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October 12, 2014
Judges in the Tribal Confederacy: “What are your gods?”
Judges 2:10-19

Purpose: To challenge the congregation see the ways they are tempted and ways they give into that temptation for syncretism in their lives today and to encourage them to seek faithfulness to God alone.

Today we continue in working our way through Heilsgeschichte, God’s salvation history.

The journey continues as we are told in the beginning of the book of Judges that Joshua, the leader who succeeded Moses, has died. The Israelites have spent forty years wandering in the wilderness and in the book of Judges we read of how they are making the transition to be a settled people. With this major transition they must come to terms with how they will interact with the Canaanite people around them. We will see that their relationships with those around them will bring us to the second crisis in our timeline.

The book of Judges is a compilation of stories of various judges. These “Judges were charismatic leaders who emerged because the “spirit of the Lord empowered” them with exceptional authority and power... There was no dynastic succession of judges... Yahweh was king and therefore chose leaders.”ⁱ While the stories are independent of each other, it is interesting and significant to note that all of the stories “of the Judges are structured and stitched together by the Deuteronomistic cycle or formula”ⁱⁱ as revealed in our scripture passage this morning from Judges chapter two. This means then that this four step cycle repeats itself again and again throughout the book of Judges so that we, the readers, can come to expect what will happen next due to the predictability of the cycle or formula. Unfortunately, it does not appear that the people of God at the time were able to detect, prevent, or speak into changing the vivacious cycle that continued to repeat itself again and again and again. So let’s look at this cycle as outlined in Judges chapter two, verses ten through nineteen.

Verse ten lets us know that after the death of Joshua another generation is born and grew up and they neither knew the Lord nor what the Lord had done for Israel. Somewhere along the way we can conclude that the people of God stopped telling the stories of Heilsgeschichte, of God's saving works in their lives. This is the same group of people who have emerged out of the land of slavery, experienced the power of the Exodus, wandered in the wilderness and was fed manna and quail, and have entered this new land that was promised to them. And yet, the text tells us that the new generation did not know the stories, and therefore also did not know the Lord. This verse alone should compel us to action to keep telling the stories to the next generation! Today Lena Claassen was/will be dedicated, and as part of our commitment to her and her parents we will commit to being active in her faith formational experience. One concrete way is to be sure that we are active in telling Lena the stories of faith, and of God's saving power and acts in our lives and in the lives of God's people since the beginning of time.


So, this new generation did not know God, nor the stories of God. (SLIDE)

Deuteronomistic Cycle

Judges 2:11-19

1. Israelites did evil, abandoning the Lord who brought them out of Egypt and worshiped the gods of the surrounding people.

In verse eleven we are told that they “did evil in the eyes of the Lord and served the Baals” which would have been the gods of the Canaanites. This is the first step in the Deuteronomistic Cycle. The Israelites did evil, abandoning the Lord who brought them out of Egypt and worshiped the gods of the surrounding people. (SLIDE)



2. The Lord, in his anger,
allowed their enemies to defeat
and dominate them.

So we are told that the Lord, in his anger, allowed their enemies to defeat and dominate them. (SLIDE)

3. The people cried out to the Lord and the Lord, moved by their groaning, raised up a judge who delivered them from their enemies.

The third step in the cycle is that the people cried out to the Lord and the Lord, moved by their groaning, raised up a judge who delivered them from their enemies. This is the point in the cycle where we might feel like, “okay, they are finally figuring things out and getting back on the wrong track. Right? Wrong.” (SLIDE)

4. After the judge died the people reverted to idolatry, to abandoning the Lord.

And the cycle repeats itself, again, and again, and again.

The fourth and final step in the cycle is that after the judge died the people reverted to idolatry, to abandoning the Lord. In fact we are told in verse nineteen that “when the judge died, the people returned to ways even more corrupt than those of their ancestors, following other gods and serving and worshipping them. They refused to give up their evil practices and stubborn ways.”

