

Oregon City United Methodist Church
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Series: Judges

Sermon: Jephthah v Jephthah

Judges 10:6a, c - 8; 11:29-40 (MSG)

And then the People of Israel went back to doing evil in God's sight. They just walked off and left God, quit worshipping him. And God exploded in hot anger at Israel and sold them off to the Philistines and Ammonites, who, beginning that year, bullied and battered the People of Israel mercilessly. For eighteen years they had them under their thumb, all the People of Israel who lived east of the Jordan in the Amorite country of Gilead.

God's Spirit came upon Jephthah. He went across Gilead and Manasseh, went through Mizpah of Gilead, and from there approached the Ammonites. Jephthah made a vow before God: "If you give me a clear victory over the Ammonites, then I'll give to God whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in one piece from among the Ammonites—I'll offer it up in a sacrificial burnt offering."

Then Jephthah was off to fight the Ammonites. And God gave them to him. He beat them soundly, all the way from Aroer to the area around Minnith as far as Abel Keramim—twenty cities! A massacre! Ammonites brought to their knees by the People of Israel.

Jephthah came home to Mizpah. His daughter ran from the house to welcome him home—dancing to tambourines! She was his only child. He had no son or daughter except her. When he realized who it was, he ripped his clothes, saying, "Ah, dearest daughter—I'm dirt. I'm despicable. My heart is torn to shreds. I made a vow to God and I can't take it back!"

She said, "Dear father, if you made a vow to God, do to me what you vowed; God did his part and saved you from your Ammonite enemies."

And then she said to her father, "But let this one thing be done for me. Give me two months to wander through the hills and lament my virginity since I will never marry, I and my dear friends."

"Oh yes, go," he said. He sent her off for two months. She and her dear girlfriends went among the hills, lamenting that she would never marry. At the end of the two months, she came back to her father. He fulfilled the vow with her that he had made. She had never slept with a man.

It became a custom in Israel that for four days every year the young women of Israel went out to mourn for the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite.

Sermon:

It was almost 10 years ago, we were driving up to North Dakota for family vacation. Why North Dakota? Because the kids were still way young. Steph and I made a promise to each other, 50 by 50. 50 states by the time we're 50. She still had North Dakota on her list. Be careful what you promise! We figured it would be better to take care of North Dakota when the kids didn't care where we go, instead of waiting till their teenagers and saying, "Why do we have to go to North Dakota!" Well kids, it was either Disney or North Dakota - but we made a promise. We actually liked North Dakota. We visited the capital, got to visit the governor, who asked us, "Why North Dakota?" We made a promise. And we keep our promises.

But also on that trip, our kids were old enough to look outside the car and comment on the passing scenery. And I committed a common parental sin. The boys would see passing parks, or playground equipment. Or someone's backyard who had a swing set. And they would ask, Can we go there sometime? Can we play at the park? The answer, of course, was no. But how do you explain to a little kid property rights, or keeping on a schedule, or for the love of everything holy we can't stop at every slide we see. So I said the parental line, "Maybe someday." Maybe someday. Which is parent talk for not now, probably not ever. But it pacified them until they saw the next swing set, and I'd have to say, Maybe someday. Not really a promise, but a little deception going on there. I still use it. Dad, can we go to Great Wolf Lodge? Maybe someday. Dad, can we get a dog? Maybe someday. Dad, can I get a tattoo? Over my dead body. To which they would respond, "Maybe some day." Be careful what you promise!

This morning, we have a story out of judges where promises get out of hand. Jephthah - not a well known bible character, is raised up to fight the Ammonites. We do know a little about Jephthah. He lived in the backwoods. He probably shared his dwelling with his animals. That is to say, he lived in a barn or shed. Maybe he would have liked to live in town, but that had been impossible. You see, it was because of his mother. The Bible says his mother was a harlot. A professional outcast. Jephthah's father was named Gilead - which is also the name of the area they are in. It is suggested that maybe there might have been a certain ironic sensibility in so naming the father, comparable to saying, 'And the father's name was Portland'; in other words any male in Gilead might have been Jephthah's father.

He lived the life of an outcast. And he made his living anyway he could, sometimes by plundering the countryside with his band of rabble rousers. The story goes that the Ammonites were oppressing Israel, and no one can defeat them. So the people of Israel go to Jephthah and tell him, if you and your gang can save us, you can rule over us. Promises, promises. Maybe Jephthah wants to be accepted by his people, maybe he sees an opportunity here, and he takes them up on it. And lo and behold, he defeats the Ammonites. Now, I'm just glossing over a lot of the story, if you want to read the whole thing, it's right there in Judges for you.

But right before the battle, having received a special anointing from the Lord, he took a bold step. He made a vow! And all these centuries later, this is the biggest reason he is remembered.

