

“Extraordinary in the Ordinary”

May 24th, 2020
Covid 10

Rev. Kimberly Heath
Wall Street United Virtual Church

Proverbs 3:5-6 (NRSV)

Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.

Judges 6:11-16 (MSG)

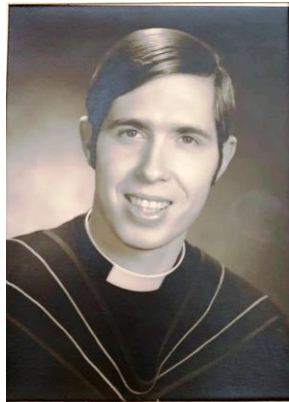
One day the angel of God came and sat down under the oak in Ophrah that belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, whose son Gideon was threshing wheat in the winepress, out of sight of the Midianites. The angel of God appeared to him and said, “God is with you, O mighty warrior!”

Gideon replied, “With me, my master? If God is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all the miracle-wonders our parents and grandparents told us about, telling us, ‘Didn’t God deliver us from Egypt?’ The fact is, God has nothing to do with us—he has turned us over to Midian.”

But God faced him directly: “Go in this strength that is yours. Save Israel from Midian. Haven’t I just sent you?”

Gideon said to him, “Me, my master? How and with what could I ever save Israel? Look at me. My clan’s the weakest in Manasseh and I’m the runt of the litter.”

God said to him, “I’ll be with you. Believe me, you’ll defeat Midian as one man.”



**Congratulations to Rev. Dr. Alan Bennett on
50 years of Ordination May 27, 1970 to May 27, 2020**

This Sunday was supposed to be different, and special. Months ago we had planned to honour my father, the Rev. Dr. Alan Bennett, who will celebrate the 50th anniversary of his ordination to ministry on May 27th, 2020. Our hope had been to have a special service followed by a reception in the hall with entertainment, but our plans (like just about every plan any of us has made in recent months!) had to change. But thank God — no matter how much the world changes, God is with us. We have to hold our

plans lightly. We have control over so little in life, and life changes, and sometimes it's God who calls us to change our plans.

That happened to Gideon. Life was harder than Gideon wished it was. This story takes place after the Exodus, after Joshua has led the people of Israel into the Promised Land. The Israelites had carved out space in the new land, but there were nations surrounding them who continued to threaten and make raids and invade. The Midians during this story were the big threat of the day. Every time the Israelites planted a crop, the Midianites would raid and destroy it.

They were a constant threat. So, just like they had generations before when they were slaves in Egypt, the people of God cried out for help, and God answered. The angel of the Lord visited a man by the name of Gideon. It's kind of neat because the Angel of the Lord greets him with "The Lord is with you, mighty warrior." And Gideon's response is "Pardon me, Lord?" Kind of a "I don't think you've got the right guy!"

When the angel of the Lord tells him that he was the one to deliver Israel, Gideon replies: *"Pardon me, my lord," Gideon replied, "but how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family." In other words Gideon says, 'I'm a nobody. I am not big and strong. I am not significant in anyone's eyes. I can't do it.*

My father (Alan Bennett) grew up attending McKay United Church in Ottawa. There were congregation members who suggested he should consider the ministry, and so he did a stint as a summer student minister at a 3-point charge: Clyde Forks, Tatlock, & White pastoral charge south of Renfrew. Though he felt something of a call, at some point he decided it was not for him.

His parents had a cottage in the area, and near the end of the summer he remembers going to a field near that cottage and just weeping because he knew he couldn't become a minister. He knew he just didn't have enough faith. And so he decided then and there not to be a minister.

Instead he got a teaching degree and started teaching high school history. A few years later he switched to working for the federal Government, and he certainly could have continued to work there. His father had a long and very long successful career working as a public servant. I have no doubt that is the direction his life would have taken had he not, like Gideon, had a visit from someone who saw something in him that he had not seen himself.

It was a snowy December morning, and my dad was working in his government office in downtown Toronto when an unexpected visitor walked in. The man was so out of context that it took my dad a couple of minutes

to place him. He was not from Toronto, but from Ottawa, where my dad had grown up. They had not met in government circles, but at MacKay United Church, where he had been for a brief time a candidate for ministry, and where this man was an elder. The visitor didn't waste any time – he got straight to the point.

