

Breaking Bad: Reading the Book of Judges in a Broken World
Judges 2:6-3:31 Tim Dickau September 9th, 2017

“A Careless Society” – When Caring Goes Wrong

Near the beginning of his book entitled “A careless society”, John McKnight tells the story of a town in the Midwest United States which had a good idea that went **bad**. The story started well. One of the city’s leaders convinced the city Council that they could better care for families who were grieving the death of a family member by hiring a bereavement counselor. This bereavement or grief counselor’s job would be to go to the homes of grieving families and to offer them “professional care”, care by a person who better understood the process of grieving. So the council hired this grief counselor. And the skilled grief counselor was appreciated by the people.

But a funny thing started to happen. People stopped going to the homes of the dead and dying. Before the counselor came, what happened there in that town is what happens in many parts of the world and cultures: people would come with food to the family homes of the dying and to the homes of the deceased. They would listen, cry and laugh together as they remembered the person who died.

But all that changed with the hiring of the grief counselor. People started to feel less capable of caring well for grieving families, and thought that the grief counselor could handle these situations better, so they merely phoned the counselor and asked him to go to the grieving homes. The end result of this story is that the grief counselor felt overworked and asked for more help which the town couldn’t afford, the counselor left on stress leave, and the townsfolk became more isolated and alone in their grieving.

This story raises all sorts of questions about how to care well for one another, especially for those who are grieving, or about what happens when we hand over this care entirely to professionals. McKnight’s book has moved North Americans towards Asset Based community development models that build on the strengths and resources of a community rather than dwelling on its problems. It’s a model that has influenced our own community development here at Grandview since it is a model that very much coincides with the idea that the Spirit gives gifts to the community, to each of you, so that together we can take up God’s mission of restoration and reconciliation. In other words, fill out the survey.

The main reason I’m telling you this story is not for the survey but because it is so typical of what happens again and again in our human experience. Something starts out well. People have good intentions, they set admirable goals – and things go well for awhile – but then something shifts. Things start to go wrong. I imagine most of you know this story firsthand. It’s the sort of pattern we see so often; it’s there in projects at work, relationships, marriages, business or a church. Things start out well but then start breaking bad.

Now maybe you are all gung-ho about September. That’s awesome. But I know some of you are feeling pretty cautious as we the turn of the calendar into September. These experiences can make us a little more cautious. It seems to me that if this experience of starting well and going downhill is so prevalent in human experience, it cries out for a different response that just throwing up our hands in caution or isolation. How else might we respond?

Let’s take a ½ minute of silence to think of one thing you are involved in that is either breaking bad and weighing heavy on you this Fall. I want you to ponder how God might be inviting you, or us, to respond differently this Fall.

The Repeated Cycle of Breaking Bad in Judges

During the Fall, we are reading the books of Judges and Ruth in the Old Testament. One of the striking features of Judges is how badly things go downhill at the point in Israel's history. Up until this point, things had been going relatively well. The nation emerges on the scene with a bang in God's mighty act of deliverance from slavery in Egypt. In the wilderness, God establishes an everlasting covenant with them, offering a vision in the Torah for a well-ordered, just and caring society. The book of Joshua describes how God led them into the promised land. And when the book of Joshua ends, we find the people gathered together to publicly devote themselves to this covenant God had made with them. By most accounts, things were going well for Israel.

But when we get to the Book of Judges, the story starts to spiral downward. The book of Judges is a series of stories describing a cycle of repeated rejections of Israel's covenant with God. Listen to that pattern as it is described in chapter 2. (scripture) (overhead - Joy, Mark and I having a contest to see who can use the most overheads before we shift to new projector). Again, the narrator points to good beginnings. Things start out well: Notice verse 7. "The people served the LORD throughout the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him and who had seen all the great things the LORD had done for Israel." However, a new generation emerges that neither knew Yahweh or Yahweh's great deeds of deliverance. This disobedience against Yahweh is summed up with the tag line "the Israelites did evil in the sight of the Lord". We'll see that line often as we read. It's not like the people stopped worshipping Yahweh: it's more that they turned to other gods for security like the nature gods of the Canaanites, the Baal and Ashtoreths mentioned in verse 13. Instead of trusting the God who had delivered them from slavery and led them into the land, they looked for help and power among these gods whom they had no history with, who had not delivered them, and in course they also abandoned the way of Yahweh, the God of justice and mercy. It was both a violation of the Torah vision and the relationship with Yahweh.

