

Early in the morning, Jerub-Baal (that is, Gideon) and all his men camped at the spring of Harod. The camp of Midian was north of them in the valley near the hill of Moreh. ² The LORD said to Gideon, "You have too many men for me to deliver Midian into their hands. In order that Israel may not boast against me that her own strength has saved her, ³ announce now to the people, 'Anyone who trembles with fear may turn back and leave Mount Gilead.' " So twenty-two thousand men left, while ten thousand remained.

⁴ But the LORD said to Gideon, "There are still too many men. Take them down to the water, and I will sift them for you there. If I say, 'This one shall go with you,' he shall go; but if I say, 'This one shall not go with you,' he shall not go."

⁵ So Gideon took the men down to the water. There the LORD told him, "Separate those who lap the water with their tongues like a dog from those who kneel down to drink." ⁶ Three hundred men lapped with their hands to their mouths. All the rest got down on their knees to drink.

⁷ The LORD said to Gideon, "With the three hundred men that lapped I will save you and give the Midianites into your hands. Let all the other men go, each to his own place." ⁸ So Gideon sent the rest of the Israelites to their tents but kept the three hundred, who took over the provisions and trumpets of the others. (Judges 7:1-8)

God Saves Us

Every year, I begin my catechism class by printing out the promises that the confirmands will make today. And it's come back to me that I'm a little scary. I ask them: "Do you believe that the teaching of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, as you have come to know it from Luther's Small Catechism, is faithful and true to the Word of God?" "Do you intend to continue steadfast in this teaching and to endure all things, even death, rather than fall away from it?" "Do you intend faithfully to conform all your life to the teachings of God's Word; to be faithful in the use of the Word and Sacrament; and in faith and action remain true to God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as long as you live?" Of course, the answer to all three of those questions is supposed to be "yes." In fact, I don't know what I'd do this morning if they said "no." So in that first class, I make a really big deal about the fact that they are making a real promise to God. I tell them that if they don't believe what they've been taught, they better not stand up here and say they do. If they don't plan to come to church and take communion regularly, if they don't plan to live the way God tells Christians to live, then they should not stand up here and say they will. They would be lying to me and to you and to God himself. I guess I can be a little intense sometimes. But you know what? These questions are real and serious. And I believe that these six young people are going to make promises that they intend to keep. Those promises, though, are not based on their power or strength. They're not based on the fact that they're good kids. They're based on God and what he does for them and in them. That's what we see in the lesson that I've chosen for confirmation Sunday this year: **God saves us.**

I.

Now, that's obviously not a new thought. But it's a thought that will grow ever more important the older you get and the more you face life. I wish I could tell you that bad things never happen to Christians. But that just isn't true. Bad things happen even to Christians in a sinful world. But God is in control even of the bad things. He makes them all good. **God saves us. He sends scary things to teach us.**

Teach us what? To trust in him. That's the lesson of our Old Testament reading this morning. It's part of the story of Gideon. Gideon was a leader in Israel during the centuries before Israel had kings but after Moses led them out of Egypt. It was a time when the people were not faithful to the Lord and God sent enemies against them to call them to repent and then he sent men like Gideon to rescue them from those foreign invaders. When God sent Gideon, the Midianites had invaded and devastated the land. The people were helpless and suffering.

In our reading, Gideon has gathered an army to fight them. If you do the math, you'll find that he had 32,000 men. At that time, that was a huge army. Yet, they probably did not outnumber the enemy. Generally speaking, the Israelites were at a major disadvantage throughout this period in terms of weapons and armor and organization. Gideon had never led an army before. Would he be a good general? So even with this big group, this was a scary time. Then God made it worse. He told Gideon to dismiss anyone who was afraid. 22,000

troops left. Yet, God said that the 10,000 men Gideon still commanded were too many. So he set up a test. He took the army to the river and every man who got down on his hands and knees to drink went home. God only kept the men who cupped water in their palm and lifted it up to their lips. That left 300 men to fight the Midianite army. God sent scary times for Gideon.

But God had a reason for what he was doing. He said, **“You have too many men for me to deliver Midian into their hands. In order that Israel may not boast against me that her own strength has saved her ...”** God reduced the army. God’s concern was with the faith of his people. Who would they trust in? Who would Gideon trust in? If Gideon had led an army of 32,000 men into battle and then defeated the Midianites, it would’ve been easy for the people of Israel to turn it into a celebration of their nation rather than a celebration of their God. They could’ve spent the rest of their lives telling war stories and reinforcing the idea that you don’t mess with Israel because they’d win in the end. And even Gideon could’ve come to believe that he won that battle because he was such a great leader of men. Why would that have been so bad? Because it would’ve been idolatry. Yesterday, during our examination, one of the questions was, “What is a person’s god?” The answer was, “Whatever is most important to them or the thing they trust in the most.” What would Gideon and the people of Israel trust in most if God let them believe they had won the victory? Themselves. Sinful human pride would’ve made these sinners worship themselves as gods.

