

**Sermon Preached by Rev. James Reisner, Pastor  
Westminster Presbyterian Church, Albany, NY  
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**Gideon's Army  
Joshua 7:1-22**

Best-selling author Malcolm Gladwell's most recent book is entitled: David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits, and the Art of Battling Giants. The story of David and Goliath is the archetype of underdog stories, and so Gladwell uses it for his title, and cites it to test the assumptions we make about underdogs. His point is that we have misread the age-old story. The odds are not nearly so lopsided as we have presumed. In fact, Gladwell says that David had the advantage. Goliath invited the Israelites to put up one soldier against him for hand-to-hand combat. It was certainly unlikely that any soldier could have matched Goliath's strength. But a man with a slingshot, that is, with artillery, would have had the advantage over heavy infantry. Speed often beats strength in ancient and modern combat.

Further, Gladwell speculates that Goliath probably had a problem with his vision. He reads the text carefully for hints at this. Goliath is led out onto the battlefield by an aide. Goliath shouts out, "Come to me, that I may give your flesh to the birds and the beasts of the field." Also, human giants often suffer from a condition of double vision. Goliath would have had trouble seeing David approach him on the run. One historian has commented, "Goliath had as much of a chance against David as any Bronze Age warrior with a sword would have had against an opponent armed with an automatic pistol."

Odds aren't always what they seem to be to the human eye. We live in a time for the Presbyterian Church, and for our sister Protestant denominations, when our numbers are decreasing, and decreasing rapidly. For some, this is alarming, for others it is depressing. Some wring their hands in anxiety, others are nostalgic for a day when our sanctuaries were full and overflowing with people. Some see our smaller size as a judgment against us. Critics inside and outside the church chime in, saying, "we must be doing something horribly wrong."

I respectfully disagree. I think there may be some virtue in the church becoming smaller. Perhaps it's not the worst thing that can happen. Perhaps it may even prove to be an advantage. Since it is happening anyway, it would be good for us to see what advantage there might be to it. After all, it's better to be David than Goliath.

And here is my question: Is the church becoming small enough so that God can begin to really use it? Is the church getting to the point where it is too small to fail? And that brings us to another Bible story: the tale of Gideon and his army and the battle they fought against the much larger army of the Midianites.

The Book of Judges records the events of the Israelites in the years after Joshua had entered the promised land and led a military campaign to take possession of it. The book tells of the exploits of the leaders of the Israelites until the time of Samuel, Saul, and David when Israel became a kingdom. During the time of the Judges, Israel was hardly a nation united. In fact, it was a loose confederation of tribes that often quarreled and fought between themselves. Judges were really regional military leaders who administered justice in the course of their duties.

The stories of the Judges are old stories. They existed in folklore well before they were ever committed to the page or, I should say, the scroll. You probably have heard of a few of them. Samson is probably the Judge who is best known. Deborah is famous as a woman judge, and as a strong military leader herself. And you may have also heard of Gideon and his trumpet.

Gideon was the youngest son of an obscure family in the relatively small tribe of Manasseh. He became the leader of his people when they were being threatened by the Midianites. The Midianites were a nomadic people who roamed from the northwest of the Arabian Peninsula through a large part of the Near East. They often came at the time of harvests. First they attacked as marauders and pillagers, and later they sought forcibly to take over the land. When Gideon heard God's call to deliver the people from the hand of the Midianites, Gideon shrank from the task. He hesitated not out of cowardice, but from a sober recognition of the overwhelming size of the Midianite forces.

At the time of the incident recorded in this morning's lesson, the Midianites were teeming in numbers. We are told that they "lay along the valley like locusts for multitude; and their camels were without number, as the sand which is upon the seashore." Against this force,

Gideon had 32,000 of the Israelites under arms. It was an uneven match to start with.

Yet, as strange as it might seem to us, Gideon went about decreasing his own force's number. As he passed from camp to camp, reviewing his troops, he saw in the eyes of many of them the look of fear. They looked more like sheep going to slaughter than like lions ready to pounce on their prey.

So Gideon issued an order, "Whoever is fearful and trembling, let him return home." And 22,000 soldiers took advantage of the opportunity. Gideon was left with 10,000. The odds were even greater against them than at the start.

