

I think my nativity scene is missing a character. (It's happened to me before. Once, I had a nativity scene that was missing a shepherd. Or maybe it was missing Joseph. It's hard to say, really -- they kind of look alike. I suppose that's what you get for a dollar-store nativity scene.) But this year, as I was re-reading the scriptures for Christmas Eve, I realized: all of my nativity scenes are missing a character. They're missing Gideon.

Gideon? you might be wondering. *Is that one of the shepherds or something? Who's Gideon?* Well... hero of the book of Judges, that's who.

I know. I know what you're thinking. *Pastor Candy, you're not supposed to do Gideon tonight. Tonight is Christmas. Tonight you do Mary and Joseph and angels and shepherds. Wise men optional, depending on your reading of the Gospel of Matthew. Throw in a little Isaiah for context, sure. But the book of Judges? The story of Gideon? Focus, Pastor Candy, focus. You've got, like 4 hours left to get Baby Jesus born.*

On a normal Christmas Eve, sure. I'd agree with you. But this is no normal Christmas Eve. This is Christmas Eve in COVID-tide. So tonight, church, perhaps you'll permit the digression. Perhaps you'll indulge your dear pastor and let her talk a little bit about Gideon.

Why Gideon? Because of something we find in our first scripture reading for tonight. We read these words in the prophet Isaiah:

² The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined. ...

⁴ For the yoke of their burden,
and the bar across their shoulders,

the rod of their oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian. (Isaiah 9:2, 4, NRSV)

You have broken, as on the day of Midian. What day of Midian? No, no, no -- don't go Google it now and pretend you already knew. What day of Midian? To be honest, church, I've read these verses hundreds of times and I never really took notice of those words. *Midian? What happened on the day of Midian?* I've read the whole Bible, but for the life of me, I couldn't remember. I couldn't recall any specific information about Midian. Some vague stuff, sure. The Midianites were... you know... some of the bad people, along with the Canaanites and the Hittites and the Jebusites and the whatever-else-ites. Beyond that, I couldn't remember anything about Midian, and what's more, I didn't care all that much. I just wanted to move along to the good part of this passage from Isaiah... you know:

For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. (Isaiah 9:6, NRSV)

But that's not where Isaiah starts. Isaiah starts with deep darkness. Isaiah starts with the day of Midian. So again... *what's the day of Midian?*

I'm so glad you asked. The story of Midian is the story of Gideon -- the lost figurine of my nativity scene. On this night, on this Christmas-Eve-in-COVID-tide night, I want to tell you the story of Gideon.

In the book of Judges, in the time of Gideon, God's people are living under the rule of the Midianites. According to the scriptures of Israel, the Midianites are cruel and

brutal oppressors. Israel's experience under Midian's rule is a time of poverty, injustice, and widespread suffering. In this time, an angel of the Lord appears to Gideon and says, "The LORD is with you, you mighty warrior" (Judges 6:12, NRSV). In response, Gideon asks the most 2020-est of questions: "But sir, if the LORD is with us, why then has all this happened to us?" (Judges 6:13, NRSV). That's a really fair question, Gideon.

Fair as the question is, God (through the angel) doesn't answer it. In fact, God doesn't even acknowledge it. Instead, God tells Gideon: *I know things are horrible. I'm going to fix it. And you're going to be part of that.*

And in the grand tradition of human beings chosen by God to bring about God's good purposes... Gideon argues and objects and serves up excuses. He responds: "But sir, how can I deliver Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family" (Judges 6:15, NRSV). Translation? *I am completely unfit for this task.* Of course, this is the God who chooses tricksters to be heroes, stutterers to be orators, virgins to be mothers, and shepherd boys to be kings. Gideon fits right in with that crew. Besides, none of this is about Gideon's power anyway. It's about God's. So to Gideon's arguments, God simply responds: "But I will be with you" (Judges 6:16, NRSV).

That appears to be enough for Gideon. He musters a fighting force of fellow Israelites to "strike down the Midianites"... but as he assembles his men, God tells him to thin down the army. As in... send some of these guys home. Because that's what every military commander wants, right? Fewer soldiers and reduced resources? That'll win the day. But see, God doesn't want Israel to try and take the credit for what will be God's victory. If they defeat Midian with a huge army, they'll think they did it all by

themselves. They need... well, they need an army that's a little more unfit for the task. Through God's guidance, Gideon winnows an army of 32,000 down to a mere 300. No way Gideon could prevail with such a number, not against those who had oppressed him and his people, harmed them, starved them, brutalized them. No way. Not with 300.

Except that he does. His fighting force of 300 overtakes and overthrows the Midianite army. (It gets a little graphic in a way that is not at all Christmas-y... but then again, overthrowing oppressive regimes is hardly the stuff of Hallmark Christmas movies.) The point is that Gideon's army is victorious in a way that makes clear: in the midst of this battle, God was with them. When God's people were weak and weary and utterly powerless to save themselves, God was with them.

