

“Great Things in Small Packages”

Big Buts in the Bible – part #2

Judges 6:1-24

Welcome, prayer

Today is the second message in our series, “Big Buts in the Bible.” That’s B-U-T-S, as in, excuses. We all make excuses, for various reasons. Some are legitimate; others, not so much. Take the following excuses for skipping work:

- “A co-worker once called in that he wouldn’t be leaving his house that day because his shoelace snapped. He insisted this was a bad omen.”
- “A co-worker said he couldn’t make it to work because his grandmother died. It was the third time he used this excuse.”
- “A colleague told our boss that he was expecting a package from Amazon and couldn’t come to work.”
- And finally... “A guy from work called in sick with back pain, then was caught hanging out at the beach. His excuse: ‘My doctor said to lie flat on a soft surface to ease the pressure on my back...and sand is a soft surface.’”¹

Of course, it’s one thing to make a lame excuse to get out of work or school. It’s quite another thing to say offer excuses to God Almighty. Yet there were plenty of people in the Bible who did. My hope is that by examining their stories, we will be encouraged to say “Yes” to God and not make excuses.

One of the excuses we often use before God is that we feel insignificant. I have met many people, especially my age and younger, who feel like they have no chance at making a difference in the world. They see problems such as poverty

¹ <https://www.cracked.com/pictofacts-1166-here-are-21-worst-excuses-to-miss-work-like-ever/>

and corruption, and despite their good intentions, they do not believe that individually, they can do anything about them. What an awful conclusion! Without courage and optimism, we would have never sent people to the moon, ended segregation, combatted cancer, or made any other amazing discoveries that help our world. There are far too many people saying, “I’m too small, too poor, too unknown to do anything great.”

I know how it feels to be the underdog. I once joined a pick-up basketball club. Nothing professional, just a bunch of guys having fun and staying in shape. The trouble for me was, I was usually the smallest guy, and I have never played organized ball. I was the “least of these” on the court. I was amazed when I actually made a basket – all two of them.

For all those people who, like me, have felt small and insignificant, let me tell you the story of Gideon. Gideon highlights a truth in God’s kingdom: great things often come in small packages.

Last week we heard how Moses was reluctant to say “Yes” to God. Gideon’s story is similar, in that he resisted God’s call in multiple ways. Gideon reminds me of a child who keeps asking “Why?” in order to get out of a chore. “Why do I have to load the dishwasher? Why do I have to clean my room? Why do I have to walk the dog? Why? Why? Why?” It is almost as if Gideon thinks he can stall God with his questions, and God will just go away.

In the beginning of the story we find Gideon hiding in a winepress while trying to thresh grain. It’s our first indication that Gideon is afraid – normally, you need a wide open space to thresh grain, and Gideon is trying to work in the confined space of the winepress. It’s like trying to do jumping jacks in a closet.

At the first greeting of Lord’s angel, Gideon immediately asks two questions. “Why has all this happened to us? Where are all of God’s wonders?” (Judges 6:13) It’s kind of snarky of him, yet I guess we have all have thought the same things. When everything is going great, we think, “God is blessing us!” But when everything is going down the toilet and our lives are in danger, we naturally ask, “Where are you now, God? Where’s a miracle when I need one?”

God’s answer to Gideon is the same as God’s answer to us. “I am here, and you are my miracle.” Look at Judges 6;14. God says to Gideon, “Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian’s hand. Am I not sending you?”

God answers a question with a question, so Gideon responds with yet another question. “But how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family.”

Gideon comes from a small tribe, and he himself is the runt of his family. It is beyond his comprehension that God could use him or even want to. Nobody picks the short guy to be on their team, unless you’re racing horses.

God’s answer to Gideon is simple and to the point. God says, “I will be with you.” I wish I could end the sermon right there. Shouldn’t that be enough? If God said to you, “I will be with you,” wouldn’t you jump up and say, “Yes, Lord! Let’s go!”

Not Gideon. Gideon hesitates, just like Moses. He drags his feet, not with a question, but a request. He says to the angel, “Please wait here until I bring back an offering for you.” (see Judges 6:18) This is another a test of God’s patience.

Of course, the Lord does wait for Gideon, and God sets the little offering on fire. Another miracle, just like Moses and the whole staff-turning-into-a-snake thing. Does that convince Gideon?

No, of course not. If anything, it scares him more. Gideon thinks, “I just saw God. I’m dead!” (see Judges 6:22)

God’s response is almost comical. “Peace! Do not be afraid. You are not going to die.” (Judges 6:23) Seriously, if I were God, I would have just said, “Enough of this silliness, Gideon. Get up, we’re going.” Have you ever said that to a child before? The one who threw a tantrum and fell on the ground? The one whose legs suddenly didn’t work? It’s like God is dragging Gideon to the battle. Obviously, Gideon is reluctant to obey.

The next morning, Gideon blows his trumpet and gathers an army for battle. Thirty-two thousand soldiers join him. The little guy has his big army, so you figure, now would be the best time to go into battle, right? Nope. Gideon still drags his feet. He makes another request of God. He places a fleece on the threshing floor and asks God to make the fleece wet with dew, while keeping the ground dry. I have to imagine God smirks and says, “OK. Here you go.” And Gideon finds it just as he requested. Another sign. At this point in the story, I feel like I do when we’re going on vacation. “Come on, already! Get in the car, Gideon.”