But Gideon wasn't finished. He devised another process to test the mettle of his troops. He ordered them to drink water from the stream before them. Most of the men kept their weapons at the ready and with an alert watch on the horizon, scooped up the water in a cupped hand and drank, just as a proper soldier should. Some 300 set down their arms, knelt at the edge of the stream, and stuck their faces down into the water—a careless way of doing it in the face of a waiting enemy and a sure way of exposing their unreadiness for battle. Strangely, Gideon selected these 300 as his chosen few. All the rest were sent home. Gideon then looked around at the few remaining soldiers and said, "All I need is here."

And these three hundred won the battle. Gideon concocted a clever ruse. He decided that victory could best be achieved by creating confusion in the camp of the Midianites. He collected the pottery jars and trumpets of the people, and put them in the hands of the three hundred. He gave to everyone a torch. The 300 were divided into three bands of 100 each, and in the darkness of the night, while the hosts of Midian were asleep, they surrounded the enemy. At a given signal, the jars were smashed with a noisy clamor, the trumpets were blown, and the torches lit. The Midianites woke up from their sleep to an attack from what they believed to be a mighty army. They fled in confusion. The 300 quickly dispatched the stragglers, and the people of Israel were saved from the hands of the Midianites.

That's the story of Gideon's army. It has one main theme: God doesn't need a majority to accomplish God's purposes. God often chooses the minority, a chosen few, to do God's work. In this story, the Israelite army, as outmanned as it was, was still too large for God's purpose. God

knew that the people would take credit for it, if the military victory took place. (And isn't that the truth?) So God sifted out much of the army. The Army was 32,000; but Gideon worked it down to 300 brave warriors: 1.3% of the original number. With these Gideon went into battle, and won a victory that could only be attributed to the work of God.

We can see this same method at work in the ministry of Jesus. Out of the multitude of the crowds that gathered around to see and hear him in Galilee, Jesus selects twelve disciples, only twelve, in order to build the church. Margaret Mead wasn't necessarily thinking of Gideon or Jesus when she penned her famous quote, but she might as well have: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

Now, don't get me wrong. I am not a proponent of shrinking the church. We do have a call to share the Gospel, to spread the Good News. The church is not supposed to be an insular community cut off from the world. So I take no delight in the annual membership reports of our national church, or in the closing of congregations that have served the Lord nobly and well in previous generations. But I also recognize that there has been an ebb and flow to the church through the ages, and we, who are Reformed folk living in the Northern hemisphere, happen to live at the time of an ebb tide.

Does that mean we have to become anxious or nostalgic? No. Do people get off the beach when the tide starts going out? Of course not. There is plenty of good work to do for the sake of Jesus Christ, even in a low tide.

To anxious hand-wringers and to those pining nostalgically for the good old days, I want to invoke the message and the story of Gideon's army, and ask the question: Could it be that the church is beginning to get small enough that God can do something with it?

In order to shrink down his army Gideon dismissed those who had fear in their eyes. In the church today, we need to cast out fear. Our priority need is, as always, to be about faithfulness and not popularity. Our call is not about survival, or anxiety, or nostalgia. We are called to faithfulness. We are called to serve the Lord with gladness. This is the day that the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Secondly, we need to be smart, skilled and strategic. We need to use the resources we have to the best advantage. In the story, Gideon's resolve

is strengthened by hearing of a dream of one of his 300 soldiers that confirmed victory in the imminent battle. We, too, need to listen to our dreams, our visions, our aspirations of what the church can be. We, too, need to set our vision with a sense of alertness for what is around us, and what may be headed our way. We need to be at the ready for what God may send to us, and for what directions in which we may be sent.

This is not a time of retrenchment, or fear; this not a time for anxiety or nostalgia. This is a time for courage. This is a time of faith and expectation. This is a time to scan the horizon with the expectation that God will act, that God will use the church to accomplish God's purposes. And could it be that the church is beginning to get small enough that God can do something with it?; something so wonderful, something so against the odds that we will only be able to give God the glory?; something so astonishing, that we will find ourselves echoing the words of the great Protestant Reformation: Sola Gloria Dei –to God alone be the glory?