

SEQUOYAH HILLS  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

**“No Direction Home: Twisted History”**

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*The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD; and the LORD strengthened King Eglon of Moab against Israel, because they had done what was evil in the sight of the LORD. In alliance with the Ammonites and the Amalekites, he went and defeated Israel; and they took possession of the city of palms. So the Israelites served King Eglon of Moab eighteen years.*

*But when the Israelites cried out to the LORD, the LORD raised up for them a deliverer, Ehud son of Gera, the Benjaminite, a left-handed man. The Israelites sent tribute by him to King Eglon of Moab. Ehud made for himself a sword with two edges, a cubit in length; and he fastened it on his right thigh under his clothes. Then he presented the tribute to King Eglon of Moab. Now Eglon was a very fat man. When Ehud had finished presenting the tribute, he sent the people who carried the tribute on their way. But he himself turned back at the sculptured stones near Gilgal, and said, “I have a secret message for you, O king.” So the king said, “Silence!” and all his attendants went out from his presence. Ehud came to him, while he was sitting alone in his cool roof chamber, and said, “I have a message from God for you.” So he rose from his seat. Then Ehud reached with his left hand, took the sword from his right thigh, and thrust it into Eglon’s belly; the hilt also went in after the blade, and the fat closed over the blade, for he did not draw the sword out of his belly; and the dirt came out. Then Ehud went out into the vestibule, and closed the doors of the roof chamber on him, and locked them.*

*After he had gone, the servants came. When they saw that the doors of the roof chamber were locked, they thought, “He must be relieving himself in the cool chamber.” So they waited until they were embarrassed. When he still did not open the doors of the roof chamber, they took the key and opened them. There was their lord lying dead on the floor.*

*Ehud escaped while they delayed, and passed beyond the sculptured stones, and escaped to Seirah.*

*Judges 3:12-26*

Last week we began a new series in the Book of Judges, which we’ll be during the season of Lent. Maybe for some of us, the Book of Judges might be something we’re not quite as familiar with, but even if you were familiar with it, you might wonder just why we’re here during Lent. Well the reason being: it’s a story of a people that have become untethered from the Lord, seeking after just what they want, and more to the point, it’s a reminder to us just how fickle we can be and how much in need of a Savior we are.

Last week, in the passage we read from the second chapter, it serves as an overview of the sort of situation the people of Israel were in. They had come to the land of Canaan, the Promised Land, and a vicious cycle begins, really a downward spiral as it turns out, one that we see over and over again in the Book of Judges. Israel falls away from the Lord, following after foreign, false gods, doing evil in the sight of God. God in turn allows other nations to rise up and subdue Israel. Israel cries out to God. Then God sends a figure called a judge to deliver them. And “judge” is not “judge” in the legal sense, but a “judge” in the sense of someone setting things right, which in this context meant something like a spirit-empowered warrior, leading the people to victory against whatever foreign power was oppressing them. Then, Israel would know peace, but that peace was always short-lived, and the cycle would start again.

And the first time we see this cycle repeat is in this story of the judge named Ehud. Will you pray with me?

Gracious God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine, but yours.

The story begins with this: “The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord” (v. 12). The Israelites *again* did this. You see we come to this story at a point when Israel has already begun to unravel. This is not the first time Israel has fallen away from God—well, that’s certainly happened before, but it’s not even the first time that this happens in the Book of Judges. They have forsaken the Lord and his faithfulness, despite God just having delivered them through another judge—the first judge listed, one named Othniel—and resumed following other gods, so this is first time repeating the cycle.

Now you would think that they would learn, but they don’t. That’s kind of the tragic, twisted part of the story. Again and again Israel turns away from the Lord, and not just that, but in the process, when left to their own devices, things get worse and worse and worse. And forgive the somewhat crude mental image, but it captures what’s going on better than just saying it’s a cycle, so I’m going to do it. What’s happening here is like Israel is spinning around a toilet bowl. It’s not just going around in a circle, but every time around brings Israel further and further down the drain.

