We’re in a series on A Word A Week, and today’s word is fleece. It comes from the story of Gideon. If you asked somebody on the street who Gideon is, they’d probably say, “The guy who puts the Bibles in hotels!” Not exactly. Here’s the real story.

Gideon was a judge for Israel during the time they had entered the Promised Land, but had not yet become a nation. So, they were nomads, former slaves, who had been wandering in the wilderness. They settled in 12 tribes, with no king, no capital, no great military. The judges weren’t courtroom judges, but military leaders during times of crisis.

During this period Israel has a cycle that goes like this;
• They become unfaithful and worship the pagan gods of the people around them.
• God hands them over to their enemies, and then they repent and cry for help.
• God hears their cry, raises up a judge, or a leader, and delivers them from their enemies.
• For a while, they are faithful, but it doesn’t last.
• The cycle repeats itself; 1. unfaithful  2. overwhelmed by an enemy  3. sorrow and repentance  4. a new judge  5. restored to faithfulness…until next time!  It happens 12 times, with 12 different judges.

This particular text reveals how God called Gideon to be a judge and deliver Israel from the powerful Midianites.

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36Then Gideon said to God, “In order to see whether you will deliver Israel by my hand, as you have said, 37I am going to lay a fleece of wool on the threshing floor; if there is dew on the fleece alone, and it is dry on all the ground, then I shall know that you will deliver Israel by my hand, as you have said.” 38And it was so. When he rose early next morning and squeezed the fleece, he wrung enough dew from the fleece to fill a bowl with water.
Then Gideon said to God, “Do not let your anger burn against me, let me speak one more time; let me, please, make trial with the fleece just once more; let it be dry only on the fleece, and on all the ground let there be dew.” And God did so that night. It was dry on the fleece only, and on all the ground there was dew.

Does God talk to us? How do you know? I’ve never heard an audible voice from heaven. (You would think a Presbyterian minister would get an audible every now and then!) Nope. I have to discern God’s voice, and I’m never 100% sure. Maybe it’s my voice I’m hearing, or someone else’s. Maybe it’s what I want to hear, or what I wish God would say. How do you know? It’s not so easy.

It wasn’t easy for Gideon either. He plays a little game with God. He throws out a wool fleece and says,

“When I wake up in the morning if there’s dew on just the fleece and the ground is dry around it, I will know this is real and that you are God.’

He wakes up the next morning and it’s done, but he still doesn’t believe it. So, he throws out another fleece, but this time he reverses it.

‘Let the fleece be dry and the ground be wet.’

Next morning, it was so. (You gotta wonder what God was thinking!) Wouldn’t it be nice if it were that simple?

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Truth is, everybody in the Bible wrestles with whether they are hearing God, or something else. Abraham, Moses, the judges, the kings, the prophets, Mary, Joseph, the disciples, Paul...all of them go back and forth as to whether they are actually talking with God. (Should make you feel better!)

And if they are talking to God, what God says to them usually doesn’t make any sense, not at first.

- God tells Abram and Sari, two folks in their old age, that they are going to have a baby? Sarah laughs! I would too.
- God calls Moses to lead Israel out of slavery, and Moses has a speech impediment? Makes no sense.
- God calls Gideon to lead these nomads into battle against the powerful Midianites? And Gideon reminds God, “But sir, how can I deliver Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family.” (6:15). Makes no sense.
This is a pattern with God. King David was the least of Jesse's sons. Mary and Joseph were nobodies, and they weren't even married! The disciples were uneducated, common laborers, with no pedigree, no social status. All of it makes no sense.

Maybe one criterion for discerning whether it is God talking to you or not is that it makes no sense! If it makes no sense, it may be God! That'd be a switch, wouldn't it?

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When Gideon is finally convinced that God is actually calling him, he recruits 32,000 men for battle. This time God plays a little game with him. The Lord says; The troops with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hand. Israel would only take the credit away from me, saying, “My own hand has delivered me.” (7:2)

So, the Lord tells Gideon to tell everybody who is afraid to go home. You’ve got to be kidding! Twenty- two thousand men go home, leaving only 10,000 to fight. So, Gideon says, “I’ve got 10,000 men to fight the Midianites.” And God says, “No, that’s too many. Take them down to the river and those who lap the water with their tongues like a dog, (You can’t make this stuff up!), put in one group. Those who kneel down and drink the water by cupping their hands put in another group.”

The men who lapped the water numbered 300 and God sent the other 9,700 home. So, we started out with 32,000 and now we have 300 left to fight the powerful Midianites. That’s less than 1%!

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So, God takes 300 men and defeats the Midianites in the middle of the night. It says they were “thick as locusts and their camels were without number, countless as the sand on the seashore.” (7:12)

Gideon divides the 300 into three companies, gives them trumpets and jars with torches; and tells them to surround the camp. On cue, they all blow their trumpets and break open their jars to create a flash of light around the entire camp. The Midianites wake up and think they are surrounded by thousands of troops and flee. It’s a bluff, and it works!

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All this seems silly, or is it? Gideon’s story reminds us that we are but mere mortals. Limited vision, limited hearing, limited physical capacities, limited knowledge, limited strength. God needs less than 1% of what we have to accomplish God’s will. Truth is, God doesn’t even need that.
The psalmist asks, “What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?” (Ps. 8:4). Good question.

Our ways of thinking must be so archaic to the mind of God. “Wet the fleece. Dry the fleece. If this is you God, show me a sign.” But we don’t know. The fleece becomes a symbol of our desire to hear God’s voice. How do you know it’s God talking to you?

The Pastor Nominating Committee is asking that question as they search for who God would call to be the next pastor of this church. So are any candidates they are talking to about being your next pastor. Should we throw out a fleece? Don’t you wish it were that simple? The committee does!

But you don’t have to be a biblical judge, or on a Search Committee to want to hear God’s voice. Everyday people want to hear God’s voice. “Should I take this job, marry this person, make this decision, vote on this bill, go there, stay here, fight this battle, sit this one out?” How do you know?

Maybe the key is that you want to know. All of them stayed with it.

Abraham and Sarah did have a son.

Moses did talk Israel out of Egypt.

Gideon wasn’t satisfied until he was sure, but then he was obedient. He did all the crazy stuff God asked him to do, after he had asked God to do some crazy stuff! (Bet he never asked again!) God took his less-than-1% and did something Gideon could not have done alone. The fleece worked! Actually, God worked!

We all need a fleece from time to time, a way to discern God’s voice and will in our lives. It’s not easy, and at times it can seem silly, but who would want to live in a world where you never hear that voice?

Let us pray,

God, help us to hear your voice and to respond to your call. And give us the courage to let go of our security, humbly acknowledging our dependency upon you alone.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Congregation; Amen.