“You know, Al,” he said, “Christmas is coming, and just like Joseph and Mary, we’re all on the road to Bethlehem. But the road is strewn with obstacles and barriers that we have to climb over. There are some people who have the gift to remove those barriers and help others along the way. You are one of those people. You can clear away the barriers on the road to Bethlehem.”

That was all he said. Then he turned and walked out.

To this day, my dad calls that encounter “the visit from the angel.” It was because of that visit, that interruption, that my father changed his career path and enrolled in theology college. He became a minister — a professional at removing the barriers and preparing the way for people to meet Jesus.

In some ways, his entire career was about removing barriers. Here is one of his stories:

“Back in April of 1995 two teenage girls in Brockville were killed on the railway tracks on their way back to high school after lunch. The CNR mainline from Montreal to Toronto goes right through the center of Brockville. The girls had waited while one train went by, and then stepped out – right into the path of another train, going in the opposite direction. Brockville is not a big city and the entire community was in shock. I ended up doing both funeral services. One of them was held in the High School Auditorium. All the staff and all the students came, as well as family members and members from the School Board. The place was packed. As I was putting the service together, I wondered what hymns I should choose. The family had left it up to me.

The first choice was easy. Everyone knows “Amazing Grace”. It is the one Christian hymn that has spilled over from the bounds of the sacred into the secular. Even people who never darken a Church door know “Amazing Grace”! The second hymn was the problem. I finally settled on “O God Our Help in Ages Past.” It was, and still is, a golden oldie – often heard on Remembrance Day. I was hoping that most would know it. We opened the service with Amazing Grace. Everyone sang – including all the students. We closed with “O God Our Help in Ages Past.” It felt like I was singing a solo. The kids stood respectfully silent. It was a totally foreign song to them. Clearly they had never heard it before.

Later, as I walked slowly back to my Church, I remember thinking that if young people today don't know — have never heard of — 'O God Our Help in Ages Past,' we are in big trouble. It was clear to me that our 200-year-old music was not speaking to modern young people in any way. It was a foreign language to them.

So it was that slowly but surely I started making changes at Wall Street United Church in Brockville." (Preached by Alan Bennett at Bay of Quinte closing service, October 2018).

And make changes he did. Though he preferred the older hymns, he made the way for a band and modern praise music, and things like projection screens long before most churches were even thinking of such things.

Other barriers were removed, like the barrier between those who met in the basement for recovery meetings and those who worshipped upstairs. He along with Pastor Doug Warren built relationships with those in recovery, removing barriers on the road to Jesus.

Some people have a special gift for road works ministry, but it is certainly not limited to professional ministers. In fact today, because so many of the barriers that young people have on their path to Jesus have to do with a deep distrust of institutions and certain professions, it is the non-professionals who are better at removing many of these barriers.

What one small barrier can you remove on the road for another person? Maybe it's helping them to connect to Zoom or other internet technology, maybe removing a barrier of loneliness or helping with some kind of injustice.

I am so glad that elder of the church in Ottawa, that angel, that messenger from God — saw something in my father that he didn't see himself. Like Gideon, he did not think he was up to this. What changed? Well I think my father saw a truth in what the man had said, but even more I think he realized that he was not alone on this journey.

I don't think Gideon would have been human if he hadn't had some doubts. But along with doubts, Gideon had faith. First he had faith that God was good; second he had faith that God had called him, and third, he had faith that God was with him and would help. Judges 6:14 reads: The Lord turned to him and said, *"Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian's hand. Am I not sending you?" Go in the strength you have and remember who is sending you.*

Don't wait for more strength! Go in the strength you have, and remember who is calling you! It is the one who is calling you who will be with you and will bring you life.

50 years of ministry! Most of you know it's been nearly a full 50, because up until the last few months he has been active as Minister Emeritus here at Wall Street Church.

*Isn't it strange
That princes and kings,
And clowns that caper
In sawdust rings,
And common people
Like you and me
Are builders for eternity?*

*Each is given a bag of tools,
A shapeless mass,
A book of rules;
And each must make
Ere life has flown
A stumbling block
Or a stepping stone.*

- Roy L. Sharpe