Gideon still isn’t ready. He actually says, “Please God, don’t be angry with me.” (Judges 6:39) Have you ever had a child say that to you before? Gideon asks for one more sign, making the fleece dry and the ground wet, just to be doubly sure. And God, with infinitely more patience than I would have, again does as requested.

All the excuse words show up in this story. “Why?...If... But... Wait.” Even though God answers his excuses and requests every time, Gideon is still reluctant to obey. It isn’t until after God calls him, gives him three signs, and finally reduces

his army from 32,000 to 300 that Gideon really understands. Twice God tells Gideon, “You have too many men. If they win the battle, they would only boast in themselves, not me.” (see Judges 7:2&4.) So with less than 1% of his original force, Gideon’s army routs the Midianites and saves Israel. In fact, they never even lift a sword. They use trumpets and lanterns to scare the enemy into chaos.

Make no mistake, Gideon is a great hero in the Bible. Yet his methods show that he had a really hard time trusting God. He kept giving God roundabout answers, instead of just saying yes and getting to work. Because Gideon thought he was too small to change the world, Gideon served God reluctantly.

If you feel insignificant, there is hope. God never gave up on Gideon, despite the excuses, despite the long list of questions and requests, despite Gideon’s feelings of inadequacy. In a way, Gideon was right: he was too small to change the world, alone. But God can do anything. I am reminded that Jesus once told his disciples, “Take heart; I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33) That is exactly what we need to know. God overcomes the world; our part is to obey.

God never gives up on us. Like Gideon, we need to stop thinking like we need an army of 32,000 to overcome our troubles. The story of Gideon shows us that we only need a few willing, faithful people to change the world. Much of the time, we are concentrating on our perceived lack of resources, instead of seeing what we have right here, right now.

If each person here or online invited just one other person to come to worship, or took one shoebox home to fill for Operation Christmas Child, or picked up the phone to make one call this afternoon, how many people would we reach for the Lord? We all have so much to offer! We are walking, breathing

miracles! According to 2 Corinthians 4:7, we carry the treasure of the gospel “in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.” So let’s use it!

God could use the great and mighty, but the Bible indicates that God prefers to use the meek and humble. Like, Mary and Joseph. Esther and Ruth. Peter and the other fishermen. Children like Samuel and David. The widow with the two small copper coins. Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor...the poor in spirit...the meek.” (Matthew 5:3, Luke 6:20, Matthew 5:5) Maybe our problem is that we are not meek enough. Maybe we need a big dose of humble pie so that God can really use us, instead of bemoaning our own lack of strength.

I don’t mind that Gideon thought that he was too small for God to use him. Humility is powerful in God’s hands. Gideon teaches us that trusting God takes time, but it does come if we persevere. Eventually, it clicked for Gideon, and from then, on he was sold out on God’s plan.

Are you sold out on God’s plan for your life? Do you know that you are a mighty warrior for God? We don’t fight this battle with ordinary weapons. We fight with light, music, and beauty. We lift up strange symbols, like the cross, an instrument of torture and death, and proclaim resurrection and life in Jesus Christ! We put on the armor of God – things like salvation, righteousness, truth, faith, peace, and scripture. (Ephesians 6:10-17) We proclaim, as the Apostle Paul did, “When I am weak, then I am strong.” (2 Corinthians 12:10.)

Friend, don’t sell yourself short. Don’t make excuses for what you think you lack. God has never been interested in what you don’t have. God wants what you do have. Your heart, your hands, your resources, and your willingness

to serve. Even if you don't see how God can change the world through you, step out in faith. Got questions and fears? You're in good company.

Now is the time for us to trust and obey. Now is the time to realize, by God's will and for God's glory, we are mighty warriors. Now is the time to heed the call to love, to serve, to give and to show the world the greatness of our God.

Will you pray with me?

Pastoral Prayer by Nancy C. Townley, ministrymatters.com

Lord, you want us to be “salt”, to add savor to your world. We cannot be bland witnesses to your love, only working when it's convenient for us or doing work that is incomplete. If we lose our “saltiness”, it cannot be regained. Give us courage and joy in our service to you. Help us to be people who clear the pathways to service rather than those who place roadblocks and “potholes” in which people can stumble. Many are called to serve You, O Lord. Help us to be people who work willingly with others, not demanding that our way is the only way, but rejoicing in a new approach to ministry. Give us confidence and joy in all that we do, for we offer our lives and our prayers to you in the name of Jesus Christ. AMEN.

Holy Communion

Prayer of Confession by Nancy C. Townley, ministrymatters.com

Patient Lord, we know that you call us to service, but we often feel inadequate. We love to make excuses for not doing something or for doing something only half-heartedly. Remind us again of your loving and guiding presence. Forgive us when we stumble and falter. Turn us again to you, serving joyfully and confidently. In Jesus' Name, we pray. AMEN.

Words of Assurance

Hear the good news:

Christ died for us while we were yet sinners;
that proves God's love toward us.

In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven!

People to leader:

In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven!

Leader and people:

Glory to God. Amen.

Memory Verse: 2 Corinthians 12:10

"That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

Reflection Questions:

1. When have you made an excuse to get out of doing something?
2. Name an underdog story that you enjoy.
3. When have you asked God for a miracle?
4. When have you dragged your feet when God was asking you to do something hard?
5. Name a "Midian-sized" challenge that you are facing. How can God work through you to meet this challenge?