

BELPRES CHURCH

Sermon Title: Following God's Leading

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Scripture:

Judges 6:12-14, 21, 25-26, 36-39

¹² When the angel of the LORD appeared to Gideon, he said, "The LORD is with you, mighty warrior." ¹³ "Pardon me, my lord," Gideon replied, "but if the LORD is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all his wonders that our ancestors told us about when they said, 'Did not the LORD bring us up out of Egypt?' But now the LORD has abandoned us and given us into the hand of Midian." ¹⁴ 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?"

²¹ Then the angel of the LORD touched the meat and the unleavened bread with the tip of the staff that was in his hand. Fire flared from the rock, consuming the meat and the bread. And the angel of the LORD disappeared.

²⁵ That same night the LORD said to him, "Take the second bull from your father's herd, the one seven years old. Tear down your father's altar to Baal and cut down the Asherah pole beside it. ²⁶ Then build a proper kind of altar to the LORD your God on the top of this height. Using the wood of the Asherah pole that you cut down, offer the second bull as a burnt offering."

³⁶ Gideon said to God, "If you will save Israel by my hand as you have promised— ³⁷ look, I will place a wool fleece on the threshing floor. If there is dew only on the fleece and all the ground is dry, then I will know that you will save Israel by my hand, as you said." ³⁸ And that is what happened. Gideon rose early the next day; he squeezed the fleece and wrung out the dew—a bowlful of water. ³⁹ Then Gideon said to God, "Do not be angry with me. Let me make just one more request. Allow me one more test with the fleece, but this time make the fleece dry and let the ground be covered with dew."

Transcript:

Those of you who are joining us online, thank you for joining us today. Those of you who are in the room, thank you for being here in person to worship with us.

My wife and I went to Europe a few weeks ago on an empty nest trip that somehow included our oldest daughter, but that's a different sermon illustration, and we were in the UK and Paris, and in the UK there was a train strike so we had to rent a car to get from town to town. And as you know, they drive on the other side of the road there, and the steering wheel is on the right side of the car instead of the left side of the car, and they have all those roundabouts and tiny little narrow roads. Right? And it was a stick shift. We know how to drive stick, but still, it was challenging.

And I started out doing the driving, but my wife kept saying, "Oh, oh, oh, look out. You're cutting it really close on this side. And, oh, oh, there's a stop sign. Stop, stop, stop, stop, stop." So after about three blocks, I said, "You know what? I think you're going to be more comfortable if you are driving so you can feel in control, and I'll feel better without all this drama happening over here."

So she started to drive, and you know what happened? I started to think, "Oh, oh, oh, she's cutting it really close on this side, and oh, there's a stop sign, I hope she ..." But did I say anything? Mm-mm, no. Mm-mm. I kept my mouth shut. Meanwhile, in the backseat, our daughter was in the backseat and there was so much starting and stopping that within a few minutes she said, "I think I'm going to throw up." So we had to pull over and let her calm down.

All that to say is sometimes it is hard to let someone else do the driving, isn't it? And you sort of want to take over control. We're doing a sermon series on following God's leading, both individually and corporately together as a church, but that raises the question, where is God leading us to and how do we know where He's taking us? And in times of decision, do you ever just wish God would tell you what to do, like whether it's a financial decision or a relationship, or what college should I go to, or what job should I take, or what city should I live in? Do you ever just wish God would tell you what to do?

Always.

Always. But do you really? Do you really want Him to tell you what to do, or would you rather be the driver and you decide where you're going? Because sometimes following God can be kind of scary, and at times, makes us nauseous.

However, if we follow Him and do what He tells us to do, He will lead us to a bigger life than we would've chosen for ourselves and we become who He created us to be. And last week we looked at the story of Gideon in the Bible and God says to Gideon, "Go fight the Midianites," who were oppressing the Israelites, raiding them, taking all of their crops. Gideon did not think

that he could do that, but through God's power, not his, he defeated the Midianites. And the point of last week's sermon is, if we are following God's leading, He will lead us to do things that we don't think we can do, but through His power, not ours, we can do them. But again, that raises the question, how do we know what God is telling us to do?

Now, there's some basic ways we figure out God's will. The Bible. We can't really say, "God, I just don't know what you're telling me to do," because there's lots of things God tells us to do in the Bible. We just don't do them.

