

The Reluctant Warrior by Jeff Strite

Judges 7:9-7:22

(Props: Ram's Horn; Fleece - obtained at "Joanne Fabric". I dressed in Old Testament clothing and wore a convincing wig and fake beard. I began the sermon by singing two verses and the chorus from "He Is Jehovah" by Betty Jean Robinson.)

"He is Jehovah, God of creation
He is Jehovah, Lord God Almighty
The Balm of Gilead, the Rock of ages
He is Jehovah, the God that healeth thee

He is the Great I AM, the God of Abraham
Jehovah Shalom, the God of peace I am
The God of Israel, the everlasting One
He is Jehovah, the God that healeth thee

Sing Alleluia, sing Alleluia
Sing Alleluia, sing Alleluia
He is Jehovah, Lord God Almighty
He is Jehovah, the God that healeth thee"

(I entered the sanctuary from an entrance a third of the way back in the room)
My name is Gideon, the son of Joash, of the family of the Abiezites, the tribe of Manasseh and the nation of Israel. There are those who say that I am a great warrior. And it is true that I have always fought against the enemies of Israel. But there was a time that I was little more than a flea on the back of a dog of nation called the Midianites.

(Began walking toward the stage and eventually stood in front of the communion table)
The Midianites had been raiding our land for several years now. They took what they wished, and killed who they would. My one consolation was that I was able to pay them back in part for the pain they had caused our nation.
But they were a powerful and vicious people and many of our people fled to hide in the mountains and the hills and even holes in the ground. When the angel of the Lord found me, that was what I was doing – hiding. I was in my father winepress threshing wheat, hoping that the Midianites would not find me and take away what little food I could supply for my family.

It was there that the angel of the Lord found me. And he said to me: "The Lord is with you Gideon. You have been chosen by God to deliver Israel from their enemies. God will be with you and together you will crush the might of Midian in a single night."

(PAUSE, then turning to someone in the audience)

Have you ever seen an angel?

(Turning to another in the crowd)

Have you?

(Speaking to still another)

Have you?

Neither had I. I had no idea who this man was. But what he said, and the way in which he said it spoke to my heart. And I WANTED it to be true. But I had no idea whether he came from God or not. So I told him if God truly was calling to this task I would need a sign. First though I wanted to make an offering to God, and I asked him if he would stay till I returned. He said he would.

I returned to my home and took the meat of a young goat and placed it in the pot to cook. Then I took an ephah of flour and made bread without yeast. And once the meat was cooked, I took it and put in a basket along with bread and took the pot filled with the broth from the young goat and returned to the angel who was not standing in the field beside an oak tree. I offered him the food, but he said that I should pour out the broth and then place the basket with my offering on a nearby rock.

As I stepped back from the offering, the angel took his staff, and with the tip of that staff he touched the meat and the bread... and the rock on which it sat erupted with flames that consumed the entire offering.

When I looked up from the flames, the angel had disappeared.

(Looking in disbelief at one person in the audience) He disappeared.

(Turning to another in the audience) He disappeared.

(Speaking with growing alarm) I had seen the angel of the Lord... face to face.

I had heard it said that no one who had ever seen such a being had ever lived.

(Spoken in fear) Oh Sovereign God! I have seen your angel face to face!

And then I heard a voice from heaven: "Peace... peace. Do not be afraid, Gideon, you will not die. Peace. Peace."

(Pause) I had not known peace for a very long time.

And so I built an altar there unto God and I called it "Jehovah Shalom" or "The God of Peace."

But I was still troubled.

I am afraid I was very rude to the angel. When he said "The Lord is with you" I nearly shouted "Who is this God you speak of? Who is this God that our fathers taught us about for so long? Who is this God who supposedly led Israel out of the bondage of Egypt? He doesn't care for us! He has turned away from us and abandoned us!"

And I was right.

And I was wrong.

I was wrong because God still cared for us.

But I was right that He had turned His face from us. He had lifted His hand of protection over us and delivered us into the hands of our enemies because of the sinfulness of my people. We had worshipped other gods and offered sacrifices and prayers in their names. And God was furious.

It's not that we intended to anger God. We still offered prayers and sacrifices to Him. But

we figured – if one God is good (shrug) many are better. And so, all across the land there were altars and idols and there were prayers and sacrifices made in the names of pagan gods. And God was not pleased.

Even in my father's field there was an altar that the villagers frequently offered their sacrifices at. An altar to Baal. And around the altar there were Asherah poles, placed there in honor of the goddess of fertility.

