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Judges
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A HOME GIVEN: THE NEED FOR A KING

SERIES: EPIC

Mary Gordon, a writer, tells this story:

It was a hot August afternoon. I was having ten people for dinner that evening. No one was giving me a bit of help. I was, of course, feeling like a victim, as everyone does in a hot kitchen on an August day. (It is important to remember that the angry person's habit of self-justification is often connected to his habit of seeing himself as a victim.) I had been chopping, stirring, bending over a low flame, and all alone, alone! The oven's heat was my Purgatory, my crucible.

My mother and my children thought this was a good time for civil disobedience. They positioned themselves in the car and refused to move until I took them swimming. Now my children were at tender ages at that time, seven and four. My mother was seventy-eight and, except for her daily habit of verbal iron-pumping, properly described as infirm. They leaned on the horn and shouted my name out the window, well within hearing of the neighbors, reminding me of my promise to take them to the pond.

There are certain times when a popular cliché disgorges itself from the dulled setting of overuse and comes to life, and this was one of them. I lost it. I lost myself.¹

Most of us manage to keep our anger under wraps most of the time, but even the most mild-mannered among us lose it once in a while. At the center of book of Judges, one man loses it. Because he loses it, his life takes a decisive turn for the worse. In fact, when he loses it, the whole nation of Israel takes a decisive turn for the worse. How we respond to a world that refuses to cooperate with us has huge implications not only for our lives but for the lives of those we influence. An overview of the book of Judges helps us look for an answer to the question, “What do I do with my anger?”

The Book of Judges

The book of Judges will not be new to those of you who have been at Peninsula Bible Church for the last two years, inasmuch as I preached through it over the course of that

span. Some have asked me why I chose Judges. I did so principally because in light of the entire biblical story, the book of Judges accentuates our need for Christ, the king whom the book anticipates. Even if we're not in dire straits, we need to appreciate our need for Christ. Therefore, I called the entire series “One Necessary Thing”—Christ, of course, being the necessary thing.

The book of Judges picks up where the book of Joshua left off. The book of Joshua featured Israel's conquest of the promised land under Joshua. The Israelites fared well under Joshua. Nevertheless, when Joshua left the scene, much remained undone, and without Joshua, Israel comes undone. The Israelites failed to drive out the inhabitants of the land and worshiped the gods of the land instead of the Lord. The Lord empowered a series of judges, or tribal leaders, to conquer oppressing nations, but each time after the Lord rescued his people, they returned to their pagan gods. The book features seven major judges, but eventually even the judges become corrupt. The first three major judges are successful, but the last three achieve only partial success.

With the failure of the tribal leaders, one might expect the tribe of Levi, the spiritual conscience of the nation, to come to the rescue. But the end of the book emphasizes the colossal failure of the Levites. The people fail. The judges fail. The Levites fail. By the end of the book, some four hundred years after Joshua led the people into the promised land, the Israelites have spiraled into spiritual, moral, and societal chaos.

The pivotal judge

The book features a balanced three-part structure: A two-part prologue, the main body, and a two-part epilogue:

Prologue: Failure of tribes

A Political prologue: Israelites vs. Canaanites; partial success (1:1-2:5)

B Theological prologue: Idolatry prevalent (2:6-3:6)

Main body: Failure of judges

- C Othniel: Israelite wife promotes success (3:7-11)
 - D Ehud: Message to king, slays Moabites at fords of Jordan (3:12-31)
 - E Deborah: Woman Jael slays Sisera and ends war (4:1-5:31)
 - X Gideon:
 - a Stand against idolatry (6:1-32)
 - b Gideon vs. Canaanites (6:33-7:25)
 - b' Gideon vs. Israelites (8:1-21)
 - a' Lapse into idolatry (8:22-32)
 - E' Abimelek: "Certain woman" slays Abimelek and ends war (9:1-56)
 - D' Jephthah: Message to king, slays Ephraimites at fords of Jordan (10:6-12:15)
 - C' Samson: Foreign women promote downfall (13:1-16:31)

