

Where the Wild Things Are

^{NRS} **Judges 7:16** After he divided the three hundred men into three companies, and put trumpets into the hands of all of them, and empty jars, with torches inside the jars, ¹⁷ he said to them, "Look at me, and do the same; when I come to the outskirts of the camp, do as I do. ¹⁸ When I blow the trumpet, I and all who are with me, then you also blow the trumpets around the whole camp, and shout, 'For the LORD and for Gideon!'" ¹⁹ So Gideon and the hundred who were with him came to the outskirts of the camp at the beginning of the middle watch, when they had just set the watch; and they blew the trumpets and smashed the jars that were in their hands. ²⁰ So the three companies blew the trumpets and broke the jars, holding in their left hands the torches, and in their right hands the trumpets to blow; and they cried, "A sword for the LORD and for Gideon!" ²¹ Every man stood in his place all around the camp, and all the men in camp ran; they cried out and fled. ²² When they blew the three hundred trumpets, the LORD set every man's sword against his fellow and against all the army; and the army fled as far as Beth-shittah toward Zererah, as far as the border of Abel-meholah, by Tabbath. ²³ And the men of Israel were called out from Naphtali and from Asher and from all Manasseh, and they pursued after the Midianites.

Sometimes the Bible is a victim of its own success. Gideon is a great example of this. Gideon is pretty much a household name today. Almost everyone has heard the name of Gideon. But if you were to ask folks who Gideon was or what he did, my guess is they'd be pretty clue free. My guess is that most folks imagine Gideon was like an Old Testament Easter bunny- only instead of hopping around and hiding eggs everywhere, Gideon was hopping around hiding Bibles in motels everywhere.

Well after spending a week with Gideon, I can tell you we have no record of Gideon even cracking open a Bible much less sticking one in a hotel room. What I do know is he's an incredibly interesting guy- maybe the most interesting figure in the Old Testament, even if now he's only remembered for something he never did.

See, Gideon was a hero; but he was incredibly human one.

He grew up in a hard time. The Israelites were in disorder. They were leaderless. And they were being bullied by their neighbors Midianites. Basically, the Israelites would work all year in the fields to produce food for the year, and when it was harvest time, the Midianites would swoop in and knock heads and take everything.

So the first time we meet Gideon he's hiding out threshing wheat in an abandoned wine vat so no one will see him. It's understandable but kind of sad. Now as he's doing this, an angel appears to him and says that God is with him, and that God is calling him to rise up and lead the Israelites against the Midianites. And Gideon- well he's cowering in that wine press. He's just not the likeliest of heroes. And indeed, he spits back at the angel that God isn't with them- that God is dead and has handed the people over to the Midianites. It's not a promising start.

So, exit the angel and enter the Lord...in person. And this is where I would imagine the Jaws music starting up, right? Like, uh oh, this isn't going to be pretty. Except, when God shows up, God just repeats the call. No fire. No brimstone. No how dare you question my presence. But Gideon persists in his attitude. And now he flat out tests God- something that most people in the Bible consider about as good an idea as when Abraham Lincoln said to his wife, "Oh, let's go take in a show." But again, God doesn't go medieval on him. God honors the test, and when Gideon brings back an offering, God's angel taps it with a staff and, so the story goes, flames leap up and consume it.

But in case we think this is just an isolated case, just a bad start for Gideon. It's just the tip of the iceberg for him. Before God calls Gideon to lead the Israelites into battle against the Midianites, Gideon asks for another sign- he tests God again. He lays

out a fleece on the ground. And he orders God to put dew on the fleece, but not on the ground all around it. And God actually does this. And you'd think this would be enough, but Gideon then says, "Hey that was pretty good. NOW I want you to make it dewy all around the ground, but not on the fleece. Do that- and MAYBE I'll THINK about going." And you'd think God would just have to squash him like a bug, right? But God doesn't. In the story God does what he asks.