Throughout the book of Judges then we read this cycle repeating itself again and again. What is amazing to note is that the people are unable to recognize the vicious, unhealthy cycle they find themselves in. They alone are to blame for the crisis in which they find themselves. But even more remarkable to note is that time and time the steadfast love of Yahweh is revealed as each time Yahweh responds to their groaning, to their distress, and continues to work to create a chosen missional covenant shalom people.ⁱⁱⁱ As I read through Judges I found myself almost holding my breath just waiting for God to declare, “Enough is enough and I am done with these

people who just do not get it!” And yet, instead we read of God reaching back out in God’s tender mercy and steadfast love.

Perhaps you are asking yourself, “What really was the issue at hand in this repetitive cycle?” Well to answer that we need to move to looking more closely at the second crisis in our timeline, and that is the crisis of syncretism. Now I am assuming that for most of us the word syncretism is not part of our normal, daily vocabulary. (SLIDE)



Syncretism: The combining of two different religions. It is not the abandonment of one god for another but attempting to intermingle the two.

Marion Bontrager defines syncretism as “The combining of two different religions. It is not the abandonment of one god for another but attempting to intermingle the two.”^{iv}

Prior to their entry into the land of Canaan “The people (of God) lived in an amazing, unheard of political arrangement with an unseen god as their king. Their daily existence and survival was a miracle, a witness to and revelation of Yahweh to the surrounding peoples. The decentralized tribal confederacy was held together only by their faith covenant with an invisible king. This arrangement amidst enemies required daily trust like the trust for survival in the

wilderness.”^v However, as they entered the land of Canaan the people of God undergo some major transitions. Just listen to these significant transitions they faced as outlined by Marion Bontrager.

- They changed from wandering nomadic people to a settled people.
- They changed from a primarily shepherding livelihood to a more agricultural one.
- They moved from the relative isolation of their forty-year wilderness honeymoon to interaction with technologically superior Canaanite people who worshiped Baal fertility gods.
- They moved from a Moses-Joshua servant type of leadership model to exposure to Canaanite authoritarian divine right-of-kings models of leadership.
- They moved from a more egalitarian shalom justice, social/political model to exposure to hierarchical exploitive and dominating political and economic models.
- And they moved from a linear sense of time and purpose to a cyclical, self-interest, economic sense of history marked by wealth accumulation.^{vi}

And so perhaps today’s sermon is really looking at how well did they weather the transitions? And did they emerge on the other side of the transitions as a group of God’s people who were more solid in their faith and understanding of their God Yahweh and who Yahweh had created them to be? Well as we have already alluded to, they emerged as ones floundering in their identity and practice as God’s chosen missional shalom community. They emerge as ones who had mastered giving into the temptation of syncretism.

I do not think that the Israelites set out to abandon God. In a similar way I do not think that we today in 2014 wake up and say to ourselves, “Today I am going to try to figure out all the ways I can abandon God and adopt the ways and beliefs of the world around me.” It is the proverbial story of how to boil a frog. If you throw a frog into boiling water it will immediately jump out because it can immediately tell the stark difference! However, if you put a frog in lukewarm water, and I don’t suggest that anyone actually tries this, and gradually, nice and slowly turn up the heat, the frog will never know what happened.

The Israelites enter the land of Canaan and encounter a new group of people in this strange land. These people have different gods, different values, a different worldview... and slowly the Israelites begin to accept and incorporate the faith and practices of those around them. However, we must remember that “Israel’s faith was based on the novel belief in a jealous God who tolerated no rivals. (It was clear that) Israel was to have no other gods before Yahweh.”^{vii}

Now what really hit me this week was spending time with a comparative chart that Marion Bontrager created. And what hit me as I was sitting with this chart is that by exchanging just a couple vocabulary words this chart could describe the temptation and realities that we face today as followers of God in the year 2014. So before we sit in judgment of the “poor Israelites who just couldn’t get it” we need to honestly reflect on the ways we too might be struggling with components of syncretism.