And this story of the judge named Ehud you might say is the first time around. Israel could have learned its lesson, but doesn’t remain committed to the Lord. And in this instance, we embedded in the narrative subtle clues emphasizing, on one hand, the glorious narrative Israel was supposed to embody, a story of deliverance, of holiness, of victory, or worship, was instead becoming a twisted history, a perversion of what it should have been.

In this instance, Israel *again* does what is evil in the sight of the Lord, and God raises up a king named Eglon of the land of Moab, who gathers an alliance from the Ammonites and the Amalekites to defeat Israel. Now those names and peoples might not mean much to you, but they meant a great deal for Israel. You see Israel, when Joshua had led them into the Promised Land, first were led through the land of, you guessed it, the Moabites, the Ammonites, and the Amalekites, at which point they crossed the Jordan River and began their conquest of the land of Canaan. The first city they came to, the first city they conquered, was a city called Jericho. You might be familiar with this story already, but miraculously by marching and shouting around the city, the city walls tumbled down, and the city was taken. Another name for the city of Jericho, and this is important: the “city of palms.”

So for King Eglon, the Moabite king, after he unites the Moabites and the Ammonites and the Amalekites, how is he going to go into Canaan? Well, by crossing the Jordan. That’s the border between Israel and Moab. And what city is he going to come to first? The same one that Israel did. Jericho. The city of palms. And that’s exactly what the text tells us in v. 13, “In alliance with the Ammonites and the Amalekites, he went and defeated Israel; and they took possession of the city of palms. And if you read too quickly you might miss this bitterly, tragically ironic twist of history, but Israel has just been conquered by an army taking precisely the same path that they themselves had taken when coming into the land of Canaan.

So for eighteen years, Israel served this King Eglon. For eighteen years, Israel is ruled from across the Jordan River in Moab, and as always happened when you were ruled by another power, you were forced to

pay pretty much whatever that power told you to pay. And so Israel was forced to pay “tributes” to this King Eglon.

A few things you should know about Eglon. Just from how he acts in this story, he’s definitely arrogant and overly confident of his power over Israel, as we can tell from his actions later in the story. But probably the most obvious note that the text gives us about him is in v. 17, which tells us, “Now Eglon was a very fat man.” Now Eglon’s size comes into play in a graphic, crude manner, but I think there’s more going on here than just establishing Eglon as an obese man.

If you didn’t already know, the Hebrew language is heavy on wordplay, and unlike me, that wordplay is used for more than stupid puns. It is used to make subtle (and sometimes not-so-subtle) associations. So for example, the name “Eglon” is a variation of the Hebrew word for “calf,” which is “*egel*.” So it’s like the king was named “Calfy.”

Now that’s something we’d miss, because it doesn’t come across in English, unless you’re a nerd like me and you look for things like Hebrew puns, but it’s not something an Israelite hearing this story would miss. Hearing the name “Eglon,” so closely associated with the word for “calf,” and being told that this king “calfy” was greatly obese, well you might as well be told that your people were being ruled by a fatted calf.

Now that’s not supposed to just be a joke. It’s another example of how twisted the history of Israel is becoming when they follow their own devices. You see, on numerous occasions, back in the law of Moses, the Israelites are instructed, as a sign of worship, to sacrifice, you guessed it, a calf to the Lord. So now, and this wouldn’t be lost on an Israelite hearing this, instead of Israel heeding its call to worship and follow only the Lord, they are instead being forced to be ruled by, and not just being ruled by, but being forced to pay tribute to, a fatted calf.

But, the Lord has a way of turning even the most twisted history into redemption. Israel cries out to God, again, and God, again, raises up a judge to deliver them. This judge is named Ehud. Now Ehud is a fairly unlikely deliverer for Israel, which we’ll look at shortly, but to recap what he does, here’s what happens.

Ehud is the person designated by the people of Israel to deliver to King Eglon the very tribute they were forced to pay. One time, Ehud delivers the tribute to Eglon, but when he reaches a place called Gilgal, he turns back. (And by the way, in another example of a twisted history, Gilgal was in fact the very place where Joshua had led Israel across the River Jordan and where twelve stones were taken to commemorate the crossing into the Promised Land. But now, the text tells us that Ehud passed some “sculptured stones,” another term for idols. In other words, the very place that was at one point a commemoration of God’s deliverance of Israel into the Promised Land was now a shrine to a foreign god.)

