

“Promise Breakers” Judges 1:1-2:23

Scripture Introduction:

This morning we open our Bibles to the book we know as Judges. Judges, the book, is not familiar to most of us, although its characters are. We have heard of Gideon, Samson, Deborah and the rest. For most these characters are spiritual heroes, people for whom to name our children and examples we believe we should follow. Nevertheless, the actual history told in Judges is far from that popular conception and nothing like a tour de force of Israel’s most virtuous leaders. Instead what we read about is Israel’s spiritual and moral failure and momentary leaders who themselves are deeply flawed. According Judges 17:6 & 21:25, it was a time when “everyone did what was right in his own eyes.”

Sound familiar? For these reasons, Judges speaks to the world we live in—a time when God’s people feel threatened and are seduced by the idolatries of the day. Let’s pick up the action in chapter two.

Introduction:

We’ve all heard variations of the joke about the catholic priest, the Jewish rabbi and Presbyterian pastor who were together in the fishing boat or in the airplane. Those jokes are usually good for a laugh; they poke fun at our differences and often remind us of how much we share in common. Today, however, such jokes require even greater representation of diversity. According to one pastor, now we have to add to the priest, rabbi and preacher, “a Buddhist monk, a Muslim imam, an Indian guru, a New Age spiritualist, a Wiccan witch, a Native American elder, a Mongolian shaman, an African witch doctor, a Haitian voodoo practitioner, and an aggressive atheist.” (from Chuck Warnock’s blog: <http://chuckwarnockblog.wordpress.com/2009/06/13/sermon-pluralism-why-doesnt-everybody-believe-like-we-do/>). Somehow the humor in this gets lost, doesn’t it?

It is a fact of our modern world; the dominant trait of our cultural world is pluralism. Regardless of our convictions about such things, there is no longer any one privileged morality, rational explanation for the world, political philosophy, or favored religion. We live among peoples who serve a wide variety of rival gods—not only those formally recognized by other religions, but also the secular gods of wealth, achievement, science, perfection, power, pleasure and celebrity. Not just in our biggest cities, but everywhere everyone experiences the dissonance and difficulty created by the confluence of the world’s diversity in our culture.

Of course, there are many advantages to this situation. We can learn wonderful things about far away cultures that have come to our doorstep. We get to eat exotic foods. We can tell that many more people about Jesus Christ. We don’t have to get on airplane to do cross-cultural ministry; we have only to walk out our front door.

Still, among those committed to the historic Christian faith the more common responses are either 1) fear over the loss of privileged positions of power and/or 2) yielding to the temptations the pluralistic culture presents to us. **As the quote by James Hunter in the bulletin makes clear, pluralism makes it hard to remain faithful.**

A clear example of compromise is illustrated by the World Council of Churches who in 1983 declared:

In the end, the great communities of faith will not have disappeared. None will have “won” over the others. Jews will still be Jews; Muslims still Muslims; and those of the great Eastern faiths still Buddhists or Hindus or Taoists. Africa will still witness to its traditional life view; China to its inheritance. People will still come from the East and the West, the North and the South and sit down in the kingdom of God without having first

become “Christians” like us. (Michael Green, Evangelism Through the Local Church, p. 46)

Main Idea: *Nevertheless, we sometimes forget that pluralism and the challenges it presents are not new to the people of God.* Enter the book of Judges. In this book, which could be better titled the “Book of Deliverers,” we witness God’s people confronting a time remarkably similar to our own. As a consequence of Israel’s failure to complete its Divinely-mandated conquest of Canaan, their world became a mixture of **threatening powers and seductive idolatries**. In what many have described as a “downward spiral”, Judges recounts the spiritual failure of the Israelites. Still, they remain God’s chosen people. And even though they are “promise-breakers”, God cannot break his promises. By his grace, “judges” are raised up to deliver Israel from its oppressors. Amidst this swirl of political powers, idolatrous temptation, moral and spiritual failure *and* God’s conquering faithfulness, **we today learn how to faithfully live for God amidst the myriad of spiritual, secular and political ideologies that vie for our allegiance in the 21st century.**

Key Question: That is the question; isn’t it? **How do we faithfully follow the Lord Jesus Christ amidst all the options that vie for our allegiance?** Chapter two of Judges does a lot to answer that question.

1) Recognize that God’s call does not change (2:1-9)

Before we explore the specific nature of the challenges that pluralism presents, we first need to recognize that God’s call had not changed. No matter what, the Israelites were to remain faithful.

In the first two verses it is clear that the Israelites had not kept Joshua’s command; they had made alliances with the Canaanites. However, this was disobedience. This demonstrates that the call for them to be a people set-apart or holy to the Lord had not changed. In fact, this call from the Lord and Israel’s failure is really what the entire book of Judges explores.

Yet, how did this situation arise? How did the Israelites come to experience a pluralistic environment? The first nine verses highlight Joshua’s death; this certainly played a major role. Joshua, their great leader, has passed on. After his 110 years, his work was done. In his farewell address, Joshua notes that God had given the Israelites rest from their enemies and “not one thing has failed of all the good things that the Lord your God promised concerning you” (23:13). Still work remained for the Israelites. Now, it would be up to Israel’s tribal leaders to build on the victories secured by Joshua. Israel’s enemies remained in the land and needed to be dispossessed. Their victory had yet to be fully consolidated in every region.

The situation in Israel at the close of Joshua’s life was not unlike the situation our country has faced in the Second Gulf War. Politically, we can argue about the wisdom of President Bush declaring victory so quickly, but the truth was the United States had gained military ascendancy. Still, achieving dominance has not removed every challenge. Consolidating that victory has been necessary, which hasn’t been easy I might add.

