

LENTEN MIDWEEK 3

March 11, 2020

AS WE GATHER

The trees of the Bible help us realize why we need a Savior, how God provided a Savior for us in the person of Jesus Christ, and how the saved lives of repentant believers look. Today we consider the oak at Ophrah, which witnessed Gideon asking for signs to be sure that he was being visited by the angel of the Lord and that he was indeed to lead Israel. We, like Gideon, sin by seeking signs and testing the Lord; yet in His mercy, God forgives all who trust in Christ to be saved from sin, death, and Satan.

HYMN “O Christ, You Walked the Road” [*LSB* 424]

INVOCATION

Pastor: In the name of the Father and of the ☩ Son and of the Holy Spirit.

People: **Amen.**

OPENING SENTENCES *Psalm 1:1–3; 96:12–13; Isaiah 61:1, 3*

Pastor: Blessed is the man whose delight is in the law of the LORD.

People: **He is like a tree planted by streams of water.**

Pastor: The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; . . .

People: **that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD.**

Pastor: Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy before the LORD,

People: **for He comes, for He comes to judge the earth.**

CONFESSION AND ABSOLUTION *Psalm 80:19; Isaiah 61:1, 3*

Pastor: Let us confess our sins to God, our heavenly Father.

People: Heavenly Father, we confess that we are bound to sin and cannot free ourselves. We have “eaten forbidden fruit” in our thoughts, words, and deeds. We have not produced spiritual fruit in keeping with the new life You have won for us. For the sake of Jesus’ sacrifice on the tree of the cross, grant us Your forgiveness. Restore us, O Lord God of hosts! Let Your face shine, that we may be saved!
Amen.

Pastor: After His triumph over Satan’s temptations in the wilderness, Jesus went to the synagogue in Nazareth and announced that the prophecy of Isaiah was being fulfilled in Him. The prophet had written, “The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon Me, because the LORD has anointed Me . . . to grant to those who mourn in Zion . . . a beautiful headdress instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit; that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that He may be glorified.”

As a called and ordained servant of Christ I therefore forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.

People: Amen. Thanks be to God.

FIRST READING

Judges 6:1, 11–27, 36–40

(Gideon asks for signs before agreeing to lead Israel.)

6 The people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, and the LORD gave them into the hand of Midian seven years. ¹¹ Now the angel of the LORD came and sat under the terebinth at Ophrah, which belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, while his son Gideon was beating out wheat in the winepress to hide it from the Midianites. ¹² And the angel of the LORD appeared to him and said to him, “The LORD is with you, O mighty man of valor.” ¹³ And Gideon said to him, “Please, my lord, if the LORD is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all his wonderful deeds that our fathers recounted to us, saying, ‘Did not the LORD bring us up from Egypt?’ But now the LORD has forsaken us and given us into the hand of Midian.” ¹⁴ And the LORD^[a] turned to him and said, “Go in this might of yours and save Israel from the hand of Midian; do not I send you?” ¹⁵ And he said to

him, "Please, Lord, how can I save Israel? Behold, my clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house." ¹⁶ And the LORD said to him, "But I will be with you, and you shall strike the Midianites as one man." ¹⁷ And he said to him, "If now I have found favor in your eyes, then show me a sign that it is you who speak with me. ¹⁸ Please do not depart from here until I come to you and bring out my present and set it before you." And he said, "I will stay till you return."

¹⁹ So Gideon went into his house and prepared a young goat and unleavened cakes from an ephah^[b] of flour. The meat he put in a basket, and the broth he put in a pot, and brought them to him under the terebinth and presented them. ²⁰ And the angel of God said to him, "Take the meat and the unleavened cakes, and put them on this rock, and pour the broth over them." And he did so. ²¹ Then the angel of the LORD reached out the tip of the staff that was in his hand and touched the meat and the unleavened cakes. And fire sprang up from the rock and consumed the meat and the unleavened cakes. And the angel of the LORD vanished from his sight. ²² Then Gideon perceived that he was the angel of the LORD. And Gideon said, "Alas, O Lord GOD! For now I have seen the angel of the LORD face to face." ²³ But the LORD said to him, "Peace be to you. Do not fear; you shall not die." ²⁴ Then Gideon built an altar there to the LORD and called it, The LORD Is Peace. To this day it still stands at Ophrah, which belongs to the Abiezrites.

²⁵ That night the LORD said to him, "Take your father's bull, and the second bull seven years old, and pull down the altar of Baal that your father has, and cut down the Asherah that is beside it ²⁶ and build an altar to the LORD your God on the top of the stronghold here, with stones laid in due order. Then take the second bull and offer it as a burnt offering with the wood of the Asherah that you shall cut down." ²⁷ So Gideon took ten men of his servants and did as the LORD had told him. But because he was too afraid of his family and the men of the town to do it by day, he did it by night.