Epilogue: Failure of Levites

- B' Theological epilogue: Idolatry rampant (17:1-18:31)
- A' Political epilogue: Israelites vs. Israelites; total failure (19:1-21:25)

Gideon is the pivotal judge. Before him, the judges led the Israelites into battle against the Canaanites, and none of the judges is reported to be an idolater. Gideon takes a stand against idolatry and likewise vanquishes the pagans, but then he turns his sword against his own people and lapses into idolatry. Israel as a whole ends up where Gideon finished: corrupted by idolatry and warring against fellow Israelites. The story of Gideon, positioned at the center of the inverted structure, is a microcosm for the entire book. His story, in an overview of the book of Judges, merits special consideration.

The story of Gideon

When the Lord calls Gideon to deliver Israel from the Midianites, Gideon is hiding from them. Needless to say, Gideon is slow to warm up to the task. The Lord, however, is patient and persistent. Because Israel's biggest problem is not Midian but her preference for other gods, Gideon's first task is to tear down his father's pagan altars and replace them with an altar to the Lord.

After challenging the worship practices in his own

family, Gideon musters an army to engage the Midianites. He musters an army all right, but he can't muster his own courage. The Lord has promised victory, but Gideon has a test for the Lord. Although his methodology is pagan in nature, throwing out a fleece and checking it for dew one morning and the absence of dew the next, the Lord condescends to the reluctant general and passes the silly tests.

The Lord, having passed Gideon's tests, now tests Gideon, instructing him to reduce his troops to a paltry three hundred in order to protect Gideon and the rest of the Israelites from pride. Still fearful, Gideon, at the prompting of the Lord, creeps up to the Midianite camp and overhears a man interpret his comrade's dream to mean that Gideon will defeat the Midianites. With that, Gideon bows low in worship, marking the spiritual climax of the book of Judges. From there, Gideon, empowered by the Lord, leads his vastly outnumbered troops to a stunning victory over Midian and puts its two kings, Zebah and Zalmunna, to flight. Gideon takes up the pursuit, and, after capturing the two kings, returns to punish two Israelite towns that refused to give him aid, beating the elders of one town with thorns and killing the men of the other town. Gideon, called to deliver Israel, attacks Israelites. Israel needs to be delivered from her deliverer.

The Lord has transformed Gideon into a mighty warrior, but Gideon has transformed himself into something closer to a bloodthirsty tyrant. What gives? What's gotten into Gideon? There's something the narrator didn't tell us. He didn't tell us that the two Midianite kings had killed two of Gideon's brothers. Finally, after reporting the capture of the kings and the punishment of the two towns, the narrator lets us know that Gideon's headlong pursuit of the two kings was driven by a lust for revenge. The entire narrative of the book of Judges, then, pivots on Gideon's anger. In his anger, Gideon turned his sword against his own people, foreshadowing the civil war at the end of the book.

The Israelites want to make Gideon, the conqueror of Midian, king, and though he demurs, he lives like a king nevertheless. He succumbs to money, sex, and power. Furthermore, when he returns to Ophrah, his hometown, he lapses into idolatry and even leads the rest of Israel into idolatry by fashioning a golden ephod, a priestly garment, which becomes an object of worship. Gideon's journey comes full circle but in a perverse way. He began well enough, by tearing down pagan altars in his hometown, but he finishes by returning as an idolater. Thus, he foreshadows not only the civil war at the end of the book, he also foreshadows the idolatry at the end of the book.

In multiple ways, up to Gideon's pursuit of the two kings, his story echoes the story of Moses. Already, the Israelites are looking for a new Moses, for someone who will effect a new exodus, but they don't find him in Gideon. The longing for a new exodus reaches its climax in Israel in the ministry of the prophet Isaiah.

