

Least Known, Most Interesting: Jephthah's Daughter

Judges 11:29-40

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We turn now to our second scripture reading, which comes from the Old Testament book of Judges. Jephthah was a son of Gideon who, after having been banished from his home by his half-brothers, made a name for himself as a bandit. When the Ammonites rose up against Israel, Jephthah was asked to come back and lead the people into battle because of his great fighting prowess. He would eventually become one of the principal judges of Israel. But before that could happen, Jephthah made a fateful decision, which constitutes our story today. We pick up the story in chapter 11 of the book of Judges, beginning with verse 29:

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Why did Jephthah make that vow?

Why didn't anyone try to stop him?

Didn't he know that it was likely to be a person, not an animal, who came out of his house first?

Didn't he know Levitical law, which clearly stated that God forbade human sacrifice?

Why did the first person out of his house have to be his daughter, his only child?

Why didn't he just refuse to honor the vow he had made?

The story of Jephthah and his daughter leaves us with more questions than it does answers. That is one of the main reasons I believe it is so rarely taught or preached. The other is, of course, its absolute depravity and utter incomprehensibility. That someone would vow to kill a person from his own household in order to be victorious in battle, and then honor that vow even when the person was his own daughter defies any sort of rational or human thought.

Most preachers avoid this story like the plague. For the past couple of weeks, I have wished I were more like most preachers.

But I chose this story for our series Least Known, Most Interesting, and not just because it fits the first category so well. I chose it because I think it is a story worth telling. I knew it would not be easy, but it is important for us to engage all of scripture, not just the passages we know by heart or the ones that make us feel comfortable. There are times when scripture caresses us and times when it grabs us and wrestles us to the ground. This is obviously the latter.

Old Testament Theologian Walter Brueggemann has said that, “reading the bible is troublesome,”¹ and though that is probably not a popular sentiment, I think it is a correct one. Or it should be. While the Bible is a witness to the great good news that is Jesus Christ, it is also a collection of stories about human beings and our interactions with one another and with God. And stories about human beings have a propensity for being troublesome. Just turn on the news. Or check your social media feed. Or listen to your colleagues around the water cooler or your relatives at a family gathering.

A part- not the whole, but certainly a part- of being human is dealing with disappointment, struggle, tragedy, and unanswerable questions, and that is troublesome.

As much as we might wish that it would, the Bible doesn’t shield us from the hard truths and uncomfortable realities of life. There are stories in scripture that we can all wish were not there, like the story of Jephthah and his daughter, but they are there, and so we need to face them, wrestle with them, talk about them, and learn from them.

Though Sunday school teachers and preachers tend to avoid this story, Biblical scholars do not. Both Jewish and Christian scholars have studied and sought to make sense of this relatively minor story in Judges. They have examined its historical context and its theological significance. Some have wrestled with how it speaks to the place of women, particularly women in situations of powerlessness and abuse. Some have used it as a jumping-off point for a discussion of the role of ritual sacrifice in Ancient Near Eastern cultures. Others have seen it as an indictment of Israel’s society at the time of the Judges – a time when “everyone did whatever seemed right in their own eyes” (Judges 21:25) and a rationale for the Hebrew peoples’ desire to be ruled by a king.

Regardless of the angle from which it is studied, the rigor of the research or the credentials of the scholar doing the study, everyone can agree that this story is, as one writer describes it, “enigmatic and disturbing. . . one of the most horrifying tales in the whole Bible.”² No amount of academic study will ever be able to make sense of a story in which a father willingly takes the life of his own child.

But that doesn’t stop us from trying. Nor should it. Throughout human history, theologians, philosophers and everyday people have wrestled with theodicy, the question of why a good God allows evil to happen. It’s an important conversation, and an inevitable one.

But it is one that needs boundaries.

In the mid- 20th century, French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, who had been orphaned in World War I and spent five years as a prisoner of war in World War II, used his own life experiences to seek to come to grips with the reality of evil in our world. According to Ricoeur, “evil is not a thing per se, but rather exists in a sort of black hole of thought.”³ Contrary to much thinking that asserted that evil was some sort of concrete entity that could be captured or managed,

¹ “God in Recovery,” July 21, 2012, The Center for Biblical Studies blog post.

² Karla Bohmbach, *Daughter of Jephthah: Bible*, Jewish Women’s Archive (www.jwa.org).

³ Stephen Paulikas, *How Should We Respond to “Evil”?* The New York Times Opinion Pages, June 27, 2016.

Ricoeur argued that it was instead a part of the grand narrative of human experience, not something under our control.

And so when confronted with evil, it becomes important not that we can explain why or how it happened, or even believe that we can somehow conquer it, but rather that we understand how we will respond to it. This is not to say that we do not resist evil, but to Ricoeur and others, the primary focus ought not to be on the perpetrator, but rather on the victim.⁴ This acknowledges the reality of evil in our world, and makes a clear statement about each person's role in standing up to it when it is encountered. Instead of feeding the black hole of evil, we can choose instead to turn our focus to those whom it impacts, its victims, and in so doing, reclaim a bit of their humanity.

