

SEQUOYAH HILLS

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“No Direction Home: Lessons from Trees”

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Judges 9:1-21

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After the time of Moses, Joshua lead God’s people into a place called Canaan which today encompasses Israel, Jordan, as well as southern Syria and Lebanon. They didn’t *conquer* the land as much as occupy and intermingle with the local’s ways, even taking up false idols. The time was about 1,000 BC, and just before King David. Political and religious chaos marked the day, so God was providing for his people several leaders/ judges over about 350 years span. Some of those leaders included: Deborah, Gideon, and Samson. Unfortunately, even when God’s people obeyed the Lord, through the guidance of these OT leaders, they became more known for times when they did NOT obey.

A **cyclical pattern** revealed their unfaithfulness on their faith journey. Their patterns over the centuries tell us more about *ourselves* than we’d like to admit. The season of Lent affords us a time of reflection and repentance of unfaithfulness; admission of the messes we make with our lives.

Today’s Old Testament passage picks up just after a good period under Gideon’s leadership, but a new era of his son who is an oppressor. The bloody violence of this reading doesn’t seem all that far from what we’re realizing people do to others in places like Ukraine.

It helps to know Jerubbaal is another name for Gideon, and Shechem is like a city/a state within the larger region of Canaan.

Hear God’s Word in Judges 9:1-21.

Now Abimelech the son of Jerubbaal went to Shechem, to his mother’s relatives, and spoke to them and to the entire family of the household of his mother’s father, saying, “Speak, now, in the hearing of all the leaders of Shechem, ‘Which is better for you: for seventy men, all the sons of Jerubbaal, to rule over you, or for one man to rule over you?’ Also, remember that I am your bone and your flesh.” So his mother’s relatives spoke all these words on his behalf in the hearing of all the leaders of Shechem; and they were inclined to follow Abimelech, for they said, “He is our relative.” And they gave him seventy pieces of silver from the house of Baal-berith, with which Abimelech hired worthless and reckless men, and they followed him. Then he went to his father’s house in Ophrah and killed his brothers the sons of Jerubbaal, seventy men, on one stone. But Jotham the youngest son of Jerubbaal was left, because he hid himself. All the leaders of Shechem and all Beth-millo assembled together, and they went and made Abimelech king, by the oak of the memorial stone which was in Shechem.

Now when they told Jotham, he went and stood on the top of Mount Gerizim, and raised his voice and called out. And he said to them, “Listen to me, you leaders of Shechem, that God may listen to you. Once the trees went to anoint a king over them, and they said to the olive tree, ‘Reign over us!’ But the olive tree said to them, ‘Shall I give up my fatness with which God and mankind are honored, and go to wave over the trees?’ Then the trees said to the fig tree, ‘You, come, reign over us!’ But the fig tree said to them, ‘Shall I give up my sweetness and my good fruit, and go to wave over the trees?’ Then the trees said to the vine, ‘You, come, reign over us!’ But the vine said to them, ‘Shall I give up my new wine, which cheers God and mankind, and go to wave over the trees?’ Then all the trees said to the bramble, ‘You, come, reign over us!’ And the bramble said to

the trees, 'If you really are anointing me as king over you, come and take refuge in my shade; but if not, may fire come out of the bramble and consume the cedars of Lebanon.'

“Now then, if you have acted with honesty and integrity in making Abimelech king, and if you have dealt well with Jerubbaal and his house, and have dealt with him as he deserved—for my father fought for you, and risked his life and saved you from the hand of Midian; but in fact you have risen against my father’s house today and have killed his sons, seventy men, on one stone, and have made Abimelech, the son of his female slave, king over the leaders of Shechem, because he is your relative— so if you have acted with honesty and integrity toward Jerubbaal and his house this day, be joyful about Abimelech, and may he also be joyful about you. But if not, may fire come out of Abimelech and consume the leaders of Shechem and Beth-millo; and may fire come out of the leaders of Shechem and from Beth-millo, and consume Abimelech.” Then Jotham escaped and fled, and went to Beer; and he stayed there because of his brother Abimelech.

The Word of the Lord/ **Thanks be to God.** ~Prayer~

“All Things Bright and Beautiful,” which our Joyful Noise sang, captures some of the joy of worshiping our Maker. Thankfully, creation can (and often does) help revive our spiritual life especially when we hear and see it giving glory to God.

In our reading from Judges Ch. 9, we hear a lesson from the trees. An OT fable of trees and plants teaches a good lesson about faith. It’s designed to remind God’s people that there are dangers of following those who bear bad fruit. Those who are bad, lead astray. Those who have done right and bear good fruit, help others live.

As we’ve noted throughout Judges, the cycle of God’s people “doing what was evil in the sight of the Lord” repeats many times. Israel cycles through faithfulness and unfaithfulness.