What our anger tells us

Where did Gideon go wrong? It didn't begin with money, sex, and power. It didn't begin with turning against his own people or turning to idolatry. It began when two kings killed his brothers. Rather, it began with Gideon's response to the killing of his two brothers. It began with his anger. The whole of his life turns on his anger. Indeed, the whole of the book of Judges turns on his anger. The story of many lives, indeed, the story of many nations, turns on anger. How you respond to something that doesn't go your way can set the course for your entire life. Billy Joel captures this ethos with his song "Angry Young Man":

*And there's always a place for the angry young man
With his fist in the air and his head in the sand
He's never been able to learn from mistakes
He can't understand why his heart always breaks
His honor is pure, and his courage as well
He's fair and he's true, and he's boring as hell
And he'll go to his grave as an angry old man.²*

The angry young man sets the course for his life and will go to his grave as an angry old man.

If someone kills a loved one, God is angry. You're supposed to be angry, too. If you're not angry, you're missing something. We might question in some instances whether we have a right to get angry, biblically speaking, but certainly anger is justified in many instances, such as the murder of two of your brothers.

What is our anger, whether justified or unjustified, whether righteous or unrighteous, telling us? It's telling us the same thing the book of Judges is telling us: it's telling us about our need. If our anger is justified, we have neither the power nor the wisdom to bring about the justice that we rightly crave. If our anger is unjustified, we need help dealing with our anger. Perhaps it could be said that our inability to respond rightly to our anger plays at least some part in most conflicts, be they interpersonal or international.

There is, of course, much to be angry about. It may help to know that God is angry, too. As the apostle James says, "human anger does not produce the righteousness God desires" (James 1:20). Divine anger, united with divine love

and wisdom and power, however, is bringing about and will establish a world "where righteousness dwells"—that is, a world of perfect justice (2 Peter 3:13).

The need for a king

Remember Mary Gordon, the writer who was slaving away over a hot stove and then lost it when her mother and her children leaned on the horn of the car and shouted her name, demanding that she take them to the pond? Here's the rest of her story:

I jumped on the hood of the car. I pounded on the windshield. I told my mother and my children that I was never, ever going to take any of them anywhere and none of them were ever going to have one friend in any house of mine until the hour of their death, which, I said, I hoped was soon. I couldn't stop pounding on the windshield. Then the frightening thing happened. I became a huge bird. A carrion crow. My legs became hard stalks; my eyes were sharp and vicious. I developed a murderous beak. Greasy black feathers took the place of arms. I flapped and flapped. I blotted out the sun's light with my flapping. Each time my beak landed near my victims (it seemed to be my fists on the windshield, but it was really my beak on their necks) I went back for more. The taste of blood entranced me. I wanted to peck and peck forever. I wanted to carry them all off in my bloody beak and drop them on a rock where I would feed on their battered corpses till my bird stomach swelled.

I don't mean this figuratively. I became that bird. I had to be forced to get off the car and stop pounding the windshield. Even then I didn't come back to myself. When I did, I was appalled. I realized I had genuinely frightened my children. Mostly because they could no longer recognize me. My son said to me: "I was scared because I didn't know who you were."³

I noted earlier that one of the reasons I wanted to preach the book of Judges was because, in light of the entirety of the biblical story, it accentuates our need for the king who is Jesus. My study of the book, not coincidentally, I think, coincided with an increased personal awareness of my own anger. So I can relate to Mary Gordon's story. No, I've never lost it the way she did with her mother and her children, but I have had occasion to cry out to the Lord about my own anger.

I used to think I was a nice guy; then I had children. My two daughters delight me no end, but they also provoke my anger, mostly just by being kids. With children, everything takes longer than you think it should, and I've

got a schedule to keep. Sometimes they don't immediately do what I ask them to do, which really gets on my nerves. I'm not much for multi-tasking and I don't much care for interruptions, but no child is a respecter of personality types. I try like crazy not to raise my voice, and usually, but not always, I keep the internal lava from erupting. I don't erupt; instead, I collapse. Much of the time, I feel drained. I need Jesus.

We're going to the polls on Tuesday, and, my goodness, people are angry. The candidates, perhaps at the behest of their advisers, are angry, though many partisans on each side would wish that they would become angrier still. People on the right are angry. People on the left are angry. People in the middle are angry that people are angry.

Who can rescue us from ourselves?

