

Sermon #1,019: Judges 2:10-23

4-21-13 (Jubilate, 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday After Easter), Bethany-Princeton MN

## YOUR NEED TO HAVE A JUDGE WHO SAVES

Prayer: Lord God, heavenly Father, of Your fatherly goodness You allow Your children to come under Your chastening rod here on earth, that we might be like Your only-begotten Son in suffering and hereafter in glory: We beseech You, comfort us by Your Holy Spirit in all temptations and afflictions, that we may not fall into despair, but that we may continually trust in Your Son's promise, that our trials will endure but a little while, and will then be followed by eternal joy; that we thus, in patient hope, may overcome all evil, and at last obtain eternal salvation; through the same, Your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one true God, now and forever. Amen.

*(Collect for Easter 3 by Reformation-era Theologian Veit Dietrich)*

In the name of Jesus, the gracious Judge who was not merely raised up for us rebellious sinners but was sent down for us and our salvation, fellow redeemed:

What a strange combination of terms: **"The LORD raised up judges who delivered [saved] them."** God calls them "judges" but they are really "saviors."

When it says, **"the LORD raised up judges,"** the title of the office they hold simply means someone who makes judgments, judging in disputes, weighing evidence. (They needed Judge Judith too.) It's assumed they performed multiple functions of government, not only weighing evidence but also leading armies. Again the Bible shows that God is concerned about justice under the law. He approves of such manhunts for murderers as we saw in Boston this week.

However, as important as this ordinary work of the judges was, it isn't why there is a book in the Bible called Judges. This book of the Bible is mostly about the judges who did things *out* of the ordinary. They came along when the Israelites were completely at the mercy of their enemies; when they were too weak to fight back and all they could do was cry. And pray. This is when **"the LORD raised up judges."** Such as Ehud, Barak, Deborah, Jephthah, Gideon, and Samson. We love these rescue stories. But that doesn't tell the whole story.

Here in Judges 2, we get the rest of the story, the seamy underbelly of these rescue stories. It isn't a pretty picture. It shows that these Israelites were not innocent victims, indeed were not worthy of being rescued.

It says **“they forsook the LORD and served Baal and the Ashtoreths.”** That includes a lot. This worship of Baal practiced by their heathen neighbors was motivated by a desire to be prosperous like their neighbors, who gave the credit to their false god. The worship of Baal included the worship of many false gods, and in the name of these gods the heathen peoples of Canaan practiced child sacrifice, mutilation in an attempt to butter up their so-called god to hear them, and all kinds of sexually immoral activity. When it says the Israelites **“followed other gods from among the gods of the people who were all around them ... they served Baal,”** it means they took part in these practices, which were the liturgy for worshiping Baal. The book of Judges ends: *“There was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Jdg 21:25).*

This makes it easy to compare the time of the Judges to the time in which we live. People are rightly horrified by the destruction in the Boston Marathon explosions done by terrorists, but this compassion everyone feels for the victims is not always applied to others. Consider how people in favor of abortion are reacting to news of the killing of newborns that went along with late-term abortions at a Philadelphia abortion clinic for 20 years. Even as they say it's too horrible to show on TV, they don't concede that it shows the immorality of abortion, but instead insist that it shows the need for *more* access to “safe” abortion. The only rights they recognize are a woman's right to do as she pleases with her body. This is all about people doing what is right in their own eyes.

Lest we feel that we are innocent victims, read on in Judges 2. After the people felt God's punishment in what He let the other nations do to them, and

they repented and prayed for help and He answered their prayer by **“raising up judges who saved them,”** we hear this summary of a regular pattern of behavior: **“Yet they would not listen to their judges ... And it came to pass, when the judge was dead, that they reverted and behaved more corruptly than their fathers, by following other gods. They did not cease from their own doings nor from their stubborn way.”** This cycle would repeat itself over and over.

This is depressingly familiar, because here we see that we can't just groan about how we live in a society where everyone does what is right in his own eyes. We are not innocent victims. We do not need to look at the godless world to see how we are living in a time like the time of the Judges. Inside the Church, we live out this cycle that we see in the Israelites of that time, this cycle of repeating the sins and mistakes of the past, of forgetting and forsaking God, of following the way of the world, of knowing better but acting worse.

In fact, this reading from Judges is a very good preview of the church on earth. We wonder why it doesn't look better than it does. There is no king here but Jesus. He does not rule by force and threat, but by His Word, by the Gospel, by grace. All He does is save. Yet how many of His children forget Him? How many find better things to do than to spend even one hour with Him on Sunday?