And God said to me "TEAR DOWN THAT ALTAR AND BUILD FOR ME A PROPER ALTAR IN IT'S PLACE! Go into your father's herd and take the 2nd bull and slaughter and offer it as a sacrifice on my altar. Then cut down the Asherah poles and use them for wood to burn the sacrifice."

(Beginning to walk to the right of the audience) And that just what I did... at night... while everyone in the village was asleep. I didn't want anyone to know that I had destroyed the altar and cut down the Asherah poles, because I knew they would seek to kill me if they did.

(pausing in front of a door at the side of the sanctuary)

And I hid.

(I went inside the door, paused for a moment then stuck my head out and looked one way and then another and after a dramatic pause I said): I'm very good at hiding.

But it did me no good. (slowly emerging from the side room)

When the village awoke the next morning they found the altar and the poles destroyed, and the sacrifice I'd made placed on my own altar and they were furious. They sought to find out who had done this, and soon discovered that it had been me. And then they found me in my hiding place and dragged me out into the open with every intention of killing me.

But my father interceded.

He said "Who is Baal that you need to defend his honor? Is he such a puny god that he needs you to do avenge his insults? Let Baal contend with my son if he is the god that you say he is." And he shamed the villagers with his words and they grumbled as they returned to their homes. But from that day they gave me a new name: "Jerub-baal" which means "Let Baal contend with him."

(Making my way again to eventually stand in front of the communion table).

It wasn't long after that that the Midianites returned to our land to ravage our crops and steal from our homes. They came with their allies the Amalekites, and with people from other eastern tribes, and settled in the Valley of Jezreel. Those who dared to look down into their camp said that the Midianite forces were as numerous as a hoard of locusts and that their camels were as could no more be counted than you could count the sand on the seashore. Those who tried to count their number seemed to agree that there were at least 120,000 armed men in their camp.

It was then God said to me: "Gideon, the time has come to raise an army to drive out the enemies of Israel." And so I went to the city square and found the horn that we used to call people to war. And I lifted it to my lips and blew the challenge. tune

(Taking the ram's horn in my hands I lifted it and blew four notes – similar to the trumpet call in the old Charlton Heston movie "The Ten Commandments")

People came running in from the fields and out of their houses. And when they came into the village square I told them what God had said to me. That it was time for us to rise and throw off the shackles of the Midianites and go to war.

We sent out messengers to the far reaches of the tribe of Manasseh, and also the tribes of Asher, Naphtali and Zebulun. And within a few short days men began to arrive at our village.

Ultimately 32,000 men encamped around my home.

Thirty two thousand men had come to my banner.

Thirty two thousand men had come to be led into battle with me as their leader.

Thirty two thousand men!!!

Thirty two thousand... men.

How many men did the Midianites have again? 120,000?

And we had 32,000?

120,000... against 32,000?

And I looked up to God and I said:

"We need to talk.

If You truly want to send me into battle with our enemies outnumbering us 4 to 1, I need a sign to prove that it is truly your will."

And I had decided on just the test that could prove it was indeed His will. When I younger I noticed that when I entered in my father's winepress in the morning, the floor glistened with the dew of the night. And so I said to God, please do not be angry, but if it your will to send us into battle with this size of a force, allow me to put a fleece from the flocks of my father on the floor of his winepress. If it is Your will, make it so that the floor is dry, and the fleece is wet.

(I had put a see-through plastic container on the floor in front of the front row and had placed one "fleece" inside of it to soak. And made a production of placing another one on the floor in front of it).

And so I placed the fleece on the floor, and went to bed.

When I got up the next morning, what do you think I found?

That's right.

The floor was completely dry, but the fleece (I lifted up the now drenched "fleece" and wrung it out over the plastic basin) was completely soaked.

God had spoken.

He was calling me to go to war.

But still... I only had 32,000 men.

That's hardly an army that would overwhelm the Midianites. What if I misunderstood God in this test? What if I mistakenly created an experiment that would have happened in the way it did... even if God had not been involved?

And so I said to God, please don't be angry, but just to make sure I haven't misunderstood

Your will, allow me to do just one more test. Allow me to place the fleece on the floor of the winepress one more time. And in the morning, if the fleece is dry and the floor is wet THEN I'll know it was your will.

(Placing the fleece on the floor once more) And that is what I did. And then I went to bed. The next morning I got up, and guess what I saw? That's right, the fleece was dry, and the floor glistened with the dew of the night.

And then I knew this was God's will.

And 32,000 men – with such a God at our back – it could be done.

It was a respectable force in the hands of a mighty God.