Honestly, you just get the feeling Gideon is the most cowardly, suspicious, and insecure guy there ever was. Not exactly hero material.

But then, as soon you say this- you keep reading, and you realize this isn't the whole story. You realize as cowardly, as faithless, as insecure as Gideon is, and I think he really is all these things, that he has moments of brilliance, too.

In the valley of Jezreel the Israelites are all just in chaos. They're angry at the Midianites always beating them up and taking their lunch money, but they're also frightened. And it's Gideon who pulls out his horn and puts it to his lips, and he rallies all Israel around him- and they actually gather. He organizes them- and they actually do what he tells them to do. As cowardly and suspicious as he can be- he has this moment of absolutely commanding brilliance.

And Gideon isn't just commanding- but he can be brave, too, and clever. When he finally follows God's call at first, God tells him to tear down the altar his father has built to Ba'al. And Gideon does this, and tears down the Asherah next to it, this sacred pole. And everyone in his village calls for his death because of it. And Gideon knew they would- the people believed these statues were protecting them. It's an incredibly brave thing to do.

And then, when he leads an assault against the big, bad, Midianites, Gideon starts out with a huge force, but God tells him to send people home. And Gideon does it- he whittles down his army until he's only got 300 warriors left. It's an act of incredible courage and trust.

And then the actual assault. This is the text we heard for this morning. Gideon takes his 300 and in the middle of the night leads them to the Midianites- the 10,000 Midianites. And he's given them all lanterns hidden within clay jars and trumpets. And he has his men surround the Midianites and on his command, they all smash their lanterns and blow their horns. The Midianites wake up terrified by these lights and the sounds- and in the confusion the Midianites end up attacking themselves and fleeing.

It's an incredibly clever thing to do- Gideon knew there would be no way 300 men could defeat 10,000 in open battle, so he came up with something amazingly creative and sharp.

Of course this creativity can get him into trouble. After his defeat of the Midianites the Israelite's want to make him a king. And he says no to this, but he asks them for all of their jewelry. And they give it to him and he creates an ephod out of it- a kind of vestment he wears. And the story teller tells us Israel starts to worship this ephod and it leads them astray- all because of a terrible kind of vanity, a need for importance, on Gideon's part.

So...what is Gideon? Is he a hero? Well, yeah. He is. Is he a faithless coward? Well, yeah, he is. Is he brave, is he clever, is he an incredible leader at times? Absolutely? Is he suspicious and incredibly insecure at times, as well? Yeah.

Frankly, the picture we get of Gideon is incredibly complicated, incredibly human.

On Tuesday this week New York Times editorialist David Brooks wrote an incredible column about being human. He cited two basic views: the philosophical and the psychological.

The philosophical story goes like this. Down deep, each of us has a kind of basic nature, or character. And almost all of our behavior is a result of our fundamental nature or character. We look like a funnel, in other words- at the bottom is this narrow sense of character- and then up towards the top, the variety of our behavior flows out from this.

This is an incredibly popular way to think about being human. People just have a fundamental nature. Honest people are honest. Mean people are mean. It doesn't matter what kind of situation they're in or environment they're in- a kind person, a loving person, well they are going to be kind. It's who they are. It's just baked into them.

Almost all of our drama works like this. Comedies and tragedies. They work because normally a person is put into a situation where it is hard for them to be who they are- lovers aren't allowed to love like in Romeo and Juliet. Or a leader isn't leading like King Lear being a prideful old fool. The problem in these plays is that Romeo and Juliet, down deep, they are lovers. King Lear, down deep, he is a ruler. And temporarily, because of a family feud in the case of Romeo and Juliet, and because of pride in King Lear's case, they aren't behaving according to their nature- and the plays can't end until they finally come to themselves again.

And we see people like this, too, sometimes. Whenever we say something like, “Oh they would NEVER do this or that,” or “They are incapable of doing this or that”, we are saying this person has a kind of nature a character- and this character shapes us.

