

“Spiraling Down”

(Judges 1-21)

“Whenever the Lord raised up a judge for them, he was with the judge and saved them out of the hands of their enemies as long as the judge lived; for the Lord relented because of their groaning under those who oppressed and afflicted them. But when the judge died, the people returned to ways even more corrupt than those of their ancestors, following other gods and serving and worshiping them. They refused to give up their evil practices and stubborn ways” (Judges 2:18-19)

The Judges Cycle: *from Corruption to Chaos*

This morning, I would like us to begin by thinking about a tornado. Now, I realize that you may have many different feelings about tornadoes, from fear to wonder. Some of you head straight to the basement, while others grab the camera and head to the porch. As we know, tornadoes are storms that have the power to wreck farms, destroy towns, and take lives. On top of that, many of you have been personally impacted by a tornado.

The first thing that many people look for during storm season, whether they are out and about or looking at a radar, is the swirling of clouds. When clouds start to swirl, we know that there is a good chance that a tornado is on its way. And after the clouds begin to swirl, the wind cycles downward until the tornado touches the ground and destruction ensues. We might think of it like this: a tornado leaves chaos in its wake.

Why talk about tornadoes? It’s not even storm season yet. Well, a tornado is a good image to use when describing the book of Judges. The book begins with swirling clouds in the sky, letting us know that danger is on the horizon. The book then cycles downward through the destruction of order and morality in the people of Israel. And the book finally ends with God’s people in chaos with everyone doing what was right in their own eyes.

Well, as you may have gathered from my tornado analogy or from this past week’s reading, the book of Judges is not a very uplifting book to read. It’s kind of like one of those “end of the world” movies that keep going from bad to worse, only this story ends before the hero can save the world. This is a story that moves from corruption to chaos. Hope dwindles throughout the story until all hope seems to be lost.

But before I get ahead of myself, let’s start from the beginning of the book. God’s people have entered the Promised Land and driven out the peoples who lived there, but they didn’t drive out all the people, as we learn in the first chapter of Judges. There were many people still in the land: Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites, who became the Israelite’s new neighbors.

So why couldn't the Israelites drive out these peoples? Well for one thing, the Canaanites were more technologically advanced than them, having iron weapons, which were superior to the Israelite's bronze ones. But the deeper faith reason for the people still being there, as we learn in Judges 2 and 3, is that God left these people in the land to test the Israelite's faith. Would God's people turn to other gods or would they remain faithful to the one true God? Joshua's final challenge to the people at Shechem was to choose which God they would serve, either the living God who brought them out of slavery and on to the Promised Land, or the gods of their new neighbors. When Joshua ushered this challenge, the people promised to serve God alone. But already by Judges chapter 3 verse 6, we read that the Israelites intermingled with their neighbors and worshiped their gods.

Unfortunately, the clouds are already swirling and God's people would not fare well with this test. The people did serve God faithfully all during the lifetime of Joshua and during the lives of the elders who outlived Joshua. But, after Joshua and all these elders had died, a new generation grew up who did not know God or God's work. This new generation did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. They abandoned God by worshipping other gods.

But the people didn't intend to abandon God. They just wanted to make a living. You see, the people had recently begun living in the Promised Land and transitioned from a wandering, shepherding lifestyle to a settled, agricultural one. To learn how to farm, the people sought the wisdom of their new neighbors, the Canaanites. The problem with learning farming from the Canaanites, however, was that successful farming for Canaanites also meant worshipping specific gods, including Baal, Asherah, and Ashtoreth. Baal was essentially a fertility god who controlled the weather. And as many of you know, the weather is crucial for farmers. Crops need enough rain at the right time, enough sun at other times, no storms that could destroy the crops, and so on.

The Canaanites way of trying to gain an advantage over the weather was to worship Baal. "Successful farming without Baal worship was unthinkable" to them. And that's the kind of farming that the Israelite's learned. They weren't trying to abandon God, but they wanted to have productive farms. So they mixed and matched religions for their greatest benefit, kind of like business people who do anything in our world to make a profit. The Israelite's worshipped Baal to provide for their families, but in doing so they broke God's covenant and turned away from the living God.

