

Called Together

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"But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressors, you have broken as on the day of Midian." Here is a great proclamation of faith in God, if we understand what the writer is talking about. We don't often think in terms of yokes and bars and rods of oppression, do we? And what happened on the day of Midian, anyway? That story is part of our history as a people of God, and deserves a good telling.

But first let's meditate for a moment on burdens, and shoulders hunched in pain or sorrow, and oppression that comes from any number of places in this mixed up world. I walked the halls of a nursing facility recently and witnessed burden in a very real sense. An elderly woman sat restlessly in her wheelchair. An alarm went off. Maybe you have heard these alarms before. They hook on to the back of your sweater and are attached to the wheelchair. If you move too far forward, as if to fall, the alarm goes off and signals the staff to come with assistance. This woman did not want the alarm hooked to her sweater. She was shouting at the staff, "No way! Not me! You're not hooking that thing to me." The air was thick with burden.

On the one hand, this woman felt burdened by her lack of mobility, her lack of ability to care for herself, the restrictions to daily living that were invading her life. She was angry, just as you and I might get angry if someone tried to hook us up to an alarm and stop us from moving freely in our own bodies. I was sad for the circumstance this woman was enduring.

However, I was sad for the staff, too. They were in the untenable position of trying to provide a quality of life for this woman beyond what the staffing patterns of the home probably allow. These aren't bad people! They longed for her to be out of bed, out of her room, with other people, interacting with her world. But they longed for her safety, too. Moreover, the only way they could be sure she was safe was to hook up the alarm from the wheelchair to the back of her sweater. It was a sad situation.

The scriptures we heard this morning remind me of that day: 'there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish.' I yearn for that scripture to be made real in the life of that burdened woman and, indeed, all residents of nursing care facilities.

There are other kinds of burdens, too. One needn't be confined to a wheelchair or a nursing facility to feel like they are carrying a heavy yoke upon their shoulders; a beast of burden hauling heavy cares through days and nights of discontent. Many who are unemployed or depressed or who feel isolated or are poor sense the weight of the bar across their back even as the slave in Moses' time used that bar to carry heavy items in the building of Pharaoh's monuments. Scores of people feel the rod of oppression as they struggle in unequal relationships at home, in the marketplace, at the lending banks, and wherever the rights of the few are negotiated not with an eye toward justice but with a hand leaning on power and might and greed.

How would you like to be a former employee of Enron in these years after its collapse, that iconic company that fixed the paradigm for greed and abuse of employee faith? Or how would you like to be a woman who needs reproductive services but cannot get past the rancorous protesters outside of her clinic? Or that person whose severance package is about to expire but whose health problems will

continue into the long-range future? Or a person who cannot go out with his partner at night because his partner is a man and they might get harassed beat up or, worse, murdered?

There is plenty of burden to go around. Nevertheless, there is plenty of good news, too, if the people of God will share it. There will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressors, you have broken as on the day of Midian."

So now, let's talk about this day of Midian. It really is an exciting story from our Judeo-Christian past and it sheds light on the burdens each one of us carries with us today, too. It reads like an adventure story and has all the elements of the best action movies ever made.

Come with me It's a few thousand years ago, give or take a century. The Midianites, those perennial bad-guys, are up to their no good again. Nomadic raiders by trade; it is recorded that they swept down on the farmers of Israel like a plague of locusts, a great multitude that pillaged crops and cattle for six years. The residents had no rest. Many of the farmers fled their fields and hid away in caves or in the hills. Since the Midianites were camel-riding bandits, the farmers were a little safer there, but lost their land in the bargain.

Then there arose a hero, just one of the many heroes and heroines to be found in the book of Judges. I invite you to read the book of Judges. It is full of good stories. This hero's name was Gideon, and he came from among his people. No ringer, this one. He was Israeli born and bred. He heeded what he experienced as the voice of God and told the people he had a plan. And this is how it worked itself out. Near 10 p.m. one night, when the watch was changing in the Midianite camp, the men of Israel, these displaced farmers, these cave dwellers, shouted to the Lord with all their strength. They made a holy racket, breaking pottery jars and screaming that God is victorious. They blew the trumpets and prepared to charge the camp in a do or die mission to reclaim their land. It is at this point, they believed in subsequent years, that the power of God came in to play.

The Midianites, these warrior bandits, were so confused by all the noise and chaos that as they arose from their sleep they took up arms against each other and the Midianites were defeated that night by their own swords and the perceived power of God. Peace came upon the land, as the now unburdened farmers were free to move back to their parcels to raise wheat and cattle and provide for their loved ones again. God broke the yoke of their burden, The bar across their shoulders, The rod of their oppressor, on what became known in our sacred texts as "the day of Midian."

"There will be no gloom for those who were in anguish." Maybe you need your own day of deliverance from the burdens that oppress you. Consider the number of resources you can turn to in the wider community. There are groups for people who want to nurture emotional serenity and for victims of domestic violence. There are services available for victims of sexual assault and for those who are in grief. There is help for addicts who want to help themselves out of the rut and there are support groups for people burdened with failing eyesight. There is more, too. Consider some of the groups you belong to even now and consider them a gift of God, a tool for deliverance, a means to freedom from the rod of what oppresses you.

Now, look at the Gospel lesson we read today. Matthew quotes the very words spoken by Isaiah! "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death, light has dawned." As you reflect on the Gospel lesson, consider that perhaps your own day

of Midian is at hand. Not because of Gideon this time, nor because of a band of disgruntled and desperate farmers, but because of Jesus the Christ. "He went about teaching in synagogues, proclaiming the good news and curing every disease and every sickness among the people."

The enemies of your life, be they persons or economics or injustices of any form are about to be roused by the power of God. As Christians, we are asked to believe that and to live accordingly and abundantly. We are invited by Jesus to go around with him as he does his good work. "Follow me," he said. And as we do, we become partners in the healing and participants in the victory. We become both the healed and the healer as we return to the world from whence we came this morning; a great light shining within us, summoning forth restoration for those who are burdened and have yet to hear the good news.

"There will be no gloom for those who were in anguish." Jesus said, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

I yearn for that scripture to be made real in the life of all burdened people and, indeed, in your life in particular, as your journey into faithfulness continues in 2011.

Amen.