

## **Gideon – Stepping Out in Faith**

**Sunday 10am**

**Judges 6:11-24 (and Mark 1:9-15)**

Good morning everyone. When we step out into anything new there's always a challenge involved, a degree of risk. Will I manage ok or will it all go wrong? Imagine launching onto the Bobsleigh or Skeleton downhill head first as we saw our gold winner do yesterday in the Winter Olympics!

Well today and in the weeks leading up to Easter we're following some Bible characters who stepped out, took a risk, and did it because of their faith.

Today is the story of Gideon. You can see his image in one of our stained-glass windows in the Lady Chapel if you look later on – who knows if there's a resemblance!

There's no doubt that Gideon is being called by God to step out in faith.

He's invited to lead the army of ancient Israel against their neighbours the Midianites, who are constantly invading their land.

Gideon can't believe he's being asked by God to do it. But when he realises it's God himself asking him to do it, he finally decides to step out.

As we continue our sermon series in the next few weeks, we'll see how each Bible character steps out in very different ways. And it will introduce the question for us too, what does it mean for *us* to be stepping out in faith?

Whether it's going out collecting for Christian Aid, being a welcomer in church, or going further afield on mission activity, we too might feel something prodding us to put our trust in God and get on with it!

John Ortberg, the author of our Lent book *If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat*, has studied plenty of Bible characters who stepped out. And he sees something they have in common, a pattern if you

like. And three stages of that pattern help us today. He says when someone steps out in the Bible

- There is always a call
- There is always fear
- There is always reassurance from God

Let's see if Gideon can shed some light on these this morning. What does it look like to take a step out in faith?

### **First, there is always a call!**

Gideon, you might think, has it easy. He hears a call directly from an angel of the Lord. The angel says to him 'The Lord is with you, mighty warrior'. And again a few moments later 'Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian's hand'.

But Gideon is hesitant, he doesn't seem to get it. In fact he's quite off-hand at first. He says '...if the Lord is with us, why has all this happened to us?... The Lord has abandoned us and given us into the hand of Midian'.

He seems not to trust that the Lord is with Him at all. He knows God has done great things in the past – Moses and the crossing of the Red Sea and such like – but he doesn't think that's what's it's like now.

Gideon is their military leader, and all he sees is the harsh reality of the Midianites tormenting them. They regularly invade Israel to ruin their seasonal crops. They ravage the land and destroy the sheep and cattle.

Despite the people having cried out to God for help, Gideon doesn't seem to expect to hear from Him!

But the angel is patient, ignoring Gideon's rebuffs, and presses again: 'Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian's hand. Am I not sending you?'

Gideon highlights for us the challenge of knowing what God's call is like. We believe God can work in our life, but when it comes to stepping out for God we may wonder what his voice sounds like.

Well I'd like to suggest it's probably simpler than we think. We may not hear a direct voice in words, but if we're used to reading scripture, praying in some way or other, and able to sense God's presence at times, then I'd say we already possess the raw ingredients to hear from God.

And from a foundation such as that, a calling is when something *specific* grows from it. Something, as we say, that is on our hearts. We each have different gifts, hopes, dreams. It's not surprising then that something may be laid on each of us that's different from someone else, and which means stepping out in some way.

Gideon's call builds on his gifts as a warrior. I wonder what resonates in us about God's vision for the world? Where in our lives we can do something about it to make it more real? What small step might help us act on it?

We're not talking here especially about a call to church life. Perhaps we have been given a heart for the homeless, or for hospitality – turning our home into a

place for our neighbours to freely visit. We may have found a heart for justice or a gift for politics. We may simply have a desire to change the culture of where we work so that people are more generous with each other.

If we are to follow Gideon's example, then perhaps we should not put this feeling off. It might be something that has been with us for a while. It might be frequently stoked up by a Bible reading, or by conversations with friends. If that's the case then let's not push back, but think about what faithful steps can make it happen.