The same is true today. The greatest temptation that faces bright and successful people is pride. Each of you confirmants is a bright person. I expect that you’ll get decent grades in high school. Now, you’ll study long hours. You’ll also dedicate time and effort to sports and music and other events at school. And four years from now, you’ll start over again in college and work even harder. In the end, most if not all of you will graduate and get jobs and make lives for yourselves and your future spouses and children. I expect that you will have success in many things in life. But there will always be that danger that your sinful pride will conclude that your hard work and your good judgment made that life for you. Your sinful pride will tell you how smart you are – how much smarter you are than parents or teachers or other people who do and say things that just seem stupid and out of touch to you. Sometimes you’ll even be right. But in the end, what is sinful pride? It’s trusting in ourselves first of all. It’s making ourselves our own god.

God doesn’t want you to fall into that sin. So sometimes, he puts you in situations like the one he put Gideon into. He sends things that are just plain scary. Think about the men and women who are deployed in Afghanistan right now. How much older are they than you? Five or six years? You could face that kind of situation. Or think about the hospitals in our area. Every one of them has a pediatric ward because it isn’t just old people who get sick. Sometimes young people need operations, too. Or think about crime or bullying or failure at work. Think about financial ruin. All these things can come into our lives, no matter how old we are. In this sinful world, we all face scary things at some point in our lives. But none of them is an accident. God sends them all into your life because he loves you. He wants you to know who to trust. So sometimes, he puts you in a situation in which there is no way that you can possibly rescue yourself. You can’t keep the bullets from flying. You can’t make the cancer go away. You can’t stop the bank from taking your house. You have only one place to turn: to him. When he rescues you, you see he is your Savior.

Then, usually, he gives you the chance to reflect on the sinful pride that tried to make you into a god. He gives you the chance to see that not only did you do more damage to yourself than help yourself, you sinned against the God who loves you. That sin deserves all the trouble God can send us in this life and it deserves death and hell. But God saved us. He sent his own Son into this world to be the perfect child of God that we cannot be. Jesus was never guilty of sinful pride. He trusted his Father even when Roman soldiers were whipping him and nailing him to a cross. Even when his Father abandoned him there and made him suffer for us, Jesus still called him “My God.” When he died he committed his soul to his Father. Jesus’ perfect faith counts for every single one of us. It counts for you. You are perfect in God’s sight because Jesus was.

And Jesus paid for all your sins and pride. He paid for all the times you worshipped yourself instead of him and trusted in yourself instead of him. He paid for all the times you took credit for the good things in your life and acted like you made it all happen. He paid for all the sins that still lie in the future. Jesus died and paid for it all. Then he rose and he forgave you for all that sin. Because you know Jesus, you know that God saves you in this life and in the life to come.

II.

God makes us a promise that we will live with him forever. God promises that no matter how bad life gets here, he is always with us and he always makes those hard and scary things work for our good. Faith clings to what God says even when my mind can't understand how this all could be for my good. Even in this life, in the midst of all the bad that swirls around us, God reaches down to overcome all those forces that we can never overcome. **God saves us. He does the impossible to preserve us.**

That's what he did with Gideon. I'm sure Gideon was happy to have 32,000 troops and if anything, he wanted more. Getting up and telling anybody who's scared to go home is not a smart thing for a commander to do before a battle. But God reduced Gideon's army by more than two thirds. And when God sent them down to the river, he made clear that the only soldiers who would go with Gideon were the ones God approved. God wanted Gideon to face his enemy with 300 men. God set up a situation where only a miracle would work.

But at the same time, sometimes God allows us the illusion of thinking that we make things happen. I heard someone argue once the Gideon took the most ready soldiers. The ones who got on their knees and put their faces down to the water to drink, couldn't see what was going on around them. But the ones who lifted water in their hands up to their faces could be watching for the enemy even while they drank. Is that true? I don't honestly know, but it seems plausible. But no matter how good the 300 men that God let Gideon keep were, they were probably outnumbered by more than 100 to one. They had no chance of defeating the enemy in a fair fight. But it wasn't a fair fight. Gideon had God on his side. His 300 men didn't strike a single blow. God told Gideon and his men to creep up on the enemy at night. Each one had a trumpet and a torch hidden in a clay jar. When they surrounded the camp, they all blew their trumpets and held up their torches and shouted. The Midianites panicked and in a classic case of "friendly fire" casualties, they fought each other in the dark and destroyed their own army.

God did something extraordinary to teach us where our real hope lies. Not in doctors and nurses. Not in education and hard work. Not in the government or a good economy or in doing our best. Our hope lies in the Lord. Now, God does use all those other things. When you're sick, you should go to the doctor. You should work hard and do your best. And you should pray for your government and ask God to give our country peace and prosperity. But understand who is really working behind all those things: God. The same God the Father who loved you and sent his Son to die for you, the same God the Son who entered the womb of the Virgin Mary and took on real human flesh so that he could live and die and rise for you, the same God the Holy Spirit who worked through baptism and the word and who will work in communion for you confirmands for the first time today. He works in all the normal things that serve your good every day.

And he has the power to do miracles when that's what you need. He did the impossible when he reached into your heart and made you a believer. He will do the impossible any time that's what it takes to get you to heaven. That is the God that you are making your promises to today. That is the God that you have learned to know through Luther's Small Catechism. That is the God who calls you to come and hear his word and take communion for the rest of your life and to live as he commands. God saves you. Come and hear of him often. Dedicate your life to serving him. Amen.