This disobedience produces a response from God: a discipline or testing. God allows the tiny nation to suffer the consequences of abandoning the covenant described in the book of Deuteronomy; Yahweh no longer protects them from their enemies or aids them in possessing the land. Although not mentioned in chapter 2's summary of the cycle, this discipline is followed in most of the stories with the people then crying out to God. And when they do, God responds by raising up a judge, someone who both delivered them from their enemies and exercised leadership or governance during a time of peace and order. The entire cycle is sometimes described very briefly as in chapter 3 where the narrator offers a couple quick episodes of this cycle. Other times, the description of just one of these cycles takes two or three chapters. These longer descriptions include some of the most well-known and colorful stories from Judges like those about Deborah, Gideon and Samson.

Near the end of chapter 2, we are warned that these cycles of disobedience will themselves trend downwards. Verse 19. "But when the judge died, the people returned to ways *even more corrupt* than those of their ancestors, following other gods and serving and worshiping them." As we move through this book, things do get worse. By the time we get to the last four chapters, even this cycle of repentance and deliverance breaks down and we find ourselves in a moral graveyard in which we encounter some of the most gruesome and heartbreaking stories in the Old Testament – stories of tribal slaughter and gang rape – the sort of stories that make sense to wait to read until after the children go downstairs.

Are you excited about reading Judges yet? Perhaps you are thinking that you are bombarded with news headlines and personal stories of tragedy all week: why subject yourself to more bad news? Good question. Why might reading the book of Judges this Fall be worthwhile? Specifically, how might God be inviting us to respond in the face of our own stories which start well and break bad?

Three Responses Judges Invites us Towards

As pastors, I want to let you know that we are actually pretty pumped about reading this book. It's not that we like morbid plots; it's because we believe that reading this book is very timely, relevant and instructive in our current cultural and political climate. This morning, I want to offer some reasons why we think this book is worthwhile reading, especially now – three responses we can make when stories break bad.

1. *Face and Name the Uncomfortable Realities of Evil.*

First, Judges invites us to face and name the inconvenient and sometimes uncomfortable realities of evil. There are numerous uncomfortable stories in Judges: stories of war, sometimes divinely sponsored – Mark is going to talk about these vexing stories next week – stories of deceit, tribal slaughter and gang rape. Judges won't let us retreat to into a consumer bubble or to focus only on stories that prop us up or distract us. There's no running and hiding in the face of these inconvenience or discomfort. In this sense, reading these stories compels us to **both see and name** the evil in our world too, like the ever widening gap between homeowners and renters in our city. Judges is not chicken soup for the soul. Instead, it offers a sort of reality therapy to keep us engaged in the brokenness of our world.

In another way, these dark stories in Judge also give us permission to name the dark stories that are part of our own history, those stories of deceit, violence, abuse, or rape. I know that some of you carry your own “unspeakable stories” around that feel like a back pack full of 10 textbooks. If there is an “unspeakable act” in your history which you've kept hidden away, one you've kept secret for a long time out of shame or fear, Judges invites us to bring it to the light. It gives us permission to name these unspeakable acts. They are not “off limits”. Reading Judges invites us to face them.

Many years ago, there was a person in our community whose life was ripped apart as a young woman when she was gang raped. I told her she never needed to be ashamed to talk about that terrible act with me or other folks here. We would continue to listen and support her on her road of healing.

Reading the book of Judges invites us to name these “unspeakable acts”, believing that in Christ the truth can set us free. In naming these acts before the light of God, evil is exposed. If you carry an “unspeakable act” that tempts you to disqualify yourself from relationship with God or others, reading these dark stories in Judges invites you to name them. We can hold them with you.

2. *A Deeper Repentance*

Reading Judges keeps the uncomfortable but vitally important stories before us. For those dark stories we have been complicit in, the book of Judges invites us to take a further step. Not only to name and confess but to make a deeper repentance. A deeper repentance. If you read the book in one sitting, you really experience the futility and fatigue of this repeated turning away from Yahweh. . The people always end up in the same hopeless place. By chapter 15 or so I was like, C'mon. Wake up. Break out of this cycle.