And what's more... God's people will remember this. They'll falter, for sure. They'll lose faith and mess up and turn from God again. (Gideon himself will do so, in the very next chapter.) But Israel remembers. Israel remembers the day of Midian. Israel remembers the time when they were weary and weak and absolutely powerless to save themselves. Israel remembers that God was with them, that God prevailed for them, that God visited their darkness with light.

Which, of course, brings us back to Isaiah.

² The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined. ...

⁴ For the yoke of their burden,
and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian. (Isaiah 9:2, 4, NRSV)

By the time Isaiah writes these words generations later, God's people are once more struggling in the midst of deep darkness. They once more face the threat of subjugation, oppression, and destruction at the hands of a foreign power. It's almost like... well, it's almost like those days under Midian. The players have changed. It's no longer the warrior Gideon staring down the Midianites. Now it's the fair-weather king Ahaz, and his far more faithful son and successor Hezekiah, staring down the Assyrians. The players have changed, but the story remains mostly the same. They are people who walk in darkness, people who need a great light.

What's more, they're people who get it, who get that great light, from God. One might say... "as on the day of Midian" (Isaiah 9:4, NRSV). Oh, right. One did say it. That's exactly how Isaiah says it.

⁴ For the yoke of their burden,
and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian. (Isaiah 9:2, 4, NRSV)

Watch as God does it again, says the prophet of God. In a time when God's people are weary and weak and absolutely powerless to save themselves, God is with them, and God prevails for them. One scholar describes how one king finally trusts "in God's salvation even as Jerusalem is surrounded and besieged... surrounded and besieged, but not taken. And it is the word of God from Isaiah son of Amoz which steels the king's nerves long enough to see God's deliverance of Jerusalem."¹

¹Rachel Wrenn, "Commentary on Isaiah 9:2-7," in *Working Preacher*, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/christmas-eve-nativity-of-our-lord/commentary-on-isaiah-92-7-6>.

When God's people are weak and weary and utterly powerless to save themselves... God is with them. God prevails for them. God does it again. In a time of deep darkness, God shines a great light. Almost as... well, as on the day of Midian.

Okay, pastor, you might be thinking. We've indulged you long enough. This stuff about Gideon and Isaiah and whatnot is interesting and all, and it'd be great for some bonus points on a game of Bible trivia or a sermon for some regular old Sunday, but... why are we talking about this tonight? It's Christmas Eve. Why are you getting so off-topic?

Because it's not off-topic. It's all the same topic. This story of Gideon and Midian, of Isaiah and Assyria... it's also the story of Christmas, the story of Bethlehem. Don't believe me? Hear it for yourself:

⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. (Luke 2:8-11, NRSV)

A Savior. The story of Christmas, the story of Bethlehem, is the story of a Savior. A Savior who by definition saves us when we can't save ourselves. (That's kind of the whole point of a savior.)

In Bethlehem, a Savior is born. In Bethlehem, God does it again. When we were weary and weak and absolutely powerless to save ourselves from the powers of sin and death and utter darkness, God showed up in the form of a little baby Savior and shone this big ol' glorious light. And this is why I'm going to have to add a little Gideon figurine to my nativity scene. And while I'm at it, a little Isaiah, too. My nativity scene is

going to get crowded, because the story of Christmas is also the story of Gideon and Midian, of Isaiah and Assyria. It's the story of all those things, because it's the story of God.

This isn't off-topic. It's all the same topic. The great light we see in the manger of Bethlehem isn't just something God did one silent night so long ago. Bethlehem isn't what God *did*, it's what God *does*. Bethlehem is who God is, over and over and over. When we, God's people, are weak and weary and utterly powerless to save ourselves... God is with us. God prevails for us. God does it again and again.

Now more than ever, I need that to be true. On this Christmas Eve night, we're people who walk in darkness. If this isn't darkness, I don't know what is. What do you call it when the whole world gets sick at once? When all the stabilizing systems of our lives begin to stumble and crumble? When you have to fear a threat you can't even see? What do you call it? I call it darkness. What do you do in the midst of darkness? You live in hope. You live in the kind of hope that proclaims: *When we, God's people, are weak and weary and utterly powerless to save ourselves... God is with us. God shows up for us.* You live in the kind of thrill of hope that can make a weary world rejoice.

On this Christmas Eve night, the first -- and God-willing, the last -- Christmas Eve of COVID-tide, I am living in the hope that this whole light-shining saving stuff wasn't just a one-off. I am living in the hope that this is who God is and this is what God does. I am living in the hope that God will do it again.

It's why, on a night like tonight, I'm singing: "A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices, for yonder breaks a new and glorious morn." I'm singing it, because I'm ready to believe that Bethlehem isn't the last time God will give the weary world a thrill of

hope. It's not the last time that God's light will break forth in a new and glorious morn.
This is who God is. God just keeps... doing it again.