

Oregon City United Methodist Church
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Series: Judges

Sermon: Abimelech v Everyone

Judges 9:1-6, 50-56 (MSG)

Abimelech son of Jerub-Baal went to Shechem to his uncles and all his mother's relatives and said to them, "Ask all the leading men of Shechem, 'What do you think is best, that seventy men rule you—all those sons of Jerub-Baal—or that one man rule? You'll remember that I am your own flesh and blood.'"

His mother's relatives reported the proposal to the leaders of Shechem. They were inclined to take Abimelech. "Because," they said, "he is, after all, one of us."

They gave him seventy silver pieces from the shrine of Baal-of-the-Covenant. With the money he hired some reckless riffraff soldiers and they followed along after him. He went to his father's house in Ophrah and killed his half brothers, the sons of Jerub-Baal—seventy men! And on one stone! The youngest, Jotham son of Jerub-Baal, managed to hide, the only survivor.

Then all the leaders of Shechem and Beth Millo gathered at the Oak by the Standing Stone at Shechem and crowned Abimelech king.

(Later on)

Abimelech went on to Thebez. He camped at Thebez and captured it. The Tower-of-Strength stood in the middle of the city; all the men and women of the city along with the city's leaders had fled there and locked themselves in. They were up on the tower roof. Abimelech got as far as the tower and assaulted it. He came up to the tower door to set it on fire. Just then some woman dropped an upper millstone on his head and crushed his skull. He called urgently to his young armor bearer and said, "Draw your sword and kill me so they can't say of me, 'A woman killed him.'"

His armor bearer drove in his sword, and Abimelech died.

When the Israelites saw that Abimelech was dead, they went home.

God avenged the evil Abimelech had done to his father, murdering his seventy brothers.

I am not the same kind of man my father was. I was reflecting on him last week when we drove to Hood River, and then around the mountain. Two summers ago, my father and I drove that same route - just after he was diagnosed with lung cancer. It was a wonderful drive, and a chance for us to talk, and a time just for us to be together. That was the last drive I ever had with him. And we have two very different personalities. Two ways of looking at the world. I didn't try to be like him - I just let myself be myself. Influenced, for sure. A part of a family, for sure. But my siblings and I are different from each other - and that's OK. This morning, we see a guy who is also not like his father.

Let me begin this morning by quickly recapturing what we observed from Gideon's life last week. During the period of Judges, unlike the neighboring countries, Israel had no physical human kings to rule them over. So, when there was a stunning victory against the Midianites with mere 300 men of Israel, they came to Gideon the leader of the 300 men and asked him to be their king because they believed that Gideon had saved them out of the hand of Midian. Gideon rightly turned down their request to be their king. He said to them in Judges 8:23, "I will not rule over you, nor will my son rule over you. The LORD will rule over you." Gideon appeared to be on the right track.

But we have the now-old story - you've heard it every week so far this Lent: "No sooner had Gideon died than the Israelites again did evil in the sight of the Lord."

In chapter 8, we were introduced to one of his sons, Abimelech. Abimelech grew up watching his father Gideon saying he was not a king, but living as a king. But, Abimelech was not like the rest of Gideon's other sons. 8:31 tells us that Abimelech was born to a woman who was not Gideon's wife, but his concubine, his mistress. So, although he was born into a prestigious and influential family of Gideon, he was a sort of outcast an illegitimate son, unaccepted by his own half brothers. Maybe for this reason, Abimelech had tremendous hatred and anger toward his half-brothers and against his father Gideon. As an illegitimate son, he didn't have the legitimate claim to rule over the Israelites like Gideon's seventy sons would have. Not being content of low status compared to his half brothers, having this pent-up anger and hatred against them and Gideon his father, he devised a wicked and brutal scheme to rule, to become a king!

He went to his mother's relatives in Shechem to rally them to back him up and to make him their king instead of Gideon's other seventy sons. Shechem was really a hotbed of Baal worship anyway. Being convinced by him, his relatives gave him seventy shekels of silver from the temple of Baal. With this silver, he hired reckless adventurers, thugs. And, he went to his father's house and sought to murder seventy of half brothers one by one by crushing them to death with one stone. He successfully, brutally, in cold blood murdered all but one of his half-brothers, Jotham, the youngest son of Gideon. And, when the people of Shechem and Beth Millo got together in Shechem, they crowned Abimelech - a cold and brutal murderer as their king.