The other way is prayer, especially those thoughts we get that come from God or the nudges that direct us. Community is another way, the input of other people. Those are the main ways we figure out what God is telling us to do, but there are also some other ways, in addition to that, that we can figure out where God is leading us to. Whether it's a decision we have to make about something, school or a career or something like that, or just trying to discern, God, how do you want to use me in the world? How do you want to use my gifts and talents and skills to make a difference in the world? Not just in big ways, but even in just daily ways.

This week, a guy whose wife has a brain tumor told me that every day he asked God to tell him how he can serve his wife in ways that honor her, and God led him to wash her hair every couple of days. That's one of the things God led him to do. So even in little daily ways, God can direct our steps.

So, let's look at the story of Gideon again this week to figure out, how did Gideon know what God was asking him to do? How did he figure out God's will? And the first way we discerned where God is leading us is to muck about, just kind of muck about. One of the guys on the search committee that hired me said he feels like a job of a hiring committee is just to muck about until God makes it clear who he's going to pick. And you know, you look busy, you stay busy, you get names, you call people, you do stuff. But basically, you're just kind of mucking about until God makes His will clear.

And that's what happens in the story of Gideon. The story of Gideon starts in Judges chapter six, but Gideon does not fight the battle that God called him to fight until halfway through Judges chapter seven. He spends a chapter and a half doing all kinds of other stuff. But as we're going to see, all that mucking about was not wasted time, because in that, God was growing his character, growing his courage, preparing him to fight the battle.

We are so impatient to know what God wants us to do. Come on, God, tell me what you want me to do and tell me now. But sometimes you just have to muck about until God reveals what He is going to do. But none of that is wasted time. All of it is growing our character and who we are.

Second way to figure out where God is leading us is our circumstances. Now for Gideon, the circumstances are the Midianites are oppressing the Israelites. And Gideon says, "If the Lord is with us, why has all this happened to us?" So he's complaining. God, why is this happening to me? Why is my job so hard? Why is school so hard? Why didn't this relationship work out? Why aren't I married yet? Or we look around the world and we say, God, why are you letting there be poverty? Why are you allowing there to be racism and violence? Why are you letting this happen, God?

And then the very next verse, God says to Gideon, "Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian's hand." So basically Gideon says, "Why are you allowing so much wrong in the world?" And God says back to Gideon, "You know, Gideon, I was going to ask you the same question. Why are you allowing it? Why don't you do something about it? You be the answer to your prayer." You see, sometimes your complaint is your calling and your misery is your mission. Gideon's misery was the Midianites. It was also his mission.

A woman who volunteered in youth ministry in our church until she moved away told me that when she was growing up and she was a teenager, she had a really rough time with her parents and a bunch of other stuff in her life was hard, and so she started doing youth ministry because she wanted to be there for students in a way that she had wished someone was there for her when she was a teenager. Her misery was her mission.

What makes you mad and sad in your school or workplace or where you live or in the world? Your complaint is your calling. Your misery is your mission. So ask Jesus to show you how you can begin to change those things in His name.

Third way we discern where God is calling us, what He's asking us to do, is to clear away the idols that we're listening to. So before Gideon goes to fight the Midianites, God says to him, "Tear down your father's altar to Baal. Then build a proper kind of altar to the Lord your God." So this is part of Gideon's mucking about, this is before the battle. And God says, "Before you go fight the battle, tear down this altar to Baal that your father has." Baal was a false pagan God, basically an idol.

God's call in our life will always involve us tearing down some kind of idol, those things that grab our hearts, that grab our attention more than Jesus does. So when we ask, God, show me, what decision should I make? What college should I go to? What job should I take? Who should I date? Who should I marry? God says, "How about you overcome that sinful habit in your life that nobody knows about? Or how about you be less attached to your image or grades or job or money? Those things are good, but they have too big of a hold on you." Yeah, yeah, God, whatever. Just tell me what to do.

But more important than the decision that we have to make is our character, how close we are to Jesus. God is more concerned with who you are becoming than what you are doing. And what the decision is going to be isn't as important to God as who you're going to become. And the more we tear down the idols in our lives, the things that grab our hearts more than Jesus, the better we can discern where God is leading us, because those things that grab our hearts, money, reputation, success, career, whatever it is, those things speak so loudly in our lives, we cannot hear what God is saying. So it's only as we begin to loosen the grip of those things and turn the volume down on those things that we begin to hear what God is telling us.