I mentioned the judge Gideon was a good judge. Gideon led Israel with integrity and faithfulness for 40 years. But, Gideon’s son, Abimelech, was NOT a good judge. In many ways, Abimelech was the antithesis of his father, Gideon. Through his mother’s influential kinship, Abimelech convinces the Shechemite leaders that the rule of one, who is their blood relative, is *preferable* to the rule of Gideon’s seventy sons. These foolish leaders give good-for-nothing Abimelech money from everyone’s pledges to the temple. He hires “ruffians” or “worthless fools” to surround him. Feeling high and mighty, Abimelech shows his true character; he does away with his half-brothers, all 70 of them, except one! One half-brother, Jotham, gets away from the mass murderer. This ends part one, at v. 7, of the two-part dramatic story.

Part two is Jotham’s persuasive speech to the Shechemite leaders. Up on a mountain, Jotham gives an object lesson. He tells a fable about an **olive tree**, a **fig tree**, and a **grapevine** that are content with their usefulness, avoid the temptation of being power-hungry, and have more important things to do than become king. Lastly, he uses the **bramble**, which is like a thorn bush. It offers virtually no shade or symbolic protection and is notorious for being highly flammable with destruction.

With these points, he illustrates great foolishness. From Mt. Gerisim, Jotham slams their choice of king with the toxic Abimelech. Jotham’s fitting rebuttal reflects more of Gideon’s good influence. From Jotham’s fruit, we can tell he (like his father) is upright.

This escapee tries to counter this massacre, saying there should only be one king, Yahweh, the Lord. None is greater, and no one should put trust in a human over God. Jotham takes a dig at Abimelech declaring only the worst and least qualified people raise up themselves to be king. Furthermore, Jotham notes that those who follow ones with bad fruit, like Abimelech, will be destroyed. It’s dangerous, he shouts! Do not follow those who bear bad fruit.

A leader’s foundation based upon murder “can come to no good and inevitably will destroy those who support it. Jotham’s call for mutual destruction of Abimelech and the Shechemite leaders anticipates their fate.”

In a parallel way to Jotham's fable, Jesus concludes his Sermon on the Mount with lessons from trees. In the NT passage Matthew 7:15-20, Jesus says to watch out for false prophets/ leaders! You'll recognize them if you look at their actions. Good trees bear good fruit; bad trees bear bad fruit. Bad trees need to be destroyed.

My uncle, Papa Don, owned a peach orchard in rural eastern NC. While I grew up more fascinated with the plump end product of his fruit trees, he was more focused on the health of the insides of the fruit. The seeds. His attention to the reproduction components served him very well. When you have good seeds, there's hope and promise, but bad seeds are worthless thus can lead to hopelessness and ruin.

Theologian and social critic, Lenard Sweet says today's Church has a "reproduction problem." We can get complacent and not bear good fruit. He says we are failing to reproduce disciples of Christ who "bear the fruit" of the gospel in the "fields" of God's world. When we don't bear fruit, we can't produce "seeds" that continue to root new plants and grow.

This is how Jesus describes Israel in the first century. He's directing his admonition, particularly at those who are "bad fruit" abusing their positions of power and status; those demanding attention for themselves.

The Jewish people weren't being spiritually fed because their leaders weren't perpetuating what God wanted as much as what they wanted. They lacked disciple-making focus.

Here, in the 21st century, it seems sometimes we do the same. If we don't watch out, our discipleship can become stagnant, its fruit shriveled, and its soul depleted. We must remain vigilant to pass good seeds of faith to the next generation. With God's help, our Seq. Church Session and committees will be able to fulfill our newly voted-upon vision to be hyper-focused on passing down the faith to those after us.

There have been fools with bad fruit from 1,000 BC to Jesus' era to now. We certainly are not immune to poor judgement. I beg us to hold up the mirror to our own inconsistent faithfulness and unfaithfulness. This could be how we are. You. Me. All of us!

In one moment, we parallel Gideon and the Israelites in faithfulness, the next moment we parallel Abimelech and the Israelites in UNFAITHFULNESS. Likewise, we can be as those who thought more about themselves than doing right by those who follow. In one season we're bearing good fruit, the next bad fruit.

The Israelites of old needed help and hope. *We* need the same, in our fallible and depraved ways. We can't rectify the problem ourselves...this universal problem of fickleness, poor judgement, and selfishness.

We put our faith in humans more so than God. We can quickly forget where our total trust should be properly placed. We have a mess, BUT God has provided a solution for his people. The truth is our help and hope comes through a lesson from a tree.

There once was a man who was nailed to a tree [pointing]. He offered hope-filled salvation to everyone and all of creation. This man was the Savior and taught how to bear good fruit. His name is Jesus.

As the Apostle Paul wrote in Romans, Jesus "was delivered to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification". I pray we let this man, who died for you and me on a tree, continue to use us to share strong lessons of faith, hope, and love.

Instead of LIVING based upon the identity of what others say about you, or what your orchard has or doesn't have compared to others, LIVE based upon being LOVED. Loved unconditionally by the Maker, who was willing to let his son die at Calvary that we might **live** and become the good trees we were meant to be.

Dear Maker & Sustainer, sanctify us to bear good fruit worthy of your calling.