

Have you read the story of Gideon in the Old Testament book Judges? It's a good story that fits well with the readings and prayers we have as we begin both a new Church Year and the Season of Advent.

For those unfamiliar with it, the Book of Judges is a series of stories about how God's People repeatedly turn away from God to follow the ways of the predominant culture, then suffer for their choices, and call on God to help them. God always responds in the form of a hero figure called a Judge, whose actions are a form of God's judgment, they clean up whatever mess the people of God are in, then the people promise to follow God's ways again. Until they don't, and the people begin to suffer again, and they cry out for help again, God sends a Judge who sorts things out, the people repent and turn to God until they don't, and the cycle starts all over again. Most of the Judges are far from exemplary people; they have faults and flaws and reveal that God chooses what we might deem unworthy or overlooked to fulfill God's plans for the world.

Such is the case in the story of Gideon. You can read the entire story in Judges Chapters 6-8. I'm just going to give a brief summary. Gideon's story starts with God's people being seriously bullied by the Midianites, Amalekites, and people who lived in the East. The story goes, every time God's people planted their farms, they were raided by the Midianites, Amalekites and others who stole all the produce and livestock, leaving God's people poor and starving. So, the people of God cried out to God for help. God sent a prophet who reprimanded God's people for abandoning God's ways to follow the ways of the Amalekites, pointing out that doing so both alienated them from God and did not endear them to the Amalekites, it only made their lives worse. That's how it usually is with bullies usually. Now the people were going to have to stand up for themselves, and this is where God comes into the story.

God sent an angel to a young man named Gideon who was secretly growing barley in small batches, so the raiders might not notice and steal it. The angel greeted Gideon like the angel Gabriel greeted Mary by saying God had found favor with him. Gideon, however, is no Mary. Gideon struggled to trust God and his first response to the angel was sneering if God favors them, why did God let the Midianites bully them. Gideon asked why God didn't deliver them from the suffering like God delivered his ancestors from slavery under Egypt. One of the wonderful things about God and angels is they can handle our human resentment, anger, snark, and pushback really well. The angel told Gideon if he wanted deliverance

from the Midianites then he should lead an army against them. Gideon laughed and said he couldn't do that because he was from the weakest, perhaps smallest tribe of Israel and the least in his family. These are not preferred traits of military generals. God responded to Gideon the way God always responds to us when we claim we are not what the world wants or values, or when we are overwhelmed, or when we doubt. God said, "I will be with you."

That wasn't enough for Gideon, he asked for a test from the angel to prove itself. Once the angel passed the test, Gideon sent a message to anyone who wanted to join him in fighting the Midianites and about 32,000 men responded.

Then was God's turn to push back. God said that was too many people. Gideon needed to reduce the army otherwise they might claim the victory was won on their own instead of acknowledging God's involvement. So, Gideon reviewed the troops and anyone who seemed too afraid to fight was sent home, that turned out to be 22,000 men. That left 10,000 to fight. But God said that was still too many. God said God would decide who should go and who should stay through an unusual test. Gideon directed all 10,000 men to go to a large body of water to drink. God told Gideon anyone who knelt beside the water and scooped it up with their hands to drink were out. The ones who laid down and lapped the water like a dog or cat could stay. That got the army down to a mere 300 men, and God said, that was the perfect amount.

After receiving even more proof that everything was going to work out, Gideon and his 300 men finally defeated the Midianites. Not with direct combat, but with some cleverness, proving God's ways aren't always the way things have always been done.

There is a lot more to the story of Gideon, who always struggled to trust God, but was quick to give God credit for the victories. One of the main points of Gideon's story also appears in many other stories and events in the Bible: God most often chooses, calls, delights in, values, and prefers the small and seemingly insignificant. God is not impressed with big numbers, economic status, birth order, education, or wealth, and in some cases will take it upon God's self to reduce that which we humans have built up. Perhaps, because God yearns for us to learn to appreciate the beauty and value of the small and insignificant.

That brings us to our Gospel today where Jesus is calling his followers to pay attention because no one knows when he will come again. We have a reading like this because Advent is a time when we remember Jesus was born in fulfillment of the promise that God would send God's Messiah and is also a season when we are reminded Jesus promised to return after his resurrection and ascension to fulfill the

promise Mary sang about in the Magnificat, the promise that began in the Incarnation and Resurrection, to restore the world to God's original intention.

In the Gospel, Jesus was addressing concerns around the unknown as his followers wanted to know precisely when Jesus would return. Even Jesus does not know. But knowing when it is not the point. The point is how we wait, even if that waiting continues for generations and thousands of years. One of the things Jesus mentioned as something to pay attention to as we wait is reduction by the examples of two being reduced to one. Unfortunately, this passage has been used to support the rapture, a concept that is not actually found in scripture but is proof of how someone can make what they want out of the Bible. This can distract from what the author of Matthew's Gospel intended when Jesus talked about two being reduced to one. One of the oppressive practices of the Romans was to abduct people while they worked, and those they abducted were usually forced into slave labor or worse, so it was not necessarily good to be taken. Far better to be left behind.

The point the Gospel writer may have been making is to pay attention when there are fewer people, not because we need to panic and do whatever is necessary to get more, but to step back and look for God, who still promises to be with us, and is most likely up to something.

In his pastoral address to the diocese last Saturday, Bishop Smith talked about this very thing. He said he sees decline not only in the Episcopal Church but in all Christian churches. He also finds hope observing the resiliency in clergy and laypeople who step up, adapt to changes, and persist in doing what they can. He interprets this to mean what is dying is not the church, but our grandiosity and our connection to the empire, a word he used to refer to whatever and whoever holds all the power in our nation. In so many Biblical accounts, like Gideon, like a young teenager living in a small unimportant village who became the bearer of God, like the shepherd David who defeated Goliath and who God made king, God utilizes smallness to turn the world around.

Advent is the reminder God has turned the world around before and God will do so again. Both in small ways right now and in the future God will reorient this world to what God intended, the world where swords become plows because war isn't needed.

This year as Advent begins, we see reduction around us too. In our parish, in our community, and we are not alone. Perhaps the bishop is on to something, perhaps God is trying to get our attention to recognize reduction doesn't mean the end, it means God is at work and calling us turn away from those false comforts of consumerism, hate, blaming, admiration of the super wealthy and turn to God.

Advent is a good time for this. The theme of the free advent devotional we are offering this year is simplicity, a form of reducing that isn't about getting rid of stuff, it is about paying attention, about focusing on where God is with us. Using is devotional might be a good way to pay attention this Advent, certainly there are others. One practice might be to read other accounts in the Bible of the small to pay attention to where God intentionally embraces with joy the small, or seemingly unimportant. Perhaps this season of Advent God is calling us to the *adventure* of loving the small, to learn or relearn small is not a punishment, it is an invitation to persist, and to wait for everything even waiting in line like we are waiting for Jesus with patience and kindness, and participate which might be why God loves the small, because it invites us to work with God who promises to be with us in all seasons.