³⁶ Then Gideon said to God, "If you will save Israel by my hand, as you have said, ³⁷ behold, I am laying a fleece of wool on the threshing floor. If there is dew on the fleece alone, and it is dry on all the ground, then I shall know that you will save Israel by my hand, as you have said." ³⁸ And it was so. When he rose early next morning and squeezed the fleece, he wrung enough dew from the fleece to fill a bowl with water. ³⁹ Then Gideon said to God, "Let not your

anger burn against me; let me speak just once more. Please let me test just once more with the fleece. Please let it be dry on the fleece only, and on all the ground let there be dew.”⁴⁰ And God did so that night; and it was dry on the fleece only, and on all the ground there was dew.

Lector: O Lord, have mercy on us.

People: **Thanks be to God.**

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Oak at Ophrah

Psalm 78 (antiphon v 4); Judges 6:1–40; Matthew 12:38–42

Maybe something like this has happened to you: You move to a new place and, when you ask for directions, someone answers in a way that depends on an old landmark that’s no longer there. For example, maybe the person said something like, “Go down this road until you get to where that big, old oak tree used to be before it was cut down, and then turn left.”

Well, maybe no one asks for directions anymore at all—everyone uses their smartphones now—and Google Maps certainly is not going to use a cut-down oak tree as a landmark. But in the First Reading, a terebinth (ESV) or oak tree (KJV, ASV, NIV, NASB) at Ophrah, a town that belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, served at least at that time as a landmark, not unlike the great trees of Mamre near the Machpelah. Under the oak at Ophrah, the Angel of the Lord came and sat while Gideon was beating out wheat in a winepress, attempting to hide it from the marauding Midianites. The conversation that ensued between the Lord and Gideon, Gideon’s later testing of God by asking for signs, and the scribes and Pharisees’ much later asking of Jesus for a sign all are relevant for us who are, as it were, “Living among the Bible’s Trees,” the theme for our special Lenten sermon series. Tonight, Considering the Oak at Ophrah, We Realize That, Though We, like Gideon, Sin by Seeking Signs and Testing the Lord, Jesus Saves All Who Believe from Sin, Death, and Satan.

I. We, like Gideon, sin by seeking signs and testing the Lord.

The Lord called Gideon to be a “judge” or “leader” of at least a group of the Israelites when they cried out to him on account of the Midianites. The Lord had given Israel over to Midian because, despite all he had done in delivering them from Egypt, the people had not obeyed the Lord’s voice but had done what was evil in his sight. As you may know, the Book of Judges is replete

with similar cycles of the people straying from the Lord, being oppressed, crying for deliverance, and being provided a judge (or “deliverer”). The generation after Joshua apparently had not been well-formed in the faith, as they, in general, did not know the Lord or the work that the Lord had done for Israel (Josh 2:10). Yet, as we heard in the reading, Gideon had heard of the Lord’s wonderful deeds. Apparently, he could not reconcile what he had heard about the Lord with what the people were now experiencing. Perhaps somewhat ironically,¹⁵ the Angel of the Lord called Gideon a mighty man of valor, though Gideon’s response suggested that he would be anything but brave in war. Gideon was insecure and reluctant to answer the Lord’s call, asking for a sign of the Lord’s power and willingness to help Gideon save Israel.

Of course, Gideon is not alone in history either in asking the Lord for signs of proof or in putting the Lord to the test, trying to make the Lord prove himself. The second-longest psalm, Psalm 78, which we chanted earlier, tries to teach the next generation by recounting the glorious deeds of the Lord so that they would not, like the previous generations, forget his signs, rebel against him, and test him. Nevertheless, in Jesus’ day, the Jewish leaders ignored the signs Jesus did, rejected him, and asked for other signs. We may similarly seek signs, at times reject Jesus, and ignore those signs that he does give us. By nature, we are part of the same evil and adulterous generation as the Jews of Jesus’ day. And, like the Israelites of Gideon’s day, all too often even we Christians do not obey the Lord’s voice but instead do what is evil in his sight. Unless we repent, as God calls and so enables us to do, we will be like the unrepentant scribes and Pharisees at the judgment, condemned by those Gentiles who answered God’s call to repent through Jonah and Solomon. But, when we repent—when we turn in sorrow from our sin, trust God to forgive our sin, and want to do better than to keep on sinning—we receive God’s forgiveness. He forgives our ignoring his signs, rejecting him, asking for other signs, or whatever our sin might be. God graciously forgives all our sin on account of the death of his Son, Jesus the Christ.

II. Jesus saves all who believe from sin, death, and Satan.

Greater than Jonah and Solomon, Jesus is the Son of God in human flesh. The same “Angel” or “Messenger” of the Lord, who in a preincarnate form came and sat under the terebinth or oak at Ophrah, Jesus himself saved Israel and all people from sin, death, and the power of the devil. Jesus lived the perfect life we fail to live, and on the cross he himself died in our place the

death that we deserve on account of our failures. And Jesus did not stay dead, but, as the greatest sign of all, after parts of three days and nights in the belly of the earth, he rose from the dead and declared his victory. As God repeatedly showed mercy and graciously forgave the Israelites whom he brought out of Egypt and brought into the Promised Land, so not only this Lenten season but always God repeatedly shows mercy and graciously forgives all who cry out to him in repentance. God eagerly forgives you all your sins!