Elements	Baal	Yahweh
Purpose or central goal	Fertility, prosperity, security, self-sufficiency, materialism	Creating a chosen covenant shalom community
Worship	Manipulate and appease the gods	Remembering God’s grace/giving thanks

Marion Bontrager

The purpose or central goal of worship of Baal was fertility, prosperity, security, self-sufficiency, materialism. Ouch. If we are honest there are goals that also tempt us today. How

much money do you have in your savings account? Do you own the latest and newest pieces of technology? You work hard for your money and therefore do you have the understanding that what you do with it is up to you, and you alone? The goal or purpose of Baal worship buys into the current American dream that “You can have it all!” And today that American dream is also married to our understanding of self-worth.

However, on the other hand, worship of Yahweh has the purpose or central goal of creating a chosen covenant shalom community. The “I” is replaced with “we”. In contrast to Baal worship it becomes how do we form together in a community, instead of how do I keep advancing in the rat race of life? Worship of Yahweh moves us away from the current understanding of entitlement that is so prevalent in our cultural today.

In worship of Baal the Canaanites sought ways to manipulate Baal and Baal’s female counterpart Ashtart to act on their behalf by granting fertility to the land. And yet in worship of our God we are called to remember God’s grace and as we do so we will be moved to giving thanks. The focus for Baal worship was how do I acquire more stuff, more wealth, and more prestige. In worship of Yahweh the focus is on Yahweh and what Yahweh has done.

Elements	Baal	Yahweh
Ethics	Right, effective ritual that works	Right covenant living in shalom covenant priestly community
View of history	Cyclical, tied to nature and the changing of the seasons	Linear – comes from somewhere, is going somewhere with the purpose of all people becoming God's people.

Marion Bontrager

In worship of Baal the Canaanites would engage in set rituals used time and time again and believed to move Baal and Ashtart to action on their behalf. Some of these rituals even included sacred prostitution. On the other hand worship of Yahweh included ethics of right covenant living in shalom covenant priestly community. Again, it is focused first on God's invitation to join in a covenantal relationship, followed closely by how then do we live in right relationship with the other. The thrust of worship of Yahweh is never about how it benefits me, or how I can come out of this ahead of others. Instead the language is plural in how God works in and through us as God's covenant missional shalom community.

And finally in Baal worship they would have viewed history as cyclical, tied to nature and the changing of the seasons. Baal was the God of fertility, seen as the owner or lord of the land. Once again the view of history as one who worships Yahweh is linear as it is understood that it comes from somewhere, and is going somewhere with the purpose of all people becoming God's people.

As the Israelites settle into this new land, with new neighbors rubbing shoulders with them, they must ask themselves who and what will they give power and authority to speak into their lives? And today we must ask ourselves the same question. I entitled this sermon “What are your gods?” What are those things in our lives that we are giving power and authority to speak into our lives and dictate who we are, how we function, and how we think about our future and the world around us? What are those things that we have given more power in our lives than God? Is it sports, wealth, busyness, media, images, our children, the drive to succeed at all costs? It is the proverbial story of boiling a frog. Do I think that the Israelites entered the land of Canaan and fully expected that within a certain period of time they too would be engaged in full out worship of Baal? No, I don’t. However, did they become to adjust, to adapt, and to accommodate the world around them in such a way that they lost their first true love and loyalty to Yahweh alone? Yes. And do we today struggle with the very same temptation to syncretism? Struggle with the temptation to combine the theology, worship, values, and practice of the world with our belief and practice as followers of Jesus? Yes.

This morning as we are reminded of the story of the Israelites may their story challenge, convict, and encourage us to honestly look at our own lives to name the places we too have begun to worship the Baals of this world. The book of Judges grants us deep and abiding hope that God will continue to respond to us out of God’s steadfast love and mercy. And therefore today may we decide once again to open up our hearts, our lives, our minds, our very beings to the transformative power of Yahweh so that our thoughts and affections may be refined into the very image of God.

ⁱ Marion Bontrager, Heilsgeschichte Notebook, 121.

ⁱⁱ Bontrager, Heilsgeschichte Notebook, 118.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bontrager, Heilsgeschichte Notebook, 118.

^{iv} Bontrager, Heilsgeschichte Notebook, 118.

^v Bontrager, Heilsgeschichte Notebook, 123.

^{vi} Bontrager, Heilsgeschichte Notebook, 119.

^{vii} Bernhard W. Anderson, Understanding the Old Testament (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall), 172.