

So Jerubbaal (that is, Gideon) and his army got up early and went as far as the spring of Harod. The armies of Midian were camped north of them in the valley near the hill of Moreh. The LORD said to Gideon, "You have too many warriors with you. If I let all of you fight the Midianites, the Israelites will boast to Me that they saved themselves by their own strength. Therefore, tell the people, 'Whoever is timid or afraid may leave and go home.'" Twenty-two thousand of them went home, leaving only ten thousand who were willing to fight.

But the LORD told Gideon, "There are still too many! Bring them down to the spring and I will sort out who will go with you and who will not." When Gideon took his warriors down to the water, the LORD told him, "Divide the men into two groups. In one group put all those who cup water in their hands and lap it up with their tongues like dogs. In the other group put all those who kneel down and drink with their mouths in the stream." Only three hundred of the men drank from their hands. All the others got down on their knees and drank with their mouths in the stream. The LORD told Gideon, "With these three hundred men I will rescue you and give you victory over the Midianites. Send all the others home."

- **Judges 7:1-7** NLT

When John saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming to be baptized, he denounced them. "You brood of snakes!" he exclaimed. "Who warned you to flee God's coming judgment? Prove by the way you live that you have really turned from your sins and turned to God. Don't just say, 'We're safe – we're the descendants of Abraham'. That proves nothing. God can change these stones here into children of Abraham. Even now the ax of God's judgment is poised, ready to sever your roots. Yes, every tree that does not produce good fruit will be chopped down and thrown into the fire.

"I baptize with water those who turn from the sins and turn to God. But Someone is coming soon who is far greater than I. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. He is ready to separate the chaff from the grain with His winnowing fork. Then He will clean up the threshing area, storing the grain in His barn but burning the chaff with never-ending fire."

- **Matthew 3:7-12** NLT

INTRODUCTION

1. First question: What is a *winnowing fork*?

A: Why, a fork used for *winnowing*, of course!

2. Second question: What in the world is winnowing?
 - a. “to sift or separate, usually for the purpose of getting rid of something deemed undesirable and/or gathering that which is important, true, or otherwise significant
- *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*
 - b. “Winnowing was familiar to all Palestinian Jews, especially to farmers: they would throw harvested wheat into the air, and the wind would separate the heavier grain from the lighter chaff. The chaff was useless for consumption and was normally burned.”
- Craig S. Keener: *The IVP Bible Background Commentary*
3. In the Lectionary Scriptures we see two types of winnowing, one designed for life in this world and one looking forward to the next.

LESSON

1. Gideon, one of the judges who ruled Israel during the 350 years between the incomplete conquest of Canaan and the time of Samuel, began life as a simple farmer borne of an undistinguished tribe, a man with no military experience. Yet he was called of God to lead His people in an uprising against the Midianites, a desert people who had continually plagued the people of God and had been for seven years occupying Israel.
2. Gideon's first task was to destroy a large idol made in the image of Baal (the “primary” god of the Canaanites) and to replace it with an altar dedicated to *Jahweh*. This bold feat gained him a reputation for boldness a new name, Jerubbaal (“Let Baal Defend Himself”).
ref: Judges 6:11-32
3. In our text passage Gideon – now possessed by “*the Spirit of the LORD*” – has amassed an army of 32,000 soldiers and has been led by God Himself to an enormous encampment of Midianite soldiers, “*too many to count*” (**Judges 7:12**). He was wildly outnumbered.
4. In movies and mythology men facing such impossible odds are prepared for battle with impassioned speeches exhorting self-confidence, zealous bravado and heroic endeavor. As we see in this story God prepares His people for extraordinary work by building their confidence in and their total dependance upon Him.

a. First Gideon was told by God to exercise the Mosaic law which laid down specific rules for preparation by military leaders called upon to lead their troops into battle against armies larger and better-equipped than their own. This law is recorded in ***Deuteronomy 20:1-8***.

(1) I wonder how Gideon felt when 22,000 of the 32,000 soldiers in his army accepted his offer to go home.?

(2) And I wonder how he felt as he watched that small remnant of his army further reduced by God, down to a mere 300 fighting men? We are not told, but we can guess. We are told how God sent Gideon on a special “eves-dropping” mission on the eve of the battle in order to encourage his faith in His promise of victory.

(3) The final outcome: The small army of Gideon – by means of a clever ploy and the divine intervention of God – won a great victory. The country was soon rid of the Midianites, Gideon was installed as a Judge of Israel, and peace and prosperity returned (for a while, at least) to God’s people.

b. Is there a lesson in this Bible story for us? Do we feel, perhaps, that our church was better-equipped to move away from the safe confines of the Myersville School back in the year 2000: when COS was sufficiently flush to purchase the Route 40 property *with cash*; when certain effective key leaders who have left our church were still here; when our average Sunday morning attendance routinely topped 100 souls?

(1) I’ll confess: I have believed that. Who wouldn’t wish to begin a great new endeavor with as many people and proven leaders as possible? Who wouldn’t choose to begin a great campaign at the moment of what many see to have been our zenith as a local church?

(2) But I’ll also agree with the Apostle Paul in ***2 Timothy 1:12***:

“...for I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep that which I have committed unto Him against that day.”

5. Some of us will in these next weeks be choosing what to do as regards this new path for our church. Will you be one of those who retire – some of you, we must acknowledge, for entirely legitimate reasons – or will you be counted among those who would follow Christ into this church's next engagement: under-sized, imperfectly-prepared, and stationed in a rather remote outpost, but buoyed by the promises of God, fitted with the love of Christ, armed with the sword of the Spirit and filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, willing to leave your comfort zone, expand your holy horizons and march in step with like-minded brothers and sisters in Christ. We are off to Rohrsersville:
 - a. NOT to hunker down just to make a comfortable home for ourselves,
 - b. NOT to scale back our mission to make visible the invisible Kingdom of God by declaring the gospel of Jesus Christ in Word and deed,
 - c. but to run this next leg of our divine race from this new staging venue, *solī Deo Gloria*.

- 6.. The second Lectionary Lesson is also about *winnowing*, a “sifting” by God Almighty with ramifications more dire than those connected to Gideon vs. the Midianites.
 - a. When John the Baptizer preaches the *winnowing fork* of God, his prophetic message speaks to the both the present and the future.
 - (1) The earth is God's present-day *threshing floor*, and two types of people dwell thereon:
 - those who repent of their sins and become **useful** in His Kingdom, producing “*fruit in keeping with repentance*”;
 - those who, like the dusty, worthless, and light-as-a-feather **chaff**, serve no purpose in the Kingdom and are to swept up from the threshing floor and burned.
 - (2) Strong words but -- whenever a new call of God issues forth to His church – one which must be re-considered by all who hear it.
 - b. **Luke 13:6-9**: **grace** before **judgment (praise God!)**, but we know, don't we, that the bearing of fruit is not an option for the people of God.