Muck about, discern from circumstances, tear down the idols. Next, ask the question, am I discerning or am I delaying? Because sometimes we say we don't know what God wants us to do as a total cop out for not doing the thing we know darn good and well He told us to do. And we see this with Gideon. He keeps asking God for a sign, for confirmation of God's will over and over and over again. So, the first thing that happens is an angel shows up and tells him to go fight the Midianites. Okay, that should have done it, right? Like a flipping angel shows up and says, "Go fight the ..." Game over, right? Okay, I know, this is God. I'm clear what God is asking me to do, but no, Gideon wants some confirmation.

So he makes an offering of food, and the angel touches the food with his staff, and then it says, "Fire flared from the rock, consuming the meal and the bread." So not only does an angel show up, but angel dude makes my food burst into flames. We're done, right? Now it's clear. It's got to be God. I know exactly what God is asking me to do. I don't need anymore signs, I'll just obey.

No, mm-mm. Gideon goes on and he says, "If you will save Israel by my hand, as you have promised ..." He clearly knows what God has said, right? He's not deciding. He's delaying. Maybe even denying what he's heard. "Look, I'll place a wolf fleece on the threshing floor. If there is dew only on the fleece and all the ground is dry, then I will know that you will save Israel, as you said," he knows what God said. Gideon rose early the next day, he squeezed the fleece, and rung out the dew.

Okay, let's review. Okay? An angel shows up. Second, food burst into flame. Third, the fleece is wet, but the ground is dry. We're done now. Right? Finally, enough signs, enough confirmation. Gideon's going to obey. No, no, no, no. Then Gideon said to God, "Do not be angry with me." See, he knows he's pushing it. "Let me make just one more request. This time, make the fleece dry and let the ground be covered with dew." Oy vey. Like, come on, dude, get on with it. And then so God does that too. He is not discerning. He's delaying, even denying, what he's hearing, and we do this a lot. "God, tell me what to do." Go forgive your mother-in-law. "God, tell me what to do." Forgive your mother-in-law. "I can't hear you God. Why aren't you speaking? I can't hear what you're saying."

See, it is really hard to hear God's voice when you have already decided in advance what He's going to say or what He's not going to say. God wouldn't ask me to do something uncomfortable because He wants me to be comfortable and He wants me to be happy, so this thing I think I heard Him tell me to do, that can't be it, can't be God. No, no, no. Because God wouldn't want me to be uncomfortable, so that can't be what He wants me to do.

Now, it is okay to ask for signs of God's confirmation as a way of discerning His will, but how many signs do you need? Back when I was in California, when the search committee that hired me first called me, I was praying about it one day ... A few of you have heard me tell this story, but not everyone. I was praying about it after they contacted me and I got a thought so strong, I heard it. You know how you can hear the happy birthday song in your head if you think about it? It was like that. And the thought said, "This is going to happen."

And I went into the kitchen and I told my wife, I said, "I think God just told me we're moving to Bellevue." And my wife said, "You're freaking me out." But in spite of an audible voice, this has only happened once in my life, in spite of an audible voice, I called the chair of the search committee and I said, "Did anyone tell you I have absolutely no leadership experience at all?" Kind of a long pause and he said, "Uh, no." And I said, "Is that a problem?" Long pause. "Not theoretically," is what he said, "However, we did say whoever gets this job will have 10 years leadership experience." I said, "I'm going to save you a lot of trouble. I'm not even going to apply." However, there was that audible voice thing, right?

So my wife and I laid out a fleece, metaphorically speaking, and said, "Okay, God, if that was you, if that audible voice really was you, make them call us back." Now, there was no reason they should have called me back. I wasn't qualified for the job.

Well, a few months later, they were down in California talking to the senior pastor of the church that I worked at about another person, not me. And the senior pastor said, "You don't want this other person. You want Scott Dudley." Now, he didn't know they'd called me. I hadn't told him. And they said, "Oh, well, we actually called Scott. He didn't even apply." And the senior pastor said, "Call him in two weeks and he will give you a different answer." And the reason was he had decided to retire and he knew I felt kind of committed to stay there until he did, so two weeks later they called back.

