

Judges 11:1-3, 29-40
“Joining the Virgin Cry”

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Four Corners Community Chapel

It’s a shame the way the world works sometimes, but God is fixing it and you can help. It’s a shame the way the world works sometimes. That’s all I have to say about Jephthah and his non-name daughter, and their tragic tale from the book of Judges. It’s a shame the way the world works sometimes.

He was born the son of a prostitute. We know nothing about why his mother hung out on street corners or why his father, a man named Gilead, decided to pick her up there one day. Maybe she had been married once before and maybe her husband died. Or maybe her husband simply decided to leave her. It’s a sad truth but those things happened in the world back then, too. It’s an equally sad truth, but women were less cherished companions and more disposable property. A woman who had been widowed or left by her husband could not work, and if she had no children, no one was going to work for her. Before long it would be as if she had never existed at all. All she could do then was all she could do. Find an empty street corner on which to sell herself out to make ends meet, and hope to God that the first man to come along will take you home to stay.

Speaking of that man, what was Gilead doing hanging out on that street corner with a prostitute? Even if it was socially acceptable in the world back then for men, any men, to do such things, does he have no pride? No honor? He is, we are told, already married with children. But maybe he wanted more. Call it greedy, but in the world back then a man without children was a man without a future, a man without someone to carry on his name after he is gone. A man was best off then having as many children as he could get. So,

Gilead wanders to an empty street corner and finds a woman who shares his hope of survival.

They bear a son, Jephthah. Gilead takes him home, but the woman is left on the street corner. She has served her purpose and will not be taken home. Her hopes of survival are gone.

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Back home it's only a matter of time before the man dies and young Jephthah himself is turned back to the streets again. He never really belonged to the family anyway. His half-brothers and sisters would always pull rank on him, saying he was illegitimate. His skin color was just different enough to make everyone know he came from someone else. He wanders off into the night and settles in the land of Tob.

Tob is that place we have never gone to, and would never go to, ourselves. It's the place we tell our children never to go. Tob is where we might expect to find thieves, muggers, and addicts. It's where school drop-outs end up, where irresponsible parents raise their babies in broken-windowed high rises, where prostitutes roam empty street corners. Stay away from there and stay away from anyone who might end up there. Now don't get me wrong, I know the world can be an unsafe place, and I'm not suggesting we send our children searching for friends in dark alleyways. But people everywhere have stories—Jephthah types stories about being born of prostitutes and abandoned by family—and we would do well to hear their stories. Because it's a shame the way the world works sometimes, but God is fixing it and you can help.

I don't know if you believe this, that God is fixing the world and you can help. Read on in Jephthah's story and it becomes harder and harder to see how anyone is fixing anything at all. Jephthah's story comes to us as part of the book of Judges, a book that chronicles the history of the Israelite people following their exodus from slavery in Egypt, and their wanderings through the wilderness for 40 years—through long days and even longer nights of wondering where their next meal was going to come from, through battles won and lost—until finally God delivers them into the Promised Land. This is how the stories of Exodus, Deuteronomy, and Joshua all tell it: God does the delivering. On their own, the Israelites would have turned back at mile marker 1. But God sees them through. And this despite Israel's feckless devotion to God. By the time we reach the book of Judges, one might think Israel would have figured out how to trust God a bit more, but instead we are told, everything has gone from bad to worse. The writer is clear to say that "everyone was doing what was right in their own eyes," and God was nowhere to be found. It makes sense then that in Judges chapter 10, when the Ammonites wage war against Israel, a group of Israelite elders skip across town to find the best street fighter they know. Jephthah.

"Come with us and fight against the Ammonites," the elders say, "and you will become head over us."

In reality the whole thing should have worked out better than it did. The Israelites needed a military leader and Jephthah, a warrior by trade, was poised for the job. Sure, these were the same people who had turned him out years ago, who said they didn't want him. But they wanted him now! And it would be a grand homecoming for Jephthah, and what is more, Judges tells us, the Spirit of the Lord was upon him.

The Spirit, who has been visibly absent everywhere else in Judges, is upon Jephthah. This is the same spirit that was there at the beginning of creation, hovering over the waters, lurking in the darkness, just waiting to see what God would do next, when God declared, “Let there be light.” This is the same spirit that rested upon Jesus as he stood in the temple at the beginning of his ministry to declare, “I have been chosen to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free.” And everyone in the temple that day sat in amazement, waiting to see what he would do next.

In the case of Jephthah, while we as readers are told that the spirit of the Lord is upon him, we are left to wonder whether Jephthah himself knows it. And you know, sometimes you just want to know that God is with you on your side. Of course, if you’re Jephthah, if you’re about to go into battle, what you really want—even more than to know that God is on your side—what you really want is for your enemy to know that God is on your side. And so, either being so sure that God is on his side and he can’t lose, or not being sure at all if God is on his side and wanting to win God over, Jephthah makes a vow to God that, *“If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, then whoever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return victorious from battle, shall be the Lord’s, to be offered up by me as a burnt offering.”* What Jephthah doesn’t bank on, of course, is that when he returns home, the first person to come out to meet him will be his only child—a daughter. We don’t know how old she is, but she must have been the apple of her father’s eye, because we’re told she is a virgin. Which is another way of telling us, she isn’t a prostitute like her grandmother before her. In other words, when it came to raising his daughter, Jephthah made sure history didn’t repeat itself. He made sure that she didn’t have to work a street

corner to sell herself out to make ends meet. He kept her safe and protected, and worked hard to make sure she got to keep her childhood. He did this every day right up until the day when he couldn't anymore.

I thought a lot about Jephthah this past week and about and what can only be called his thoughtless, careless vow. And I thought about all the parents in places like Sutherland Springs, Texas and Las Vegas and Newtown, Connecticut who must have vowed never to let anything bad happen to their children, but who nevertheless could not protect them from being killed at concerts or school or even in church. And I thought about God and wondered why God didn't intervene for Jephthah like he did for Abraham, telling him, "Stop! Don't kill the child. Now I know that you fear me. Here, use this ram for your offering instead." But God didn't do that for Jephthah's daughter. Because it would seem God is not going to do for us what God knows we can and ought to do for ourselves, and if for ourselves then also for one another.

I have given you a mouth and the ability to talk, God said to Moses. So speak.

I have placed visions within your heart, God said to Joel. So build something.

I have set my word as a flame within you, God said to Jeremiah. So preach.

I have set my spirit upon you, God said to Jesus. So heal.

It's a shame the way the world works sometimes, but God is fixing it and you can help. I don't know if you believe that or not.

There's a story about how during the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln was asked if he believed God was on the side of the Union. Lincoln responded, "My concern is not with whether God is on our side. My greatest concern is to be on God's side, for God is always right." I think what old Abe must have meant was this, that there are times when it is

necessary for us to find a way to get ourselves over to the other side. For God is always about moving to the other side, to those places where the hungry are simply people who haven't been given bread yet, where strangers are simply people who haven't been made friends with yet, where life gets cut short and love has not gone yet.

The book of Judges records that somewhere on a mountain in Israel a group of girls still go out every year to remember the no-name, virgin daughter of Jephthah. They gather as high above the world as they can to tell her story, to make her cry heard—a cry that urges us to consider our own vows and commitments carefully, to strive for peace and justice always, and to remember that while it's a shame the way the world works sometimes, God is fixing it, and you can help. Amen.