



Lamb of God Lutheran Church – Columbus, Ohio
August 30, 2015 (Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost)

Preacher: Pastor Timothy Wagner

Sermon Text: Judges 7:1-8a

Sermon Theme: Impossible Odds

¹ *Early in the morning, Jerub-Baal (that is, Gideon) and all his men camped at the spring of Harod. The camp of Midian was north of them in the valley near the hill of Moreh.* ² *The LORD said to Gideon, “You have too many men for me to deliver Midian into their hands. In order that Israel may not boast against me that her own strength has saved her,* ³ *announce now to the people, ‘Anyone who trembles with fear may turn back and leave Mount Gilead.’” So twenty-two thousand men left, while ten thousand remained.*

⁴ *But the LORD said to Gideon, “There are still too many men. Take them down to the water, and I will sift them for you there. If I say, ‘This one shall go with you,’ he shall go; but if I say, ‘This one shall not go with you,’ he shall not go.”*

⁵ *So Gideon took the men down to the water. There the LORD told him, “Separate those who lap the water with their tongues like a dog from those who kneel down to drink.”* ⁶ *Three hundred men lapped with their hands to their mouths. All the rest got down on their knees to drink.*

⁷ *The LORD said to Gideon, “With the three hundred men that lapped I will save you and give the Midianites into your hands. Let all the other men go, each to his own place.”* ⁸ *So Gideon sent the rest of the Israelites to their tents but kept the three hundred, who took over the provisions and trumpets of the others.*



Movie makers know that audiences like it when the little guy wins. Whether it’s the small town football team that wins the state championship, the geeky guy who gets the girl, or the victim who overcomes the high-powered corrupt legal team, we love to see our heroes overcoming impossible odds to win in the end.

To my knowledge, with the exception of a Veggie Tales animation or a scene in a Bible miniseries, the account described for us in Judges 7 has never been made into a Hollywood movie. But it is a story about the little guy coming out on top. Or is it?

For the last seven years, the Midianites had been oppressing the Israelites as the Lord’s judgment for Israel’s unfaithfulness to him. Year after year, they would send their armies in at planting time, drive the people into hiding and live off the land until the dry season, leaving the Israelites hungry and helpless.

This time, Midian and her allies mustered a force of 135,000 troops to invade Israel’s land. The Israelites cried out to the Lord for help. The Lord chose a man named Gideon to be the army commander, and he gathered 32,000 troops to try to fight back against the invading army. How brave these men were, at least on the surface, to volunteer to fight for their people, when they were outnumbered more than 4 to 1.

Yet, in their hearts, many of them knew these were impossible odds. They were afraid. And the Lord knew it. You might think that a scared soldier fighting on your side would be better than no soldier at all. But the Lord had a different approach in mind. He told Gideon, **“You have too many men for me to deliver Midian into their hands”** (v. 2). Can you imagine Gideon’s reaction? This is the same Gideon who asked the Lord for not one, but two, miraculous signs as proof that they should even be fighting this battle! And now, the Lord says, “No, you have too many men.” Who ever heard of such a thing?

But Gideon listened to the Lord. He told everyone who was afraid that they could go home and didn’t have to fight. And more than 2/3 of his army left. Now, he only had 10,000 men. Suddenly, they were outnumbered more than 13 to 1! Talk about impossible odds! But perhaps with just the right battle plan, they still had a chance. After all, they were in the upper position on the hill above the enemy camp. They were defending their homeland.

But the Lord would make the odds even more impossible. The Lord told Gideon, **“There are still too many men”** (v. 4). I wonder if Gideon could believe his ears. But maybe the Lord had a special battle plan in

mind that required only 8000 soldiers instead of 10,000. Hey, if they could win the battle when they were outnumbered 13 to 1, who's to say they couldn't win if they were outnumbered, say 14 or 15 to 1?

Now the Lord's first means of reducing the size of the army made sense. If we are going to get rid of some people, why not send the scared ones home first? But his next approach seemed completely random. He told Gideon to take his army down to a stream for a drink. And there he said, "**Separate those who lap the water with their tongues like a dog from those who kneel down to drink**" (v. 5). Gideon must have thought, "What does how they drink water have to do with how they fight?" But he followed the Lord's instructions.

And when it was over, another 97% of his army was dismissed from duty, leaving him with only 300 men. Now, the army of Israel was outnumbered by the enemy 450 to 1. Here was an underdog, if there ever was one. No amount of battle skill or strategy would be enough to overcome these impossible odds. There were no long-range missiles or atomic bombs in those days. Battles were fought hand-to-hand and eye-to-eye. Even if the Israelites were to catch the enemy by surprise and kill a few men, they would get tired and have to surrender long before all of the 135,000 enemy soldiers even needed to pick up their weapons.

But the Lord promised Gideon, "**With the three hundred men that lapped I will save you and give the Midianites into your hands**" (v. 7). And the Lord kept that promise. He caused the Midianites and their allies to turn on each other in a panic after they had dreams about being defeated in battle and saw the torches and heard the shouts of the 300 men in the middle of the night.