So that should have been enough, right? Audible voice, unlikely callback. That should have been enough. Uh-uh-uh-uh-uh. Even still for the next couple of months, as we went through the interviews, I was like, "I don't know. I don't think God is calling me to do this. I don't think this is God's will for my life. I mean, yeah, sure, audible voice, whatever, audible voice. I'm just not sure." But I wasn't actually deciding. I was delaying, because I was afraid, and pretending to decide to kind of not have to do it. And the other thing I was doing was grieving, and pretending to decide was my way of working through the grief of leaving people I loved in California.

So in times of decision, ask yourself, am I deciding or am I delaying or denying or grieving? And if it's one of those things, ask God to help you trust, keyword, trust Him and do what He says. Muck about, look to your circumstances, tear down your idols. Are you deciding, delaying, denying, grieving?

And then one last thing, and this is so important. This is so important. Remember, even when we are faithless, God is faithful. I think one of the reasons we feel like we don't know what God is calling us to do and we have a hard time deciding is we are so afraid of making the "wrong" decision and then our life will be miserable or that we'll fail. But who is that focused on? That's focused on me and what I can do. The story of Gideon is not about how amazing Gideon is. The story is God is so powerful, He can get His will done with even the tiniest bit of faith on our part.

Gideon is not a good leader. He's paralyzed with fear. He's indecisive, he worships idols. And yet God uses the tiny bit of faith he has to free the Israelites from oppression.

We get paralyzed making decisions because we are so afraid we're going to mess it up. It is okay to fail. Failure is not a big deal in the Bible. Failure to act because of fear of failure is, and life is just not that fragile.

When we face a decision, it's not as if God is going, "I'm thinking of a number between one and infinity. And if you guess the right number, your life will be amazing. But if you guess the wrong number, you will be unhappy all of your sad, pathetic, miserable days. Feel free to succeed." That is not God. Life is not that fragile. Even if you do "make the wrong decision", God is so powerful, He can steer you to where He needs you to be. It's not about us getting it perfectly right. It's about how powerful God is. And if we are in the ballpark of being remotely faithful to God, offering up even our halfhearted, half-baked prayers, asking for His guidance and His leadership, He will steer us to where we need to be over time.

As I've shared with you before, I spent 15 years of my life not knowing what career I was supposed to do. So, I graduated from college and got a master's degree in English, thinking I want to be a professor. Changed my mind, went to seminary because I was thinking, "No, I want to be a pastor." Changed my mind again and then got a PhD in literature thinking I want to be a professor, and I ended up a pastor. 15 years of zigzagging.

And when I came here, I was the youngest senior pastor of a large Presbyterian church in the country. Okay, if at 18 I had said, "My life goal is to be a young senior pastor of a large Presbyterian church." First of all, that would've been pathetic if I had said that at 18, what a pathetic goal that would be, but second, I couldn't have screwed it up worse.

Let's see, spend most of high school stoned. That's a good idea. And then have to spend several years undoing the damage that that did. And then I'll spend 15 years zigzagging between different careers so that if a church is looking for a senior pastor, I will have absolutely no relevant experience for the job. And oh, oh, oh, make sure to get divorced along the way because churches love that.

I could not have screwed it up worse, but I got where God wanted me to be because once I became a Christian in college, I had a guide, and His name was Jesus, and He was steering me. And none of that was a waste of time. At every twist and turn, God grew my character, helped me, forced me to face some of my deeper issues, grew my faith in Him. I kept moving the best I knew how, not perfectly, but God steered because He can steer anything except a stationary object.

So if you are frozen and paralyzed with a decision right now, just do something. Do anything. If it's biblical, moral, legal, ethical, just do it. Get moving because God can steer you where He needs you to be.

And now, because of all of those twist and turns, through all of that God taught me better how to hear His voice, so now when I face times of decision, I'm better at figuring out what God wants me to do. And a lot of times, most times, I actually don't think there's one particular thing God wants us to do. I think most of the time God says, "You pick. You choose. I am so powerful, I can work with whatever you choose to get my will done." And then other times I think there is a specific thing He wants us to do. And usually when that's the case, He's pretty clear, as He was with me. And often, when He's clear, it's because the thing he's asking you to do is going to be really hard and He knows you're going to need the clarity.