On the other hand though, Brooks notes, there is the psychological view of people. And through observation after observation psychologists have found this philosophical view of people to be nice, but not terribly realistic. In test after test psychologists have found that people simply do not have this kind of rock solid thing called a character that governs how they are no matter what kind of situation they are in. A person can be incredibly intelligent and personable at work, for instance- and then just shut down when they go home. Like a light turning off.

Most of you probably heard of that experiment in the 60’s when psychologists created a kind of fake prison and designated some students guards and some students inmates. And they had to shut the experiment down because the guards actually started to physically assault the prisoners, and the prisoners were planning an actual jail break.

What psychologists have found is that the atmosphere we’re in, the environment we’re in makes an enormous difference in the ways we behave. They’ve noted that rather than humans having one simple character down deep, we have a multiplicity of characters, a cast of characters all running around inside of us, and they are all fighting inside us for expression. In this view we are like a funnel- but it’s like an upside down funnel. Down deep we have all of these competing selves- and at the top the reality is we only let a few of these selves out at any given time.

If any of you have seen *Where the Wild Things Are* this is exactly what it's about. And you know as much as I love the book, and it is a classic, this is one of those times where the movie is better than the book.

The book has a kind of philosophical view of people. Max has all these wild things inside of him, but then in the book he tames them all with the magic trick of staring into their yellow eyes. And he masters them and becomes their king. And really, there is an uncomfortable kind of violence in the book- especially when Max sends them off to bed without any supper, even though they haven't done anything wrong. They've just been playing with him. But in the philosophical view of people there people have a single character- and when offer forces try to carry you away, the only thing to do is to silence them. To shut them down. To cut them off.

But the movie is far more interesting. Max is like anybody else. He's a little boy who loves his mother, who completely depends upon her, and he's incredibly frustrated with her, and rails against her.

And these wild things inside of him. Well, he tries to be king of them, he tries to master them. But in the movie he isn't able to be king. He isn't able to control them and shut them down. He has to learn how to live with them- not allowing them to take him over to be sure, but also not able to cut them away either. Indeed, to hurt them would be to hurt himself.

The movie shows us a much better picture of who we really are. We're full of wild things- some of them beautiful, some of them not. Some of them brave and courageous, some of them violent and in terrible pain.

And life isn't about going into battle against them- and trying to destroy the selves you don't like. Life is about figuring out how to make peace with these parts of ourselves. Especially because you never know- the parts of yourself that scare you the most, so often these parts are connected to the parts of us that are the most beautiful and noble.

And it's in this light that Gideon's story makes sense. Some scholars have said Gideon's story is so confused that it must be because there are two historical versions of the story that in Judges are just intertwined. And this might be true. But I think it's equally likely that the reason the story is so muddled is simply because Gideon was human- and because scripture has this amazing way, this unique way, of putting a mirror up to us showing us for who we are, good, bad, and ugly. The story portrays Gideon as a hero and a coward because he is both. The story portrays him as faithless and faithful because he is.

And honestly, the most interesting person in the story to me isn't really Gideon. The most interesting person in the story to me is God. Throughout this story God demonstrates this amazing consistency with Gideon- this amazing patience and love, whether Gideon is being brave, cowardly, faithless, or incredibly brave. No matter which wild thing is rearing it's ugly, beautiful head- God's loving face continues to shine upon Gideon, no matter what.

This morning I leave you with the words of Rumi, my favorite 13th century
Islamic poet. There are so many to pick from...

The Guest House
This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
Some momentary awareness comes
As an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
Who violently sweep your house
Empty of its furniture,
Still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
For some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
Meet them at the door laughing,
And invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,
Because each has been sent
As a guide from beyond.

Beloved, this being human, it's a guest house, isn't it? This week may you create
community amongst the wild things inside of you. And may you be as gracious and as
gentle with yourself as you go about this as God was to Gideon. **Amen.**