But anyway, Ehud turns back at Gilgal, and requests a private audience with King Eglon. Eglon stupidly, arrogantly, grants it and sends away his servants and guards. Presumably, Eglon had already had Ehud searched for a weapon, but as the text points out, Ehud is left-handed. And when it says “left-handed,” it literally means “bound in the right hand,” which could just straightforwardly mean left-handed, or it could mean that Ehud was in fact restricted in his use of his right hand. In either case, Ehud presumably was searched, but because of the tendency for swords to be kept at the left thing, for a right-handed person to draw, and also

because it's possible that Ehud had some kind of disability in his right hand, presumably the guards did not search his right thigh—or just didn't think him much of threat to begin with.

So Ehud, now with a private audience with this fatted calf of a king, tells him, "I have a message from God for you," draws his hidden sword from his right thigh, and with his left hand, pierces the sword into Eglon's belly. Eglon, however, is so big—and by the way, this is when the sermon starts to get a bit PG-13—Eglon is so big, that the fat of his belly actually closes over the blade, and Ehud can't pull his sword back out, and the text tells us in v. 22 "the dirt came out." Now do I need to explain what that probably means? I've already talked about spinning around toilet bowls in this sermon; I don't think I should push my luck.

King Eglon lies dead. Ehud escapes and leads Israel to victory against Moab. Israel is restored, and the land has rest.

Now what are we supposed to make of a graphic ending to a troubling narrative outlining the perversion that Israel's history has become? I wish I could tell you that this time around, Israel learns its lesson, and follows the Lord faithfully for generations and generations. But that doesn't happen. The spin cycle down the toilet bowl continues after this story too. But there are signs of encouragement, subtle though they may be.

I think a big sign is the very person God raised up to deliver Israel. He raises up Ehud, whose left-handedness points not only to how he was able to kill the king, but also to how God shows us he is at work in history, no matter how twisted we might make it. Ehud is a left-handed man, and he is also from the tribe of Benjamin. The very name Benjamin literally means, "son of the right hand." In other words, this man, this deliverer, by his very description, doesn't even fit his own tribe, doesn't measure up, not the pride and joy of his kin. He might even be one with a physical disability in the very manner of his namesake as a son of the right hand.

And yet, this is the man God chooses to redirect the twisted narrative that Israel's history had become, the one God chooses to restore his people, temporary though their faithfulness may be. He chooses one whom history would not expect.

And for us, this story again reinforces just how twisted and tragic the story of Israel is becoming—and holds up a mirror to how twisted and tragic a story our own or more broadly this world can become. Are there times you look at your own life and ask, is this really what this was supposed to become? Supposed to be one way, but now it's so twisted away from it that you almost have to love, because it'd almost be funny if it wasn't so heartbreaking.

Or you look at the headlines, and take your pick at whatever hard news is coming out, but of course top of the papers these days has been the war in Ukraine. It's troubling no matter what, but there's something twisted about it too—and I just learned this this week—that a country whose very name means "borderland" finds its own borders, its very sovereignty ignored and attacked.

But then there are the unlikely heroes, the ones who rise to the occasion too. The name Zelensky, the Ukrainian president, was probably one few of us recognized before a month ago. But how surprising has it been that someone whose background was stand-up comedy and TV shows, becomes this international symbol of defiance against tyranny? More bizarre still is that the TV show for which he's best known is about how someone unexpectedly is elected president after a viral video is released. Now I want us to be careful here. I

don't like pinning hopes or tests of God's faithfulness on the headlines. Sadly it's all too possible tonight, tomorrow, next week that President Zelensky could be killed. But though it might be little consolation in the midst of so much that is twisted, it can be a reminder of how God can be at work within the world: taking the twisted and the tragic and offering hope in the midst of it.

As it turns out, the story of Ehud would not be the only time God does something like this, but without naming too many names, the Book of Judges isn't just a story of how depraved Israel becomes when it follows its own devices and writes its own story. It also points ahead to one who would come, one whom God would raise up, one whom the world was not expecting, one whose very name means "the Lord saves," but who would die, but in doing so would take the twisted history of the entire world, turn it on its head, and redeem it.

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