

“Put Out a Fleece”

Judges 6:36-40
Richard C. Allen
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South Glastonbury
Connecticut

Today brings us to the close of our August preaching series on animals in the Bible. We've been from Jonah's big fish to Balaam's donkey to Pharaoh's frogs. Our text for this morning takes us to Gideon's fleece. A fleece, of course, is a sheep's woolen hide.

Gideon was a believer. And it's easy to identify with him. He had an inkling that God was calling him into service, into some form of discipleship, but he hesitated to respond, hesitated to say, “Here am I, send me.” He needed some clear sign that his inkling wasn't just a passing thought, not just a reverie or a pipe dream. He needed a clear sign that his inkling was, indeed, God calling him into ministry and mission.

I say Gideon is easy to identify with because I find myself feeling these inklings all the time, inklings to be leading the church in this direction or that direction, and needing some affirmation that the push is coming from God. So Gideon is a soul-mate of mine. We understand each other. Perhaps you experience him in the same way.

The story of his putting out a fleece to “test the waters” has evolved to a common expression among people of faith: “let's put out a fleece.” It's a simple way of saying, “Let's pray about this.” “Let's pray for clarity.”

Gideon's story is almost humorous. He says to God: I'll put out a fleece tonight, and, in the morning, if the fleece is soaking wet, but the ground around it is dry, then I'll know it is really you who's calling me to action. And in the morning, IT WAS SO! But Gideon wasn't quite ready to take the plunge. This time, he says, I'll put out a fleece, and if the fleece is dry while the ground around it is wet, THEN I'll know I'm hearing you right! AND IT WAS SO!

Thus, it feels to me like every church should have a fleece. We believe God calls us into discipleship. But what form shall our discipleship take? Let's put out a fleece! Actually, this church has been doing that very thing for years! We just haven't named it as such.

Five or six years ago, a woman named Maryse showed up here hinting it might be time for South Church to send volunteers to the Dominican Republic to work with Haitian refugees. Since that time, dozens of youth and adults have made the trip to the DR, have discovered parts of themselves they didn't know existed, and came home full of passion for saying, "Here am I, send me." Where did this Maryse woman come from? I believe God sent her to us. Pam Reale, one of our youth advisors, had put out a fleece. And God sent Maryse. Next Sunday, we'll hear from two of those who have just returned from their mission work with Arm2Arm in the Dominican Republic. Their testimony will be the highlight of the morning!

In our homiletics class in seminary, we were taught to approach the task of preaching with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. A sermon must be relevant to what's happening in the world, in the nation, in the neighborhood. Otherwise, what's the point? I can picture Dr. Eddie O'Neal dramatizing this point in class, holding up a Bible and a copy of the New York Times, and then staring at us as if drilling his point into our brains.

So, I have had an inkling, a nudging I believe is of God. I've put out a fleece between the Bible and the newspaper. The inkling is to invite the church to listen to voices not often heard, not often understood, and very often misrepresented. There are at least three voices I believe we should take time to hear. I believe we should hear directly from homeless people. It was a wonderful thing last Sunday afternoon to glean sweet corn at the Gutt farm with about twelve of you who volunteered. It was a memorable time. Even more memorable was pulling into the parking area at the Open Hearth Shelter at 150 Charter Oak Terrace and meeting face to face some of the men who would be enjoying the corn. They came out to unload the sacks of corn. They greeted us. One said, "God bless you."

I had an inkling that each of them has a story to tell, a story waiting to be heard in churches like ours. I am hoping we can arrange such a time of story telling. I'm asking our mission ministry team to see what can be done. Somehow, in hearing directly from people who are homeless, not just from the directors of development, we will gain a deeper understanding of life's meaning. When Jesus instructed his disciples to minister unto the least of God's children, he may have been hoping that those first disciples would learn something from homeless people that they couldn't learn in any classroom or any textbook. With Gideon, I have put out a fleece.

I've had an inkling to tune in to the voices on the ground in the Holy Land, the voices of the common people living in Palestine and in Israel. We hear often from the political leaders and the military generals, but we rarely hear what life is like for families who go to bed at night not knowing who will still be alive the following morning. Peacemakers need to listen carefully to all the sides of a story, even if those stories are hard to hear. In the Gospels there is a provocative story of a Syrophenician woman who approaches Jesus for help with her daughter.

Jesus dismisses her out of hand, seeing her as an outsider. It's an uncharacteristic moment of rejection. But the woman doesn't back down. She insists on being heard. She is confident that if Jesus hears her side of the story he will have a different attitude. Almost grudgingly, Jesus listens to her story. And as he listens, his heart is changed. He then ministers unto the daughter of the woman who has come from a far off place. This Gospel story comes to mind as I imagine the importance of our hearing the stories of Israelis and Palestinians living and suffering in and around the Gaza Strip. I've encouraged the social action ministry team to find ways to enable us to hear these distant voices, voices that are rarely heard, yet need to be heard. That is where peace begins. With Gideon, I have put out a fleece.

Lastly, I've had an inkling to have our church host a seminary student. In graduate school, a student can learn to think theologically; a student can learn the principles of Biblical interpretation; a student can learn church history and Greek and how to craft a sermon. But a student's identity as a pastor is forged in the fires of congregational life. It's the interactions with youth and adults, with ministry teams and staff members; it's the calling on the sick, the sitting with mourners, the serving of meals, the sharing in worship that molds a new pastor's identity.

There are many churches who think of themselves as teaching parishes. They partner with Hartford Seminary or Yale Divinity School or Andover Newton Theological School, and they host a student for a term or a year. I had this experience myself as a student. I served as the youth minister at the Waltham United Methodist Church outside of Boston. I made a trillion mistakes, but I was forgiven a trillion times, and I am forever grateful for a local church that took a chance on me, that shaped my understanding of what it means to be a servant leader. I'll be asking our deacons to look into this possibility for mission. With Gideon, I have put out a fleece.

Over the last five weeks we have seen how God speaks through animals, even through the fleece of a sheep. Our church has wonderful banners, wonderful antependia, wonderful worship space and wonderful class space. What we need now is a patch of ground where we can put out a fleece from time to time to discern how it is God is calling us into discipleship. This is how the text was speaking to me this week. As always, I share my reflection with you in the greatest of hope! Amen.