Now, this turning away from God is the beginning to what many people call the Judge's Cycle, which happens throughout much of the book. We heard part of the cycle in the verses that Dale read earlier: the cycle follows a 6-step pattern:

- First, the people do evil in the eyes of the Lord, which mostly refers to worshipping other gods
- then the Lord brings a foreign oppressor upon the people to punish them,
- after being oppressed for a number of years, the Israelites cry out to the Lord for help, promising to put their full trust in God alone
- and thus the Lord raises up a judge to rescue the people,
- then the judge leads the people of Israel to freedom from the foreign oppressor.
- Finally, the land has rest.

Sounds fairly straightforward. When the people turn away from God, they face the consequences of their actions. But when the people turn back to God by abandoning their worship of other gods, God rescues them through a judge and life is good again.

Unfortunately, it isn't long until the whole cycle starts over again. As we have already learned from the people's wilderness wanderings, this is not a people who learn their lesson quickly. Thus the tornado begins to descend.

The whole book of Judges is like a tornado that cycles downward, causing destruction, and leaving chaos. We can notice this downward cycle as we read through the stories of the 6 major judges: Othniel, Ehud, Deborah, Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson. Things start off well with Othniel and continue well with Ehud, and even Deborah. These Judges faithfully enact the full Judge's cycle: receiving God's call, saving God's people and allowing the land to rest. The cycle, however, begins to fall apart with Gideon and then is abandoned with Jephthah and Samson. By the time we get to Samson, the people do not cry out to God for help, Samson does not free the people from the Philistines, and the land does not have rest.

By the time we get to Samson, the entire Judge's cycle has fallen apart. The Tribal Confederacy that seemed to be holding the people together for a number of years is in shambles. And thus the last chapters of Judges are some of the worst chapters in all of Scripture, highlighting the complete corruption of the people. The downward tornado-like cycle has reaped destruction and left the people in chaos.

The book ends with a foreboding statement: "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit" (Judges 21:25). Now that's a motto that might sound good on the surface, but when put to practice it gets messy very quickly.

The people were supposed to put their complete trust in God to provide and care for them, but instead they turned to other gods to try and get ahead. For several generations, they recognized the error of their ways and turned back to God, destroying their idols and renewing the covenant. But in the end, they completely gave up on God and put their full trust in themselves.

As we enter this season of Advent, this season of hoping and longing for a savior, I can think of no better book to help us recognize our own need for a redeemer. We also, are drawn away from God and turn to other gods. Some of us put our trust in money, others in productivity, and still others in nationality. We try to mix and match these gods with the living God, hoping for the best of all worlds, hoping to get one-up in life. But eventually, our trust is no longer in God, but in ourselves. After all, who needs God when we have money, security, power?

I wonder, where do you notice the downward, tornado-like Judge's cycle in your own life? What are the things that turn you away from faith in God? What other gods do you put your trust in?

- As a way of responding, please join me in the first Words of response printed in your bulletins.

"Redemption Found"

(Ruth 1-4)

"Don't call me Naomi," she told them. "Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The Lord has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me."

(Ruth 1:20-21)

Courageous Redemption: *Ruth, Naomi, Boaz*

"The women said to Naomi: "Praise be to the Lord, who this day has not left you without a guardian-redeemer. May he become famous throughout Israel! He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age. For your daughter-in-law, who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons, has given him birth."" (Ruth 4:14-15)

Into the hopeless, downward cycle presented in the book of Judges, we find a glimmer of hope. In the midst of stories describing the people turning to other gods, practicing immorality, and embracing violence, we have a story of redemption.

On the surface, the book of Ruth is a story of Naomi's redemption, from bitterness to joy. On a deeper level, however, this is a story of redemption for God's people that confronts and counteracts the downward judges cycle. And on top of that, this story gives a glimmer of hope for future redemption as well.

So first of all, what does redemption mean? In the book of Ruth, redemption has a specific cultural meaning that refers to buying property and carrying on the family line. This specific meaning then helps us understand the more general meaning of redemption, which refers to salvation and the continuation of God's people. Back in the book of Exodus, God redeemed the people from slavery in Egypt: saving them, giving them a future. Looking ahead to the New Testament, Jesus comes to redeem God's people from slavery to sin: saving us, giving us a future. Ruth is a story that looks back to God's redemption through the Exodus while also looking ahead to the hope of a greater redemption to come.

The story begins with Naomi and her husband leaving their hometown of Bethlehem to live in foreign territory to escape a severe famine. While there, her husband and her two sons died. Later, she learned that the famine had subsided in her home, so she returned with Ruth, the wife of one of her sons who insisted on coming along with her. Ruth was so committed to Naomi that she said, "may your land be my land, may your people be my people and may your God be my God!"