On the one hand, positively, the description of these cycles of repentance we find in the book not only calls us to cry out to the Lord and repent; they invite us to repent again, and again, even when we make the same destructive choices. There's a reason confession is part of our worship *every week*. We never will come to a place where outlast the need for repentance. Only on that day when God makes all things new in the renewed creation will there be no more need for repentance. In that sense, the book reminds us that human history, and our personal histories, will always be mucked up with ways in which we resist God's ways. And they remind us that it is never too late to repent -- again.

On the other hand, the repeated cycles cry out for a deeper repentance, a repentance that actually moves somewhere new, a repentance that deals more deeply with what underlies our resistance to God and God's ways, a repentance that leads towards lasting change.

I expect that the workshop LeDayne is leading this weekend will aim towards this deeper repentance. We can and should make statements resisting racism. Whether it is the racist protests in Charlottesville or the Burundian government's attempts to use ethnic conflict as a ruse for covering up their corruption, the church has role in naming evil. Publicly. If we don't, we run the risk of upholding the status quo. But the harder work is sometimes to note how racism has snuck into our own hearts and minds and to actually move towards the stranger.

I want to say something about the genre of form of writing we find in Judges here at this point as it is relevant to this call to a deeper repentance. The books from Joshua to Kings, which includes the book of Judges, are included in what is sometimes called the Deuteronomic history – history related to the book of Deuteronomy. These books from Joshua to Kings in the Old Testament seek to explain why it is that Israel ended up in exile, despite the grand promises to Abraham and David to make a great nation who would bless and lead all the nations towards justice and peace. In the book of Judges, we find these sweeping evaluations of an entire decade of Israel's history as one where they “obeyed or disobeyed” the Lord. These sweeping judgments can seem kind of odd to us today for all sorts of reasons, including the fact that living in obedience to the ways of God isn't foremost in our culture. What's important is to note that these evaluations allude back to the covenant in Deuteronomy and the promise of blessings or curses. When Israel obeyed God, God blessed them in all sorts of ways. When they failed to keep the covenant, they experienced the curses spoken of in Deuteronomy.

Deuteronomy also makes it clear that Yahweh's offer to *forgive and restore* awaits them should they turn back to God. That's why repentance was so integral to Israel's spiritual life.

It's why repentance is so key to the church's life today. In fact, I believe that the practice of confession and repentance is one of the key ways in which the church bears witness to the gospel in the world. Sometimes the actions of the church in society, especially in our backyard in North America, can leave you scratching your head or stomping your feet. When the church is complicit in wrongs, it can be tempting to throw up our hands and walk away. Or perhaps to feel powerless in the face of the church's faithlessness.

Judges compels us instead to make a deeper repentance. The church doesn't only bear witness to the gospel when we are doing it right, when we are impacting our cities for good in the name of Christ. Maximus the Confessor, who surely must be the winner of the prize for the best name in the history of the church, wrote that we *bear witness to the gospel* when we confess and repent of our sin. When we confess and repent, we point to how our sin can be redeemed by Christ. Rather than denying, ignoring or carrying the church's sin with shame, we repent of it. Catholic theologian Hans Von Balthazar adds that when we confess and repent we bear witness

to the entire drama of salvation, this drama of naming our rejection of God, this turning to Christ and the reality of redemption. When the church is complicit in wrong, we don't have to cower or live with ongoing shame. We can confess and repent, we can call our brothers and sisters to account, we can step into and point towards Christ's path of redemption.

One of the first times I learned the power of this repentance was as a young adult in Calgary. Some of you may remember the name Ernst Zundel from the 1980's and 90's. He is a reminder that neo Nazis have been around in every generation. He lived in Alberta for a time and wrote books both denying most of the atrocities of the holocaust and promoting a neo-nazi vision of a purer society. He also attracted a group of Christians who supported him.

This Christian promotion of Zundel prompted Roy Bell who was the pastor of first Baptist Calgary to organize a press conference with other clergy in the downtown to both denounce the efforts of this Christian group and Zundel as contrary to the Christian vision. They also took the opportunity to confess the church's complicity in anti-semitism throughout history and to call for a renewed commitment to respect for Jewish people by the church. Their press conference had a healing impact in the city. Repentance is one way we can bear witness to the redeeming work of Christ.