And when we do what He says to do, He leads us to a bigger life than we would've chosen for ourselves, and second, when you do what He tells you to do, you become who He created you to be. When this story starts, Gideon is a fearful farmer, as we said last week, hiding in fear of the Midianites, and the angel shows up and says, "The Lord is with you mighty warrior." He is not a mighty warrior in that moment, but God is calling him who he really is, the name he really has, before life and the discouragements and the setbacks of life turned him into that fearful farmer.

Life hands us setbacks and discouragements and that can make us bitter, fearful, cynical. But when we do what God tells us to do, we become who we really are, who God created us to be. It's by doing the thing God told him to do, fight the Midianites, that Gideon is restored to his original design, who God created him to be, that mighty warrior that he really was.

So, action step for this week. For the next couple weeks, we're going to focus on what we're going to call a swing goal. Swing goal is like if you're teaching someone how to golf, which you shouldn't do by the way, because that's torturing people and that's wrong. But let's say

you're doing that. If you're teaching them to golf and you say, "Widen your stance and tighten your grip on the club and don't bring the club back too far," that's too many things for them to think about. So instead, you say, "Just focus on one thing for every swing. One thing. Widen your stance," and you do that for a couple of weeks.

So, you may want to take your phones out so you can take a picture of the screen. Our swing goal for the next couple of weeks is pray and listen. Ask a few questions, like, "Lord, what is it you want me to do? What are you doing in this situation? Show me so I can participate. What does your love require of me?" And then listen to those thoughts that maybe come from God, and don't evaluate in the moment whether or not they're from God, because that can kill it, right? Like, "Was that you, God? I don't know. Was that you, or was it the burrito I ate? I just, I don't know." That can just really kill it. So, write down what you hear and then come back later and evaluate whether or not it was God. Swing goal. Okay?

Now, we tell you to pray a lot, but this week we're asking you to actually do it, like actually do what we're asking you to do, and just practice this. And then when you do hear God tell you what to do, step into it and your life will get bigger and you will become who He created you to be. And that's been my experience. When I finally did what God told me to do and started doing college ministry, I hated it. It was so hard. I hated it. And the students were always complaining, and they were always fighting with each other, and they were always criticizing me all the time. And I reached the point after a couple of months where I told my wife, "I'm just going to quit. I hate this." And my wife said, "You will do no such thing." And she said, "This is good for you. Doing this ministry is forcing you to work through conflict, which you're afraid to do. It's giving you a backbone. It's turning you into the man that I need to be married to, so you will not quit." Okay. I won't.

But she was right. She was right. When I did what He told me to do, I became more of who He created me to be, and I got a bigger life than I ever would've chosen for myself. The relationships I've formed, the experiences I've had, the miracles I've seen, because I haltingly, imperfectly, stepped into what God asked me to do, making all kinds of mistakes along the way, and my life got bigger, richer, deeper, better.

So, if you have a decision to make, or you're wondering, how does God want to use me in His world? Or maybe you're already doing that thing, you don't need to do more, just keep praying and listening for God to guide your steps every single day to do the things He calls you to do, and watch Him turn you into the person that He created you to be, the person that deep down you want to be, the person that you can and will be through Jesus' power working through you. So Jesus, thank you that you lead. Thank you that you don't leave us alone to try to figure out where you're taking us. And so God, help us get better at hearing your voice. Tear down the idols in our hearts that are speaking so loudly that we can't hear you. And Lord, we ask that you lead us, you guide us, show us what you want us to do. Help us to get better and better and

better at hearing your voice. Lord, we are listening. Speak, and we will follow. In your name, Jesus, amen

Discussion Questions:

Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.

Icebreaker Question: If you had to dress up in a costume next week, what would you pick?

Opening Question: Looking back, were you able to apply any of the things we talked about last time to your life this week? What did you do? How did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions: Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

Sermon Reflection Questions: Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- "It's hard to let someone else do the driving sometimes." What are the areas of your life where you are holding tight to the steering wheel instead of trusting God to take the lead?
- Scott gave several examples of ways we can discern God's leading: (Bible, Prayer, Community, Muck about, Circumstances, Tear down idols, Are you deciding or delaying, denying, grieving? and Even when we are faithless, God is faithful). Which one(s) are you trying / wanting to try this week? How is it going?

Closing Question and Application: Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

Closing group prayer: Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.