You'll note in your bulletin that I have chosen to identify today's story not as the story of Jephthah, but rather as the story of Jephthah's daughter. It is a small thing, to be sure, but it matters. Scripture doesn't give us her name, but as with other unnamed people in the Bible, her story is no less powerful for its absence.

As I see it, while the actions of Jephthah are significant and disturbing, they are not the most compelling part of this story. In the same way that I don't want to see the terrorist hijackers as the primary actors of 9/11, or a disease as the primary actor in a dying person's life, I don't like giving this man the starring role in a story about an extraordinarily resilient young woman and the compassionate friends who surrounded her.

Viewed in this way, this story becomes not one primarily about the horrible actions of one, but rather about the beautiful actions of many. In the face of an evil that was beyond their ability to fight or control, the community around this young Israelite girl did what we all hope our communities will do- they surrounded her and loved her for the time they had with her.

In accompanying her in her final months of life and allowing her the time and the space to grieve her crushed dreams, they gave her a great gift. It did not undo the tragedy that would befall her, but it shone light on what was good and true and right. Their witness may not have been as dramatic as the evil act perpetrated by Jephthah, but it had a power that, despite all of his victories, he could never match.

The quote in the sidebar of your bulletin is from one of my all-time favorite songs, *Closer to Fine*, by the Indigo Girls. The song was the group's first hit and it won them a Grammy. Its lyrics speak to the desire to know and understand oneself and the importance of experience. This line sums up as well as any I've ever heard the reality of evil and goodness in our world: "Darkness has a hunger that's insatiable, and lightness has a call that's hard to hear."

Jephthah's insatiable desire for power brought great grief to his family and his people. But the little voice of light and life witnessed to by the young women of that community could not be drowned out. It doesn't negate the tragedy in this story, but the fact that these young women showed up and cared for their sister, and that for years afterwards, women who never knew her

⁴ Ibid.

paid homage to her memory, is a testimony to the incredible power of light in the face of deep darkness.

I have to be honest with you - I don't like this story. I didn't before I spent a lot of time with it, and I still don't today. But you don't have to like a story to learn something from it.

There are difficult things in all of our lives that are realities, whether we like them or not. And it is up to us to determine how to face them.

I don't like that some people get diseases like cancer and Alzheimer's, bipolar disorder and addiction.

I don't like that some people betray the trust of those with whom they are closest.

I don't like that some businesses choose profit over people, leaving individuals without jobs.

I don't like that, in a country with so many resources, millions of people face hunger, homelessness, and illiteracy.

I don't like that things seem to come easily to some people, while others live without the deepest desires of their hearts.

I don't like that people kill other people.

There is much in this world that is dark and evil. There are a lot of things that make us sad and scared and angry, and faced with them it is natural for us to ask "why?" But if we aren't careful, we can give too much energy to those questions and wind up chasing rabbits that will not be caught.

Evil is a black hole. It sucks up our attention and our questions, our fears and our anger, and gives us nothing in return. Good, on the other hand, often whispers in our ears, asking us to hear it over the din of the world. It is up to us to decide where we will focus our energy- the insatiable darkness or the silent, love-filled light.

The great writer J.R.R. Tolkien once wrote, "Some believe it is only great power that can hold evil in check, but that is not what I have found. It is the small everyday deeds of ordinary folk that keep the darkness at bay. Small acts of kindness and love."

Small acts like those young Israelite women surrounding their friend before she was sent to her death. Like the police chief and the activist who turned a Black Lives Matter protest into a cookout, bringing police and community members together for fellowship and fun. Like the strangers who lined up to give blood after people they had never met were injured in a mass shooting. Like the person who chooses not to be baited into an argument, but offers words of love and acceptance instead.

From Genesis to Revelation, the bible tells a story. It is like other stories in that it has good guys and bad guys, drama, conflict and intrigue. But it is unlike any other story in one primary way.

Because of God's action in Jesus Christ, we are assured of the outcome before we read the first word. Jesus Christ, God's only Son, the Prince of Peace, faced every temptation and challenge, every grief and disappointment we do, and conquered them all. In Christ we are assured that, no matter what evil may come, it will never prevail.

So when that black hole beckons to you, when the dark shadows of evil ask for your time and your attention, when you are tempted to lose hope and believe that all is lost, take heart. Jephthah and his wickedness are not the story here.

As we prepare to gather at this table once again, we have the opportunity as a community of fallen and redeemed brothers and sisters to reclaim the central truth of our faith. There may be hosts of evil around us, but we needn't fear. Because Christ lived with us, died for us, and conquered death because of us,

The light shines in the darkness.

The light shines in the darkness.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

Thanks be to God. Amen.