And God gives you miraculous signs of his forgiveness so you do not have to doubt his gracious favor toward you or otherwise put him to the test. God gave Noah the rainbow (Gen 9:12–13, 17) and Abraham circumcision (Gen 17:11). God gave Gideon miraculously consumed broth and unleavened bread, the wet fleece, and then also the dry fleece. God gives us all together his read and preached Word, and God gives us individually his Word with water in Holy Baptism, with the touch of the pastor's hand in Absolution, and with bread and wine that are Christ's body and blood in the Sacrament of the Altar. Better than the reminders of old covenants—entrance rites that only directly benefited some and were one-time signs of God's favor—God's Word and Sacraments are means of his grace that connect us to the new covenant. These means are directly available to all, and can and should be returned to as often as we need his forgiveness—which is pretty often, considering we daily sin much and, apart from his forgiveness, surely deserve nothing but punishment (Small Catechism, Fifth Petition).

Not everyone is called by the Lord to “judge” or “lead” Israel as Gideon was. But, forgiven by God through his Word and Sacraments, we serve in the vocations to which God calls us by doing the good works he gives for us to do. And, like Gideon, our faith will know “moments of uncertainty as well as heights of greatness.”¹⁶ Especially at those “moments of uncertainty,” we can be encouraged by the Lord's patience with Gideon, whom the divinely inspired author of Hebrews seems to suggest was made strong out of weakness (Heb 11:32–34). And as was the case with God's testing of Abraham (Gen 22:1; Heb 11:17), God's testing of us is for the purpose of refining our faith and drawing us closer to him (Heb 12:5–11). So *considering the oak at Ophrah, we realize that, though we, like Gideon, sin by seeking signs and testing the Lord, Jesus saves all who believe from sin, death, and Satan.*

Even with landmarks such as the oak at Ophrah, navigating our way at times can be difficult as we are “Living among the Bible's Trees.” Yet, we are not

alone! The Lord is with us! In sharp contrast to his early success, Gideon and his family were later ensnared by a foolish act of idolatry—even if under a best construction it may have been well-intentioned (Judg 8:27). Despite that sin, the author of Hebrews can still commend Gideon through his faith and speak of his being made perfect (Heb 11:39–40). In this life, neither he was perfect nor are we perfect. This Lenten season and always, we are humbled in repentance to live only by grace through faith. To that end, we close now by praying as we sang in the Office Hymn: “No binding sign we ask, No wonder from above. Lord, help us place our trust alone In Your unswerving love” (*LSB* 424:3). Amen.

OFFERING

SERIES HYMN “Among the Bible’s Trees” [Tune: *LSB* 595]

Among the Bible’s trees we live. How true they grow, as well they should.
From them may we this Lententide Learn how our Lord died for our good.

Beneath the Ophrah oak one day Came down the angel of the Lord,
A charge to give to Gideon, Free Israel from Midian horde.

Under that oak he asked for signs As we are prone to test the Lord.
But Jonah’s three-day sign came true; From death Christ rose, proving His
Word.

Lord Jesus Christ, God’s only Son, Whose body hung on Calv’ry’s Tree,
O living Word, Your sacrifice Pardon proclaims eternally.

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PRAYER OF THE CHURCH

Pastor: Let us pray for the Church here and around the world, and people everywhere in their various needs.

For everyone weighed down by their bondage to sin and an inability to stop sinning by thought, word, and deed, let us pray to the Lord.

People: For the sake of Christ's sacrifice on the tree of the cross, heavenly Father, open their ears to hear the Gospel anew; free them to live before You in Your kingdom.

Pastor: For everyone who has fallen prey to society's distorted morality, let us pray to the Lord.

People: For the sake of Christ's sacrifice on the tree of the cross, heavenly Father, surround them with faithful and caring members of the Body of Christ; call them back in repentance and hope.

Pastor: For those who keep the peace at home or are deployed abroad, for those who provide care and guidance in relationships, finances, and health, and for those who respond to natural disasters and crises of various sorts, let us pray to the Lord.

People: For the sake of Christ's sacrifice on the tree of the cross, heavenly Father, accompany them with Your Holy Spirit; protect them from harm, and give them wisdom in all circumstances.

Pastor: For ourselves and the Church around the world as we seek to produce true spiritual fruit, let us pray to the Lord.

People: For the sake of Christ's sacrifice on the tree of the cross, heavenly Father, assure us that we are Your pleasant planting; forgive our errors, and send us to serve in faithfulness and love.

Pastor: These and any other things You would have us ask, heavenly Father, grant to us for the sake of the sufferings and death of Your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord.

People: Amen.

THE LORD'S PRAYER *(Matthew 6:9-13)*

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen

BENEDICTION

Pastor: The blessing of God Almighty—who created you, forgave all your sins, and strengthens you for service in His kingdom—be upon you now and forever.

People: **Amen.**

HYMN

“Abide, O Dearest Jesus”

[*LSB* 919]

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