His Church should look strong and glorious. It should be filled with firm, confident faith of people who know they have the only true God, the only true faith, and no matter how the world might persecute that faith they will not be intimidated into compromising or losing that faith. It should be filled with love and patience that reflect His love and patience. It should be filled with nothing but forgiveness for the few sins and errors of others, from people who know and receive His forgiveness for their mountain of sins. It should be filled with people

who live out their faith by making a serious attempt to live a godly life with the help of God. It should be heaven on earth, a beautiful garden in the desert.

But instead, it is quite often fellow Christians who disappoint us most. There seems to be just as much gossiping and back-biting at church as in the workplace. The voice of complaint threatens to drown out the voice of praise. There is the silence represented by the voices who are not there, people who once made great promises on their confirmation day that they break all the time. The people who should love the church are quick to make threats to leave it; some don't make threats but just stay away. The church, whose voice should be one harmonious song of praise just as the church in heaven is, instead is more like a bunch of individual voices singing their own song, just a bunch of noise.

But you don't even have to look around. Just look at yourself honestly, in the light of God's Law, and you will see a person who does not always pray from the heart, a person in whom the voice of praise gets drowned out or silenced by the voice of worry and the voice of complaint, a person who chooses to look away from your own sins and faults and looks at other people's shortcomings and focuses on them instead, a person who excuses your sins and often does not try very hard to deny your sinful flesh. You are the chief of sinners, the note of discord that needs to be corrected; what is wrong in the church begins with you.

Like Israel, what kind of judge do you deserve? One who will lower the boom. One who will expel you from the Lord's presence. One who will rule by force and make you go the right way. That would be ruling you by the Law.

Instead, like Israel, what do you get? The Judge who is your Savior. The King of grace, the One who rules His Church on earth only by the Gospel.

This is the glory of the church on earth. This is the reason not to leave. You are not the reason the church is glorious, whether you do or don't live as you

should. It doesn't mean how you live is unimportant: Your good works glorify your Father who is in heaven, it is one way the world can be drawn to Him, so it does matter. It's His will that you perform works of love for your neighbor that He calls you to do. But your true glory is a glory nobody can see, not even you, for you will only see it in heaven. Your true glory is Jesus' perfect righteousness that He gives to you, which He gave to you first in baptism, and you have this by faith in Him. Here on earth, the church's glory consists in being ruled by His grace – that is, that His word of forgiveness is spoken and it is believed by you, and by others, that we all say from the heart our “Amen” to the Gospel.

These “judges” who “saved” are all flesh-and-blood previews of Jesus, who is the Judge, who according to the Law should reject and condemn us for all eternity, yet who did the saving so you would be judged innocent before God.

We want to object when we hear that God required nothing of Israel before sending the judge/deliverer. He did not send the judge *if* Israel would promise this time to not forget Him. That's what we would do. We would run out of patience. We think this only encourages people to take this love for granted, if it doesn't cost them anything. If this cycle goes on and on, that they keep forgetting, at some point, we think, God should stop sending these judges/deliverers, stop letting them misuse and abuse His love. God should have more self-respect.

But that is just the point. God is not like us. Our love is not like His love, thanks be to God. Our thoughts are not His thoughts. This is the very point of His forgiveness. These judges were God's unconditional love in the flesh. The children of Israel were unworthy of these judges who saved them. But that too is a beautiful picture of Jesus, your Savior, what He does for you. You can never be worthy of Him. You never will be worthy of Him, no matter how hard you try.

When it says here in Judges 2 that the Lord *“was with the judge”* as long as he lived, *“all the days of the judge,”* in Jesus' case it means that He will always be saving you, all the days of your life. He not only died but rose again: *“death no longer has dominion over Him” (Ro 6)*. He lives to serve you with His love, His forgiving love, His grace. As long as you are on earth, He will rule you by His grace alone, in His church. That is the reason to remain in the church. You come to church because He, the Judge who is your Savior, is here, and He will not judge or condemn you but will only save and forgive you, again and again and again, no matter how many times you need it. This is the only thing that can give you the strength to resist sin, live for Him and bloom with the fruits of faith.

In heaven they are singing a hymn of praise to Him for this grace that He is giving you, the angels rejoicing over your repenting yet again and believing in Him. This is a song which you are a part of, by repentance and faith. You are no longer a discordant note, but simply part of the perfect harmony He creates between heaven and earth, truly glorious. By His forgiveness and salvation, your life is turned into a rejoicing that truly glorifies Him. Amen!