Hear it with the King James, "And Jephthah vowed a vow unto the LORD, and said, If thou shalt without fail deliver the children of Ammon into mine hands, Then it shall be, that whatsoever cometh forth of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the children of Ammon, shall surely be the LORD'S, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering."

Remember, he lives in a barn with his animals - first thing that comes out is yours, Oh God.

He wins the battle, everything is good. He goes home, and the first thing out of the doors of his house isn't an animal, per se, but his daughter. And he freezes in his tracks, for he knows that he made a promise, not just to anybody - but to God. This makes for a good TV drama - having an unresolvable situation. You can't break your promise, and you can't sacrifice your daughter. What do you do? Of course, today we'd just say, Break your promise, God would understand. But this is Old Testament times. We don't keep promises anymore. Integrity isn't valued as it once was. I love doing weddings. I'll marry just about anybody. I've discovered that I can't tell who's going to stick it out. Some folks I marry I think there's not a snowball's chance that this will last, and here they are, years later, doing fine. Some folks I marry I think this is it, true love, forever kind of love, and several years later I hear they split up. So I really can't tell. But once, and only once, in 17 years of doing this have I ever turned down a wedding. They met six weeks earlier, online. They wanted to get married in two weeks. He needed a safe house once he got out of prison two weeks from now, and she was looking for a daddy for her kid. The whole thing was goofy. I said, I'm not comfortable with this, can you hold off the wedding six months? She said, I don't think we'll still be together in six months. I'm not doing this wedding!

I can't, in good conscience, say "to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better or worse." When you don't really mean it! I understand, marriages sometimes go sour and divorce is the best option on the table, but you should never go into it with that mind set!

What if you had to keep every single promise you ever made? How many playgrounds will I have visit in the Dakota's? Kids, I know you're 18 years old, but I promised. Let's go! I'll tell you this, I would be very, very careful about what I promise. Ecclesiastes 5 says, "Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few. . . When you make a vow to God, do not delay to fulfill it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow."

I went to college years and years and years ago. Back then, student loans were bankrupt able. Nowadays, you can't bankrupt student loans, you are stuck with them forever. Since then, tuition has gone up exponentially, since the lenders know you are hooked. And that's not good. But before all that, a friend of mine went to college with the intent of declaring bankruptcy once she got her degree. Every loan she signed on, she knew she was lying. Not keeping her promises. She knew it going in.

One of my pet peeves is the hollow threats that people make. Parents are experts at this. Walking thru Fred Meyers and I overhear a father is talking to his son, "You do that one more time and we're leaving." I didn't know what he was doing, but apparently he did it one more time. Father said again, "OK, that's enough, do it again, and we're out of here." Kid did it again. Father didn't leave. Hollow threats are those that you cannot or will not fulfil. And kids learn that there's no need to change behavior because the boom isn't coming. Don't make promises that you cannot keep. You're integrity is on the line.

What did Jephthah do? He told his daughter about his vow. And she asked to go away with her friends for two months. I'm surprised she came back. If my parents said that I was to be sacrificed, come back in two months, I'd think twice. Some believe that she wasn't burned as an offering, but she made her life as an offering to God. Lived in the temple, unmarried, dedicated to God. I'm not sure what really happened. Lucky for her, De 12:31 says, "You must not worship the Lord your God in their way, because in worshiping their gods, they do all kinds of detestable things the Lord hates. They even burn their sons and daughters in the fire as sacrifices to their gods."

What should we learn from Jephthah's sad experience? Vows are not to be made lightly. Vows are not to be made lightly. Marriage vows, church membership vows, library card vows. Don't promise something that you can't deliver on. Keep your commitments. We should vow from thanksgiving, not from a desire to get something from God. Bargain Vows are extremely dangerous! Jephthah told God, if you do this, then I will do that. God kept his side of the bargain.

What I find really interesting is that Jephthah never had to make a promise to begin with. God didn't ask if of him, God had already said that the battle was his. I wonder, just wonder, if Jephthah thought he still owed God. Nothing is for free, right? But God's love is given, without cost. God's forgiveness is unbound. God's providential care is without strings. But sometimes we think that we still owe God - and we feel guilty when we can't live up to God's expectations. Let me tell you - God's grace is free. That's what makes it amazing.

This is what I know: God keeps His promises. He promised the shepherd Abraham to make him into a great nation, that he did. He promised to free the slaves out of Egypt, that he did. He promised to send a Messiah, that he did. He promised to raise Jesus, that he did. He promised to give us strength in times of trouble, hope for the hopeless, that he does. He promised in his Father's house there are many rooms, and room for us - and I know he keeps his promises. Do I want to go to heaven? Maybe someday. Maybe someday. But for right now, to steal a Robert Frost line, for right now, I have promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep, and miles to go before I sleep. I promise! And the family of God said, Amen!