Let me add a personal story about confession and repentance. A good number of you were here almost exactly five years ago today when I made a public confession about receiving a DUI, driving under the influence of alcohol. On that day, I confessed my sin and wrong in our worship. In the morning congregation after Monica preached, Christina asked if people would pray for me as we pray for people whom we are sending, gathering around me in the middle of the sanctuary. A number of people prayed heartfelt words of forgiveness and care. In the evening congregation, six people stood up and made what I would consider appropriate public confessions, including one person who confessed that he needed to enter rehab for his addiction to alcohol, which he did.

Your response was a deep grace to me. But the whole day ended up being a grace for many of you. Since that day, I've had more than five people tell me that my confession was the one thing I've done that has had the most impact on their lives for good. When they told me this, part of me was thinking, you mean you can't even think of just one sermon that impacted you, even just one story. I work hard on these talks.

But in another way these responses made complete sense. They told the truth. Our confession and repentance bears witness to the redeeming work of God. Christ came to redeem sin and sinners for good.

3. Look for God, even when darkness is all around.

Reading Judges invites us to name evil and to repent of it when we are complicit in it. To make a deeper repentance. There is one final response I want to name that Judges invites us to make. To get at this one, let me take a little poll here. Of those of you who grew up on stories of Gideon or Samson, how many of you grew up with hearing these as "heroic stories", stories that made Gideon or Samson the good guys to be emulated or copied?

If you read these stories carefully, it's very clear that the narrator views these judges as ambiguous characters, fallible leaders with clay feet. Indeed, one of the secrets of reading Judges is to read the narrative portions slowly and carefully because the narrator's point of view often become apparent through the use of irony. In their excellent commentary on Judges (there are more copies at the Regent book store for those of you who want to buy one) Athena Gorospe

and Charles Ringma write that “the character’s speeches may seem to give importance to the role of God, but their actions may actually contradict these claims. In these narratives, irony is used as a form of critique or protest, since it reveals the distance between what is and what ought to be.” When you read these stories don’t assume that the narrator thinks these characters’ actions are met with divine approval, even when they do something in the name of God. God is in the story, but exactly how and where is not so simple to figure out. We need to look for God in the shadows of these dark stories.

This irony comes out in the story of Ehud in the next chapter. It’s a story with full of trickery and toilet humour. Really. Ehud is a left-handed trickster from the smallest tribe in Israel who brings a tribute to the Moabite king, Eglon, thereby gaining the king’s favor. After Ehud is sent out of the king’s court, he returns carrying a sword under his garments. Ehud tells Eglon that he has a secret for the king. The king is excited to hear the secret and sends everyone out of the room. Well that’s when Ehud reveals the secret; he pulls the sword from beneath his garment and shoves it into the side of Eglon. Now Eglon has a very large stomach, so much so that the sword disappears under his fat. Eglon relieves himself in the process, Ehud leaves and shuts the door behind him. Meanwhile, the king’s servants who think Eglon is having a bad day with his bladder, dare not enter the room lest they embarrass the king so afraid they wait. When they finally do enter the room, Ehud is long gone, rallies the Israelites with his tale of trickery and murder, and leads them to defeat the Moabites and secures 18 years of peace.

Where is God in that story? Well, it ain’t obvious, is it? On the one hand, the Moabites had attacked and plundered and oppressed the Israelites for 18 years. God is protecting his people. And Ehud is about the most unlikely deliverer you can imagine from the smallest tribe, but he is also a deceitful trickster. These stories are not simplistic morality tales. They are real stories with all the ambiguity that real stories exhibit.

And here’s the thing: God is there in those stories. As we encounter these stories, we are invited to ponder them, just as we are invited to ponder the ambiguous stories in our own world and our own lives. Are you looking for God in the shadows of your own stories that are breaking bad?

Let’s pray

God, we acknowledge that we so often start up well – and end up badly. When our stories go awry, give us the courage to name evil, and to make a deeper repentance. And give us grace to keep looking for you in these stories, even in the shadows.