

# Hard to Believe

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Sermon for Sunday, June 21, 2009 Judges 6:7-24

Claire Windsor was once a famous Hollywood actress. She was also my grandfather's first cousin. Growing up, I heard about her and was so proud. It didn't matter so much that her hey-day had been 35 years before I was born, when movies were only black-and-white, and silent. She was still a star, and still related to me. She was, I guess, a kind of hero to a small town Iowa kid who dreamed of someday making a name for himself in the world.

Several years ago, while researching my family tree, I came across her name again and decided to do some research to learn more about her. While she was famous for her good looks, what I learned about her was not pretty, to put it mildly. Yes, she was a star. She headlined several movies and also made a fortune as a "clothes horse," the term my grandfather always used to refer to her modeling career. But she was certainly no role model.

Twice divorced in a time when even one divorce was highly unusual, she had quite a reputation for seducing men. She used her beauty to move about in high society, and was often mentioned in the midst of scandals. Two of her lovers died in suspicious circumstances, and she was once actually sued for "alienation of affection." In other words, she was accused of seducing a married man. The jury found against Claire, and awarded the then whopping sum of \$75,000 in damages.

Claire was also a frequent guest at the wild parties thrown at the Xanadu mansion owned by William Randolph Hearst. These parties were notorious for the immoral and illegal behavior that took place. Servants carried about trays or morphine and marijuana as well as cocktails, and it all took place during Prohibition. Suffice it to say that somewhere along the way in my research, Claire ceased to be much of a hero to me. Heroes, we learn, do not always stand up well to close scrutiny. Be they athletes, actors, politicians or even preachers, a thorough inspection of the most successful often results in disappointment. It isn't just that they turn out to be ordinary folks just like us. It is that they so often turn out to have flaws equal in magnitude to their talents. Arrogance, greed, unbridled lust, financial recklessness, drug and alcohol abuse – we have almost come to expect these from the rich, famous and powerful. We hardly raise an eyebrow when another headline appears announcing the latest scandal. We are far more surprised to find out that a great person is actually a genuinely nice guy or gal.

Deeply flawed heroes are nothing new, of course. The myths and legends of many cultures are full of them. The histories of ancient civilizations also offer plenty of evidence that there has always been some strange connection between great public accomplishments and great personal failings.

The Old and New Testaments provide plenty of examples. Noah no more than steps off the boat before he gets falling-down drunk and causes a scene. Abraham twice lies to conceal his marriage to Sarah, in order to save his own skin. Jacob is a downright rascal, stealing birthright and blessing from brother Esau and blatantly favoring two sons above the other ten. Nearly all of the kings of Israel and Judah have major personal problems, including David, the greatest of them all, whose lust leads him to commit adultery and then plot the death of the woman's husband. In the New Testament, James and John display fiery tempers, Peter is arrogant, and Paul can be demanding.

But the flawed hero to whom we turn our attention this morning is Gideon, in the 6th chapter of the book of Judges. Now, Judges is a book from which sermons are seldom preached. It appears precisely once in the revised common lectionary, a three year cycle of four scriptures per Sunday used by most Protestants. Perhaps this is because Judges is full of stories that reveal the less savory side of God's people. Indeed, many of the stories found in the book of Judges are not at all the kind of stories you would want your pre-adolescent children to read. Judges is so full of violence and frequent sexual immorality that if it were a movie, it would probably be rated "R."

Gideon's story is actually one of the mildest in the book, though it eventually involves a few brutal scenes. The portion we read comes at the start of Gideon's story, long before he becomes the man of violence and vengeance he ultimately is. Indeed, the Gideon we met is more the Milquetoast type.

The book of Judges describes that period of time in the life of God's people just after they have become settled in the Promised Land. In later eras, this was not a period looked back upon with fondness. These were the bad old days, when it is said, "everyone did what was right in their own eyes."

That can sound like everyone was taking personal moral responsibility and trying to figure out and do the right thing. But as the stories reveal, it wasn't that way at all. By "everyone did what was right in their own eyes," the author of the book of Judges meant that people pretty much did whatever they pleased, without consideration for others or for

the commandments they had been given by God through Moses. Think Roaring Twenties, or Radical Sixties. These were wild times.

Most of the time there was no formal government. Instead, as crises arose, God would call forth a leader to guide the people in battle against their enemies. Such was the case with Gideon. The Midianites, nomads on camel-back, had been plundering Israel for seven years. When the Midianites swept in, they overwhelmed the settled Israelites with their blitz attacks. Israelites ran and hid in caves. The Midianites would take whatever they could carry off – money, grain, livestock, and women and children to use or sell as slaves. What they couldn't carry off, they often destroyed –killing animals and burning fields, leaving destitute the Israelites who survived.

Year after year this went on, until God decided that his people had suffered enough for their rebellion and idolatry. Then God sent an angel – or messenger – to a young man named Gideon. And look where the angel finds him: in a wine press. Gideon is hiding inside this wine press – a large stone or brick box for tramping on grapes – to thresh his grain. He is there because he is afraid of the Midianites, who could appear at any moment.

Gideon is, it seems, in a sour mood. When the angel greets him with the words, “The Lord is with you, mighty warrior,” (which, by the way, is a strange way to address someone hiding in a winepress), Gideon will have none of it. “But sir,” Gideon answers, “if the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all his wonderful deeds that our ancestors told us about?” Gideon is bitter, angry, and pessimistic. Nonetheless, the messenger persists: “Go in this might of yours and deliver Israel from the hand of Midian. I hereby commission you.” Gideon is still not buying it. “How am I supposed to deliver Israel? I come from the smallest clan in the tribe of Manasseh, and I am the least in my own family.”

Gideon resembles several other major figures in the Old and New Testaments who attempt to resist God's call. There is Moses at the burning bush, making excuses, there is Jeremiah, who claims to be too young, and of course there is Jonah, who simply runs away. And we shouldn't forget Peter, who upon first being called, says to Jesus, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man.”

But Gideon is among the most persistent in resisting God's call. He even demands multiple signs. From Sunday School long ago, you may recall a later story in which Gideon lays out the fleece – not once, but twice – asking God to prove that this call is genuine.

In the end, Gideon (like Claire Windsor and countless other celebrities and superstars) isn't much of a role model. But there is still an important lesson to be found in his story. And that lesson, quite simply, is this: God does not give up. When God makes a plan or a promise, God follows through. And when God calls us to a particular role or task, God can be relentless. As Gideon learned, God keeps calling. As Jonah discovered, there is no escape.

Several years ago, I read a quote about parenthood that has stuck with me, because it is both funny and profound. 20th century playwright, novelist, psychologist and mother of four, Florida Scott-Maxwell, once said, "No matter how old a mother is she watches her middle-aged children for signs of improvement." The funny part is the image I get of senior citizen mothers still showering their grown children with unsolicited advice. The profound part is the observation that the people who really love us never do stop hoping we will improve, grow, learn – in short, that we will become all that we are meant to be.

God loves us. And that is why God is persistent in laying claim to our lives. God's call is an invitation to become what we are meant to be. We may find it hard to believe – Gideon did. But God's call is hard to escape. And God calls all of us, in one way or another. God places some claim on each of our lives. Some of you know what I'm talking about. Some of you would know, if you would stop to think about it for a moment or two. God is calling. God will keep calling. What will your response be?

Amen.