!? Abram lied and doubted. Jacob swindled. Moses murdered. The Story isn’t mainly about the people, it is mainly about the God of the people and his amazing faithfulness! God is faithful to his people and to his promises.

But seven times you will read the same words: “...the people did evil in the eyes of the Lord.” Like a bell tolling through the book, those same words echo again and again. “The people did evil in the eyes of the Lord. The people did evil in the eyes of the Lord.” Each time, God withdraws his hand of protection and blessing, the people are overtaken by their enemies. They cry out to God, and every time faithful God answers their prayers and sends a deliverer. But, oh, the decades of suffering they

experience because they abandoned God's ways and chased after the sexualized gods of their pagan culture.

It is such a frustrating cycle... but it isn't until the last verse of the book that we understand why the people kept failing so disastrously. Listen to these haunting words in 21: 25: "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did what was right in his own eyes." (By the way, there's a glimpse of the Scarlet Thread. Israel had no king. Tuck that one away for a future chapter!) But look again at those last nine words: "...everyone did what was right in his own eyes." Let's see... a culture that worships sex, a culture where there is no right and wrong but rather, where everyone does what is right in his own eyes. Hmm... does that sound familiar? Could you find a better description of our American culture? Our culture worships sex, and with every passing year, our Baal worship becomes more and more bizarre. This week Glamour Magazine announced their "Woman of the Year." Who was it? Caitlyn Jenner. Really? Why don't women rise up in outrage over such lunacy?

This haunting diagnosis, "everyone did what was right in his own eyes..." is the definition of a modern term we ought to know: Moral Relativism. Here's the definition right out of Google: "'Moral Relativism' is the view that ethical standards, morality, and positions of right or wrong are culturally based and therefore subject to a person's individual choice. We can all decide what is right for ourselves."

This is the prevailing philosophy of our culture and it is captured in words like those of author Pat Murphy: "...I had to realize that the truth isn't always the same for everyone. I had to realize that my truth may not be the same as your truth."

May I just say, as clearly as I know how: that is complete poppycock! There is no such thing as "your truth" and "my truth!" Truth is not a possession. It is an objective reality. There is only one person who can define "truth" and that is God, the author of all reality. When someone says, "You have your truth, I have my truth," their underlying statement really is this: "I reject the idea that there is a God who determines what is right and wrong. I will be my own god; I will decide what is true based upon my own feelings and preferences." When you go there, you have just plunged into idol worship.

We are living in a time and culture analogous to the culture that was sucking the life out of the Israelites. And interestingly, like then, the issues of sexuality are often the back door through which this false religion enters and takes possession of our minds, our souls, our marriages, our kids, our churches. I can think of four Christian organizations that matter to me which have, over the last year, begun to wobble—wobble on God's definition of marriage, wobble on God's definition of sexuality, wobble on God's definition of gender, wobble on orthodoxy. And the problem is, if you choose to take a stand—if you choose to say, "This is not right, this is a betrayal of your mission, this is a violation of God's creative order, it will

lead to the disintegration of our culture...”, then the knee jerk response you get is, “What? You are a hater. You are a bully.”

You do not have to be a hater to say, “Men are men and women are women.” You do not have to be a bully to say, “God created marriage between a man and a woman for the propagation and protection of children and for the good of society.” But when you live in a time and place where “everyone does what is right in his own eyes,” it becomes increasingly risky to take such a stand.

But take it we must. Surely one of the calls of the Church today must be to lovingly, graciously, but courageously speak the truth of God’s Word. If Judges teaches us anything, it is that with the anointing of God’s Spirit, the least likely person can make a difference in an upside-down society. A football coach named Joe Kennedy who refuses to stop praying after a game. A man like Brad Henning who continues to go into public schools with the countercultural message that sex is a precious gift to be offered only in a relationship of marriage... or a young man like Justin Botejue.

Justin is the new Whitworth University student body president. In April, a small group of radical student leaders took it upon themselves to pressure the Board of Trustees to adopt a resolution to change its policy on sexual standards. It was extremely divisive and disruptive, and we agreed that we would not act on this until the fall. But two weeks ago, Justin stood up in front of the Board of Trustees and said this: “Last spring a group of activist students tried to pressure you to pass a resolution. But I am here to say that their efforts were destructive and not in the best interests of our university. Our students are tired of being pressured and as president of our student body I am rescinding the request for the resolution that was placed before you. Instead of pushing an activist political agenda, I am going to focus the efforts of my administration on emphasizing the historic, Christ-centered mission of Whitworth University.”

When he was done, you could have heard a pin drop in that room. It was one of the most powerful and proudest moments in my 20 years on the board. All because one student, filled with the Spirit, had the courage to stand and say, “Not on my watch. As for me and my house... we will serve the Lord.”

These are inspiring stories, aren’t they? But we cannot depend upon Joe Kennedy and Brad Henning and Justin Botejue to carry our spiritual water. Every household here, every individual here, every student here must be emboldened to take a stand. To resist the temptations of this sexualized culture—this materialistic culture, this idolatrous culture.

And you know the important difference between the judges and us? Every single believer in this place has been anointed by the Holy Spirit of God. Not just a select few, not just for a certain time... every one of us, all the time, filled with the Holy Spirit of Jesus. It may seem that we are outnumbered, that we are surrounded by

an increasingly antagonistic culture, that everyone is doing what is right in his own eyes, but never underestimate the impact of one Spirit-filled, courageous, faithful person who takes a stand for Christ and against the idolatry of our time.

I wonder... will you be such a person?