Can you imagine! Many of the stories in the book of Judges are about the Israelite people turning away from God to worship other gods. But here is a foreign woman committing herself to the one true God because of her steadfast love for Naomi. In this devotion, Ruth actually models what God's steadfast love looks like.

Anyway, so Naomi and Ruth return to Bethlehem during Barley harvest, only they don't have much means of survival since their husbands have died. To help, Ruth goes out in the fields to glean behind the harvesters. Fortunately for her, she chooses the right field, the field of Boaz, one of Naomi's close relatives.

The first thing that is impressive about Boaz is that when he came to check on the field, he greeted the workers with the words "The Lord be with you" and they answered, "The Lord bless you." Can you imagine! In the book of Judges, the Israelites are constantly turning to the Baals instead of trusting in God to care for them, but here we have a farmer who trusts in God so much that he even greets his workers with the phrase "The Lord be with you"! Again, this is a picture of true faithfulness.

Ruth finds favor with Boaz, who is impressed with her courage to stick with Naomi and come to a foreign land and try to provide for her mother-in-law. Boaz takes steps to make sure that Ruth is well taken care of and protected all throughout the harvest.

But redemption has not yet been found. Naomi and Ruth made it through the harvest, but now what? In that culture, Ruth would not be taken care of until she found a husband. This is when Naomi decides to turn up the heat and asks Ruth to do something even more courageous. Naomi asks Ruth to approach Boaz at the threshing floor and ask him directly to redeem her family.

Boaz's response is immediate. Whereas he could have rejected Ruth and turned her away, he accepts her, praising her courage and loyalty and promising to do what he can to help bring redemption. The next day he negotiates the purchase of Naomi's husband's land and also negotiates to marry Ruth in order to continue her husband's family line. The Lord allows her to conceive and she gives birth to a son, thus redeeming Naomi from her bitterness and allowing the family line to continue. This is a story of hope and redemption.

But as I mentioned, the redemption present in this story is not simply for the characters within. This story highlights a broader redemption of God's people in the midst of the time of the judges. Here we have a story that confronts and breaks the destructive cycle present throughout the Judges. This story highlights what true faithfulness to God looks like. We learn that true redemption is found through being faithful to God.

But that's not all. At the very end of the story, the author of this book gives us part of Ruth's future family tree. Ruth's son was named Obed. Obed became the father of Jesse, who became the father of David, who became great king over God's people. At the end of Judges, we read: "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit." But here we have an answer to that dilemma: Israel will soon have a king, and not just any king. David was a king with whom God would promise to establish his everlasting Kingdom. The story of Ruth points ahead to greater redemption to come.

Now, it turned out that having human kings lead God's people wasn't much better than the Judges, but when we look back on this story from a New Testament perspective, we can catch a glimpse of an even greater redemption in the works.

Jesus, who came to redeem the entire world from the bondage of sin was born into the very lineage of David, whose father was Jesse, whose father was Obed, whose parents were Boaz and Ruth! Jesus is the one who comes in the line of David to fulfill God's promise of establishing an everlasting Kingdom and thus redeeming all of God's people! Jesus makes a way for God's people to continue forward in faith.

Today we begin the season of Advent, which is a season of waiting, anticipating the redemption to come in the person and work of Jesus. Today we acknowledge our own need for a redeemer, a savior, in the midst of the turmoil of our world and of our lives. Today we catch a glimpse of God's redeeming grace through the story of courageous faith. Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz all stepped out in faith and took initiative to receive God's redemption. The book of Judges highlights our need for redemption. The book of Ruth helps us see how to embrace God's work of redemption.

Therefore, in this season of anticipation may you not sit back and wait passively for redemption to come. On the contrary, may you actively find ways to participate in God's continuing work of redeeming grace.

Maybe you see a need for redemption in your own family. Perhaps you see a need for redemption in your local community. Wherever you see these needs, may you have the courage to step out in faith, trusting that God is the one who will bring about true redemption: in your family, in our society, in our world.

And as we step out in faith, we will be models of God's faithfulness so that others also can catch a glimmer of hope in this season of hope.

(Please join me in the second words of response printed in your bulletins).

In the book of Ruth, redemption was found in the town of Bethlehem. In the New Testament, redemption also begins in the town of Bethlehem with Jesus' birth. For this reason, our last two hymns will focus on Bethlehem. Let us first sing "O Little town of Bethlehem," Number 191 in your Blue Hymnal.