It wasn't in today's scripture, but Jotham, the sole surviving half-brother curses Abimelech and flees the territory. We don't know what became of him later on.

And Abimelech began his rule. He didn't know the first thing about ruling, but he enjoyed the power and the prestige. The nation was to serve him. He's different than the other judges, for sure. The other judges were brought up from God, specifically called. Not so with Abimelech. The other judges were brought up to fight a clear and present danger. Not so with Abimelech. The judges brought peace. Not so with Abimelech. Soon after, the people of Shechem rethought their decision and decided that maybe Abimelech wasn't the right person for the job.

A revolt began against Abimelech. And the thugs went about to crush the rebellion at Shechem. He attacked Shechem until he had captured it and killed its people. He destroyed the city and scattered salt over it to symbolize that the city was utterly destroyed with prospect for life. However, the remainder of the people of Shechem locked themselves into a large tower. But, Abimelech led his men to set the tower on fire. And about a thousand men and women died.

Apparently, the resistance against Abimelech spread to the adjacent city Thebez about 10 miles northeast from Shechem. The people of Thebez all fled to their strong tower hoping to defend themselves against Abimelech. Abimelech again tried to do the same thing he did against the stronghold temple of Shechem. But, while he was approaching the tower to burn that one down to the ground, a woman dropped an upper millstone on his head and cracked his skull.

Having mortally wounded, he didn't want to be known as having killed by a woman who dropped a millstone on him. So, he ordered his armor bearer to finish him off, which the armor bearer did. With their leader killed, the rest of the Israelites simply retrieved and went back to their home.

And, the story ends with verse 56 and 57: Thus God repaid the wickedness that Abimelech had done to his father by murdering his seventy brothers. God also made the men of Shechem pay for all their wickedness. The curse of Jotham son of Jerub-Baal came on them.

So what does one do with this story? Think twice before you set out to make yourself your own king!

Abimelech's father Gideon did great thing for the kingdom of God. In spite of his doubts, fears, skepticism, Gideon rose to God's challenge and led 300 men to witness God's deliverance.

Abimelech learned to walk the same destructive path. To become his own king was so important that he murdered all his seventy brothers except one. Once he secured himself the position of a king by committing evil sins, maintaining the power as a king was so important that he turned into tyrant. When the people revolted against him, he mercilessly killed his own people and burned them alive, only to meet the death in shame without any honor.

As a father of three kids, I often think about what kind of legacy I am going to leave behind me. I take the warning from God seriously. The way I relate to my wife, the way I related to them, the way I relate to other people have huge influence on what kind of character they develop. The kind of person I am also influences you as I pastor you. I certainly do not want to raise Abimelech kind of children. So, I take God's call to lay down my pride before him, my king, to trust him, to humbly follow him and serve him. I know I don't always succeed in imitating Jesus in the way he lived. But, I press on to become more like him. A king's job is to serve, not to be served. A leader's job is to serve, not to be served. A Congressperson's job is to serve, not to be served. A Pastor's job is to serve, not to be served. A father's job, a mother's job, is to serve the family. Not to be served. A kid's job is to serve the family, not to be served.

Some days I might be an Abimelech. I deserve. The world owes it to me. When we make ourselves kings, we subject others to serve us. We lose the ability to compassionate. We lose the ability to put ourselves in others' shoes. We want to win the arguments. We want to conquer the relationship. We want to manipulate people, gossip, swear, yell and scream. We want to have our ways at all cost.

Philippians 2:5-11 says this about our Lord Jesus Christ, "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father."

I am not like my father. Just like I hope my kids aren't like me. I want them to be their own person. I don't want them to live their lives trying to be like me, and it would sadden me if they lived their lives trying not to be like me.

How about you this morning? Abimelech tried so hard to become something that he wasn't supposed to be. And he found pain and anguish. Are you on the path that you are supposed to be on? Are you trying hard to be something that you know you're not? Are you still trying to live up to your parents expectations, even though they've been gone for years? Are you doing what YOU are called to do?

This morning, let us close with prayer: Heavenly father - a lot of us still don't know what we want to be when we grow up. Remind us that you can make all things new. For those who feel trapped, show the way out. For those who need direction, guide them. For those who cannot see themselves taking any sort of leap of faith into the unknown, remind them that you are at the highest mountain, the deepest ocean, as far as the east is from the west and that your presence goes with us. In your Son's name, AMEN.