Jeff Lucas in his book on *Gideon* guesses our more typical reactions – keeping our head down, keeping our arms folded, being a spectator, becoming an analyst of risk!

Questioning has its place, it brings clarity. But when there is something specific on our hearts, then it's going to be important to explore and talk to people about it.

The first part to stepping out, then, is there's always a calling that prompts us.

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**But as well as calling, John Ortberg has noticed there is always fear. Even in Bible heroes there is always fear.**

The climber Sir Edmund Hillary once said of the mountains he was conquering 'You're as big as you'll ever get, but I'm still growing!' He was a man who clearly knew how to conquer his fears, and be prepared to step out to ever greater adventures.

Well Gideon might be a warrior, but he is not so steely nerved.

When the angel says a second time 'I am sending you!' he replies: '...Lord, ... how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest ... and I am the least in my family'.

He doesn't just have a fear about the size of the Midianite army, he doesn't think he's worthy of the task. He judges himself by his status in life, his lack of position within his clan.

Yet to this the Lord simply replies, 'I will be with you!'

Part of Gideon's calling is to learn to trust in the Lord - despite his fears, despite his doubts, despite his sense of unworthiness.

Even for us, God will surely lay on our hearts only what He knows we can manage.

After all, in Psalm 139 we hear, 'You have searched me, Lord, and you know me'... 'you created my inmost being; knit me together in my mother's womb'. He knows us intimately.

We should have no such insecurity that we are not good enough if God is calling us to something.

And it may well be that God wants to stretch us if that is the way to increase our trust in Him.

John Ortberg says, 'A God sized calling is... where we will have to rely on his strength, use *more than* our talents and gifts. There will... always be an element of

risk, and... fear in stepping out. Then we will learn how he longs to closely guide us and show us Himself’.

Fear can come to us in many ways. We may have to speak with people we don’t normally associate with. Visit the sick. Get behind the youth. Set up a project. Rather than ignoring and rejecting what’s on our heart, maybe we should challenge instead what is making us say ‘No!’

Vincent Van Gogh, the artist said, “If you hear a voice within you says you cannot paint, then by all means paint and that voice will be silenced.” A good job he followed his own advice!

Gideon heard God’s voice, ‘I will be with you!’ Let’s believe that, as we step out in faith and start to overcome our fears.

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**As well as calling, and fear, John Ortberg says there is also always God’s assurance.**

Gideon asks for a sign, for confirmation, from God.

He wants to know that he’s not making all of this up. So he gathers some food for an offering and the angel touches the food with his staff, and it burns up. And then the Lord says ‘Peace! Do not be afraid!’ Gideon knows he has been given assurance from God.

There’s no doubt we will always want that assurance. That postcard from God.

The way we get that assurance may not be that surprising. We continue to pray. We talk to those we know and trust, or to those who are our friends of wisdom.

And then despite our fears we find that peace. We know in our spirit we are moved to act. We get to a point where there’s nothing else to do but get on with what we have in our heart and are passionate about.

When the Lord gives Gideon peace, there is only one thing *he* can now do. Read chapters 7 and 8 to find out what happens!

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## Conclusion

To draw our thoughts together this morning, the story of Gideon seems to confirm what the author of our Lent book believes is part of a pattern to stepping out. And the pattern shows us

- There is always a call
- There is always fear
- There is always assurance from God

From our Christian life we've experienced so far, is there anything specific that catches *our* attention, resonates in us?

We don't necessarily *always* sense something - there are times of waiting as well as doing. Nor should we fear not sensing something – for whatever the circumstance, we know the that love of God is still with us. As God says to Jesus at his baptism today – 'You are my beloved Son,

with you I am well pleased'. Sometimes that is all we need to hear.

But we do well to stay aware of the possibility of a calling to something new. It may be as simple as a new attitude, or putting our toe in the water of a new area of ministry.

If we think we are being invited to step out, then let us take heart that in taking the risk we may be achieving more than we ever imagined we could.

**Amen.**