Yes! I could do this. I could lead these men to victory over the Midianites. They only outnumbered us 4 to 1! It could be done! We were men of Israel. We were bold and courageous and able to stand against the pagans and defeat them.

But then God said (pause) "Gideon... you have too many men."
SERIOUSLY? We only have 32,000!

But God said, tell the men that whoever is afraid may go home to their tribes.

Well, that's not so bad. These were brave men of the nation of Israel. These were men of courage and strength and their anger with Midian would overcome any supposed fear. I would hardly miss the ones who would leave.

And so I mockingly addressed the men. If any of them were afraid, they were welcome to leave and return to their homes.

And 22,000 folded their tents and left!

I only had 10,000 soldiers remaining.

But still, it was more men than I'd ever led into a battle before.

It could still be done.

I might yet win over in a battle against our nation's enemies even with 10,000.

But then God spoke again (look of dismay)

"Gideon, you still have too many men. If you were to win with such a force, Israel might be tempted to believe they'd won against Midian by the force of their own arms, rather than by the power of My arm." And he told me take the army down to the banks of the river and observe them as they drank from its streams.

(Mounting the steps to the stage and using the edge of the stage as if it were the bank of the river. Kneeling on knee I said:) Most of the men knelt down by bank of the river and brought the water to their lips with their hands.

(Then laying on my stomach) But a few others, no more than 300 men, lay on their stomachs and lapped the water like dogs.

It was these few that God said I would take into battle against the hordes of Midian. And I sent the rest of the men home.

And I was suddenly very afraid.

Wouldn't you be?

Facing 1000s of armed men with only a force of 300? It seemed to be sure way to bring defeat and disaster upon myself and my people. The only possible outcome seemed to be slaughter and death. And so I was very afraid.

But God knew that. And so He said to me "Gideon if you are afraid (and, yes I was) take your servant Purah with you and carefully make your way to the edge of the Midianite camp and listen to the conversation of some of the men there... and I will give you the courage you need for the battle.

And so Purah and I crept down to the outposts of the enemy camp. And we arrived, I overheard two men talking. One spoke to a dream he'd had. He'd seen a huge round loaf of barley bread roll down into the camp and crash into a tent, overturning it and causing it to collapse.

The other man – and I swear this is what he said – responded "This can be nothing else but the sword of Gideon the son of Joash of the nation of Israel. Their God has delivered Midian and the entire camp into their hands."

He knew my name!

He knew the name of my father and the nation I represented!

The only way he could have known such things was if God had made it known to him.

It was then that I KNEW that God would grant us the victory over our enemies. And I bowed my head and worshiped.

Quietly, Purah and I made our way back to our tents and when we arrived I cried: "Get up! Get up! God has delivered Midian into our hands."

I divided our men into 3 companies and gave each man a trumpet and empty jar to cover their torches. Then I explained to them where they should position their men around the camp of our enemies and sent them to their places. When it seemed that our men were properly positioned I blew my horn, and – as one man – our army broke their jars to reveal their torches and blew their trumpets.

The night was lit up with the blaze of our torches and our trumpets spoke with the judgment of God upon the camp of Midian. And all of our men shouted "A sword for the LORD and for Gideon." It was such an overwhelming sight and such a thunderous sound that the camp of the Midianites erupted in fear as each man ran from their tents and grabbed for their swords. In their confusion, they believed that we were in the midst of their camp and they began to turning their swords on one another.

And the slaughter than night... was terrible.

Those who survived cried as they fled from the valley and we chased them all the way out of our land.

And the Midianites never returned to bother us again.

That night changed me.

It was on that night that I realized all that God had meant to teach me.

I had learned that I was being called by a God who wanted my total allegiance. He was a God who would not tolerate any other god, or any other treasure to stand between myself

and Him. If I was to be used by God, I needed to destroy and remove from my life anything that would compete for my affections.

But I also learned that the God I came to serve was a powerful God. He was a God who was capable of consuming an entire offering from the flames of a rock. A God who could protect me from the anger from my neighbors. A God who could speak to me by my own personal fleeces and by the dreams of my enemies. And He was a God who could destroy a mighty army with a force of only 300 men.

THAT is the God that I serve!

A God who would stand beside me and protect me in times of trouble.

A God who could bring strength to my life and peace to my heart.

(I softly sang this verse again, emphasizing the "God of PEACE")

"He is the Great I AM, the God of Abraham

Jehovah Shalom, the God of peace I am

The God of Israel, the everlasting One

He is Jehovah, the God that healeth thee."

Do you have that kind of peace in your life today?

Do you know the power of God in your life that can give you courage and strength?

Do you have the kind of peace that only God can give?