Application:

The challenge of living between initial victory and its consolidation is a continual theme in Scriptures. It is something parallels are own experience. For example, like the Israelites who were living between the great victories of the Exodus and the conquest of Canaan and the eventual Davidic monarchy, we too are mid-story. As Christians, we have experienced and even greater exodus and conquest, the one achieved by Jesus Christ on the cross and through his resurrection. Still, there remains the work of the Gospel to go forth. We have received a great

victory. The Spirit of Christ is here. But, Jesus is not at our side. Still, the call to advance the Kingdom through the deeds of mercy and proclaiming the Gospel remains.

Like the Israelites, it is tempting for us to shrink back from our call to be God's holy people. Either through fear or compromise, we fail at the task we have been given. This is what we need to explore further now.

2) Obstacles to faithfulness are real; dangers abound (10-15)

Now we need to explore the specific reasons why they became promise-breakers. Joshua's passing cannot be blamed. No. Pluralism presents two very-real dangers, which not only challenged Israel for the rest of their history, but which also challenge us today. What were they? I've already named them, but verses 10-15 describe the situation well.

a) Threatening powers

The first danger every pluralistic situation presents is fairly obvious. There are those who have power, perhaps even greater power, besides us. This has been a threat, which has caused Israel to fear from the very beginning. The Canaanites were a military power. Their fear had led them to wander an additional 40 years. And still, after their conquest of the land the power of Canaanites still threaten.

I will be glad to explore the justification for Israel's conquest of the land during the CE hour, which will begin a few weeks, but what I want us to ponder now is that Israel faced a real political and military enemy which didn't just lie down. Constant effort was needed if they were going to conquer the land. Yet, the power of the Canaanites proved too much. Whatever gains were made during Joshua's generation were going to be lost during the time of the Judges.

Application:

Today, we experience both of these threats. Not that raw, military power has targeted Christians in the United States. However, we are all familiar with the so-called "culture-wars." What is this about? This is really about the fear we feel about pluralism and the fact that "others" have gained power. Other groups with other values have power. This creates fear in our hearts. We struggle with how to respond.

b) Seductive idolatries

Of course, the other, grave danger presented by the Canaanites was not military power, but seductive allure. The Canaanite practices were immoral and contrary to the commands of the Lord. Their practices were ordered according to the pantheon of gods they served. Furthermore, these practices appealed deeply to the Israelites. Rather than serving the Lord, verse 11 says they "served the Baals." They abandoned the Lord and went after the gods of the surrounding culture.

Now, it is important for us to understand what is at work in idolatry. An idol is really nothing; there are no gods besides the one God. In fact, all gods are reflections of the aspirations and desires of their worshippers. **Idolatry feeds two impulses within all of us and they were operative during the time of the Judges too:**

- **A means to gain power over the world around us**
- **A means to feel secure about our identity in the face of failure**

For example, this reference to the Baals refers to the weather god, on whose blessing the fertility of the land was believed to depend. Given the importance of agriculture in the

ancient world, it is easy to see how gaining a sense of power over the weather and the fertility of the ground would be important. Moreover, because all idolatry is moralistic, that is it is about our efforts and works, it created an elaborate structure for those who had power to keep it.

The allure to gain power and have the approval of the surrounding powers is always great. For this reason, the Israelites gave into the seductive practices associated with the pagan religions that surrounded them.

Application:

This is no less true for us. We may not feel the allure of overt allure of gods from other, formalized religions, but the secular gods of our culture have an incredible appeal. They promise power over the world and security within it before others. Wealth, pleasure, achievement, celebrity, beauty, perfection. What are they all about? Ways of attaining what we think will secure our lives!

The lesson of Judges is for us too. Just as the Baals were powerless to grant life to the Israelites, so is every secular god we devote ourselves to. Judges is going to give us an excellent opportunity to see how we have been seduced by rival gods that cannot save us. Like the Israelites, the call on our lives is the same—to turn away and to turn back to the Lord.

3) God remains faithful

Let's remind ourselves of the key question we started with, "How do we faithfully follow the Lord amidst today's pluralism?" The final lesson I have for us may be the most important. It is this: **If our faithfulness is dependent on ourselves then we are without hope.** However, the lesson of Judges 2 is one of grace. **God remains faithful even though we become faithless.**

In fact, we see God's faithfulness demonstrated in two ways:

- a) God has a sovereign purpose for the trials we face (3, 20-23)**
- b) God always rescues us beyond what we are able to handle—the Judges or deliverers. (16)**

The upshot of all of this is that God remains true to his promise. While we're promise-breakers, God is the ultimate Promise-keeper. Only when we discover his faithfulness can we find the strength to be faithful. In essence, what God is saying to us is why would we give ourselves to rival gods, which in themselves have no power to help us, save us or secure the future we seek?

Ultimately, God's sovereign and unswerving commitment to us is seen in the revelation of the ultimate deliverer, whose name is Jesus.

Conclusion:

So, where does all of this leave us? I suppose I raised more questions than I have answered. What I want us to see this morning is that the world we live in has been lived in by God's people through the centuries. Though, the challenges are real our God remains true to his promise. For this reason, we don't have to follow Israel's example. More and more, by his grace, we can be come promise-keepers too.

But if that is going to happen, we must take an honest inventory of our hearts and examine where the allure of the secular gods actively tempt us, and how we have turned away from the Lord.