A world of hurt

Where does the book of Judges leave us? In a world of hurt, but not without hope. The epilogue features a refrain that appears twice in full and twice in part:

A In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit (17:6)

B In those days Israel had no king (18:1)

B' In those days Israel had no king (19:1)

A' In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit (21:25)

The narrator, opening and closing his epilogue with the refrain, observes that Israel had no king in the days of the judges, though Israel wanted to make Gideon king. Mostly, the Israelites wanted nothing to do with the divine king, the Lord, which shows up in their preference for other gods. When the narrator says that Israel had no king, he means that Israel turned away from the Lord, the divine king. However, the Lord also anticipated Israel's need for a human king after his own heart who would inspire worship and obedience. The book of Judges, therefore, anticipates the next era in Israel's history, which features the monarchy. (In *Epic*, we're giving that era the title *A King Crowned*.) Clearly, Gideon, who succumbed to money, sex, and power, who turned his sword against his own people, and who lapsed into idolatry, would not have been a good king. How about Saul, the first king? No better than Gideon. David? Better, yes, but lacking (see: Bathsheba). What then? Who then?

The book of 2 Samuel, especially 2 Samuel 7, anticipates the advent of a descendant of David, whom the New Testament identifies as Jesus Christ, the Son of David, who

in his person meets the need for both a divine king and a human king. Unlike Gideon, he is also the new Moses, who effects a new and better exodus, not from any pagan oppressor but from Satan, sin, and death. If the story of Judges sinks on one man's angry response the killing of his brothers, then the story of the world rises on one man's sublime response to those who were crucifying him. For our anger, we need the biblical story, which culminates first in the coming of Christ and finally in the second coming of Christ.

How Jesus helps

Jesus, the Son of David, can help. Skip forward in the biblical story to the prophet Isaiah, who, like the author of Judges, anticipates the coming king but, unlike the author of Judges, defines him:

Isaiah 40:10-11:

**See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power,
and he rules with a mighty arm.
See, his reward is with him,
and his recompense accompanies him.
He tends his flock like a shepherd:
He gathers the lambs in his arms
and carries them close to his heart;
he gently leads those that have young.**

A common image for kings in Israel was that of a shepherd. On the one hand, Jesus is a powerful king: he rules with a mighty arm. On the other hand, he's a loving king: he gathers lambs in his arms and gently leads adult sheep who are burdened because they're caring for young. He's tough, and he's tender.

I have long cherished the images evoked by Isaiah 40:10-11. I teach those two verses, in the context of a course on Isaiah, to our interns every two years. I know Isaiah 40:10-11 well. Not until recently, however, have I truly seen myself in those verses. One of the elders recently said to me, as part of my once-every-two-years review, "You're a shepherd everywhere you go." Another friend told me, "You're like those that have young in Isaiah 40:11." Yes, I suppose I am a shepherd everywhere I go, in my church and in my home. At home, I literally "have young"—young children. All these years teaching Isaiah 40:11 and I thought it was for other people, those who were excessively burdened, not for me. Now I know: it's for me too. I too am burdened. What does Jesus do for me, the (sometimes) angry shepherd? He shepherds me. How does he do it? He does it gently. He gently shepherds the shepherds. He gently leads me.

In my prayers, this is what I sense that Jesus wants to do for me. I don't know what it means for me right now; I only sense that I must pray for, and be open to, gentleness. In the place where my anger rises to meet an uncooperative world, Jesus wants to meet me with his gentleness. My anger needs his gentleness. This is consistent with Proverbs 15:1, "A gentle answer turns away wrath." Jesus answers my wrath with his gentleness.

And if I'm burdened, what does he tell me? "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-30).

Perhaps your anger also needs the gentleness of the shepherd. If so, pray for it and be open to it. Come to him. Yes, you also need the king, the tough and tender shepherd.

NOTES

¹Mary Gordon, excerpt from "The Deadly Sins/Anger; The Fascination Begins in the Mouth" (*The New York Times Book Review*, June 13, 1993).

²Billy Joel, "Angry Young Man" (1976).

³Gordon.