Israel was facing impossible odds, but the Lord proved that nothing is impossible for him. And that was exactly his intention. He had told Gideon that he wanted to reduce the size of the army "**in order that Israel may not boast against me that her own strength has saved her**" (v. 2). The Lord, whom many of the Israelites had abandoned by their idol-worship, would not abandon the Israelites. Instead, he would fight for them and win the victory so that they might trust him and praise him as the only true God.

How often God's people have faced such seemingly impossible odds, only to see the Lord win the victory. Think of Moses and the Israelites escaping the Egyptian army at the Red Sea. Think of the young shepherd boy David who defeated the fierce and fearsome giant Goliath. Think of Elijah standing alone and challenging the 400 prophets of Baal to a showdown. The Bible is full of stories that Hollywood would love, but there's one big problem. The heroes in these stories don't win by their own strength, tenacious will, or determination. They win because God gives the victory. And that's not a story that Hollywood is all that interested in telling because that's not a story that our sinful world is all that interested in hearing.

And as we think about that, and we think about the mission God has given us to "**go and make disciples of all nations**" (Matthew 28:19), we see some pretty impossible odds. Some say that Christians make up 1/3 of the earth's population. I think it's actually much less than that. Officially, our congregation has 110 baptized members right now. The city of Columbus has a population of over 825,000 people, with about 1.2 million people living in Franklin County. How can we possibly make an impact? It seems pretty impossible to make many disciples even in central Ohio, much less of "all nations." It's easy to think we should just give up and go home, like those scared soldiers in Gideon's army.

But those impossible odds don't compare with the impossible odds of our even being here today. God's Church is made up of saints, people who are holy. And well, that's not me, and that's not you. We shouldn't be here today, not on the basis of what we've done or we've deserved. Even though God says, "Trust me," and gives us one example after another in the Bible to teach us that he is completely trustworthy, by nature we trust only ourselves. Health problems lead us to worry. Money problems give us stress. Lost jobs or homes or friends leave us feeling lonely, abandoned, and defeated. And, instead of trusting the Lord, the devil and our own sinful selves want us to blame him! These are only symptoms of the sickness of sin that leaves us spiritually stillborn. On our own, our ability to be holy is far less than the ability of Gideon's army to win the victory by their own military prowess.

And yet, you sit here today against all odds. You sit here today holy, blameless, pure. That's because God overcame impossible odds for you. He overcame impossible odds when he entered our world through the

womb of a woman whose complete abstinence made pregnancy a biological impossibility. He overcame impossible odds, when he obeyed perfectly every one of his holy commands—not only in his actions, but even in the deepest desires of his heart. The immortal God overcame impossible odds when he died on a dark Friday afternoon 2000 years ago. And he overcame impossible odds, when he rose from the dead three short days later. He overcame impossible odds for us, because he knew it was impossible for us to get to heaven on our own. And now, by his powerful Word of truth, by his gifts of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, he has overcome impossible odds, giving new life to hearts dead in sin, producing precious fruits of faith in hearts that were once a desert wasteland.

Now, we place our trust in him. Not only because he fought a battle for Israel and defeated a massive army with 300 men. Not only because he overcame impossible odds in the lives of Moses and David and Elijah. But because he overcame impossible odds at the cross and at the font. And because he continues to overcome impossible odds at his Table and in his Word, keeping our faith alive even in the desolate landscape of a sinful world.

We place our trust in him for every need of body and soul. We trust him with everything we have—our money, our time, our health, our homes, our eternal good. We leave behind our prideful independence and boasting, and instead we boast in the Lord, who alone has done marvelous deeds. We lay every need at his feet in humble trust. We confidently share his story, even when the odds seem impossible. We make his impossible mission our mission. Because with Gideon we see that there are no impossible odds with the Lord. Amen.

Lessons for August 30

Judges 7:1-8a

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Romans 9:1-9

¹ I speak the truth in Christ—I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit— ² I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. ³ For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, ⁴ the people of Israel. Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. ⁵ Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen.

⁶ It is not as though God’s word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. ⁷ Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham’s children. On the contrary, “It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.” ⁸ In other words, it is not the natural children who are God’s children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham’s offspring. ⁹ For this was how the promise was stated: “At the appointed time I will return, and Sarah will have a son.”

Luke 13:22-30

²² Then Jesus went through the towns and villages, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem. ²³ Someone asked him, “Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?”

He said to them, ²⁴ “Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to. ²⁵ Once the owner of the house gets up and closes the door, you will stand outside knocking and pleading, ‘Sir, open the door for us.’

“But he will answer, ‘I don’t know you or where you come from.’

²⁶ “Then you will say, ‘We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.’

²⁷ “But he will reply, ‘I don’t know you or where you come from. Away from me, all you evildoers!’

²⁸ “There will be weeping there, and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves thrown out. ²⁹ People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God. ³⁰ Indeed there are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last.”