

Judges 11:1-11, 29-40
Matthew 5:33-37

St. John's Presbyterian Church
Devon, Pennsylvania
Victor M. Wilson, D.Min., Pastor

Second Sunday in Lent
March 20, 2011

JEPHTHAH'S OATH

"For I have opened my mouth to the Lord, and I cannot take back my vow." Judges 11:35b

The season of Lent obliges us to attend to what is important. That is, to our promise making. "I have opened my mouth to the Lord, and I cannot go back," said Jephthah.

This is clearly no ordinary man. Nor is his an ordinary story. Born by rights a Hebrew, the son of a great leader named Gilead. He should have had all the rights and privileges of his father's station in life, but his mother was from the wrong side of the tracks. And when he was old enough to walk unaided his brothers kicked him out lest he become a claimant on the family property. Perhaps they thought of such purgings as keeping the bloodline pure or protecting the family's good name.

Exiled to the high country on the edge of the Arabian Desert, young Jephthah makes a reputation for himself as a bandit and a warrior, no doubt harassing the great trade routes that linked Asia and Africa to the east of the Jordan river.

When Israel's neighbors, the Ammonites, begin to rattle their sabers on the eastern border, the elders of Israel are caught off guard. Israel does not at this point in its history have kings but instead relies on "judges," people with natural charisma and leadership whom God would "raise up" in times of national crisis. But no judge is evident at this time. And so, desperate for a strong military leader they seek out their exiled brother, the bandit Jephthah in the distant land of Tov across the Jordan.

Now imagine how you might feel at such a moment if you are Jephthah. Suddenly all the aces are in your hand. You can ask for virtually anything and be assured of it: money, title, property. Yet he asks for nothing. Instead of direct material reward the elders of the eastern tribes offer Jephthah the leadership of their tribes. But because he has been badly bitten once before, the one thing Jephthah asks of them is their solemn pledge that they will not go back on their word once the battle is won. As the text says, "And the elders of Gilead vow to Jephthah, 'The Lord will be witness among us, we will surely do as you ask.' Their vow is his security because this is a man for whom a vow is as permanent as stone. And so this thief, this bandit outcast, becomes a chief.

Later, Jephthah makes his own vow, that rash yet sacred oath to God that will cost him dearly. It is a vow, you recall, that if a battle should ensue and be won under his leadership, Jephthah promises to sacrifice the first thing to come out of his house upon his return home. In the intervening text, which we did not read, Jephthah tries every reasonable diplomatic means to get the Ammonites to withdraw their offensive. But the enemy is uncompromising. So Jephthah rallies the Israelites and routs the Ammonites in battle.

Now, our hearts sink with a terrible despair when Jephthah returns home to suffer the greatest defeat of his life on the heels of his greatest victory. His little daughter, with timbrels (little finger cymbals) fluttering on her fingers comes dancing out of the house. It is the bitterest moment. Surely he will take back this vow, a vow pledged in secret and so easily dismissed in secret, but he does not. Surely, then, he will offer some substitute—a slave, perhaps, but no. Surely his only child will talk him out of it, or some family member will show him a wiser alternative, will convince him that the Lord does not expect, does not want such a vow to be fulfilled. But the story offers no such easy compromise.

Then the daughter asks for two months to be away from home; some time, she pleads, to be away with her young friends and to say her farewells. It's a perfect opportunity to escape, to run away. But to

compound the horror, she returns, determined that her father shall not break his vow. She is her father's daughter!

Finally, in desperation our attention turns to God who surely will not let such a hideous thing happen. Once before God had intervened on Mt. Moriah and stopped the aged Abraham as the early morning sun flashed on the raised knife above his son, Isaac. We scour the tumbling words of this dark story for an alternative, a last minute substitute—some ram caught in a nearby thicket as before. But there is none. And suddenly the child is dead.

Need I even say it? This is a devastating story.

No doubt like you, when I first read it my heart cried out in anger for some understanding of this thing, some way to wrench some comprehension from, if not to fully understand, this horrible event.

So I told myself, this was Jephthah's vow. It was his to make and his to break. Is not "life" more precious, more sacred than loyalty to some momentary promise, especially the life of a child? After all, what is a promise? Mere words uttered so often in the flurried emotions of the moment. And what difference would it make if a briefly uttered promise were not kept?

What difference, indeed. "The Son of man must suffer many things," promised Jesus, "and be rejected by the elders and be killed, and after three days rise again. And he said this plainly," said Mark.

What happens if a promise is broken? Well, our salvation would not have happened, for one thing. The mind has only to take a few excursions down the paths of promise making and promise keeping to imagine the chaos if our oaths and promises had no fidelity. Vows are the glue that give stability to our times and to our relationships.

- We build our families on the pledges we make to each other, and when a vow is compromised the fabric of our relationship becomes quickly threadbare. A pledge which says, "I promise to stay with you, my dear, for as long as it seems a good idea," is hardly a vow that you can hang your future on.
- We build our churches on the vows we make. We pledge ourselves in the sacrament of baptism, in ordination as officers and teachers, in our creeds when we call Christ "our Lord," and in the gifts we pledge.
- It is vows that pledge the distinction between truth and falsehood in our courts of law.
- It is vows that give us our national security, vows of allegiance and obedience to obey commands, vows to retain secrets, vows to bear arms as the occasion demands.
- Vows keep us at peace, nation with nation. We make promises which we break only at terrible risk to countless numbers.
- Vows are the cement that bonds government to people, President to nation.
- There are promises to keep to our children, perhaps especially to our children, because like Jephthah's daughter they learn integrity and faithfulness by the value they discern in our word.

These are the vows to make and then to keep. These are the sort of vows that have integrity. Vows that find a clear approval in the Word of God.

Such binding in a vow insists upon our deep reflection before the vow is made. The Jephthah story is a harsh but sober reminder that vows, once made, are to be kept.

On the dark side of Jephthah's vow is a reminder that vows are not conditional obligations, "I will if you will." A vow is not a bargaining tool, a compromise. That's a large part of the problem with Jephthah's oath. It says, "Lord, if you attend to this part of my agenda (the slaying of the Ammonites), then I will do this in return." God is not manipulated by our promise making. Suppose God chose to save the little girl, in the context of the vow the only way would seem to be the defeat of Jephthah and the army of Israel at the cost of hundreds of thousands of lives. But what sort of God would do *that*?

Jephthah's integrity towards a promise is in one sense laudable. But his vow is contrary to what God expects of us in our thanksgiving. In the *Institutes of Christian Religion*, his *magnum opus*, John Calvin wrote "vow nothing that does not accord with God's Word, and make no vow that hinders you from fulfilling God's calling upon your life."

God is not obligated to undo our promises. And any strength and bonding which vows have would be made useless if God always stood ready to undo them when things looked hard. Our vows always embrace the possibility of hardship, suffering, and wrong choices.

Even rash vows are not God's vow to break. We may feel some indignation that God does not intervene in Jephthah's story, or in ours, or in our nation's. But remember that God, too, has made a vow to give us great freedom. God has pledged to let us make our own choices, even to the point of our making terrible mistakes. So God does not remove the consequences of every human pledge simply because those consequences show themselves eventually to be infinitely hard.

Imagine, for a moment, a well groomed residential neighborhood. Large trees line broad boulevards and the late afternoon sun casts deep shadows across well manicured lawns. You're out walking, enjoying the air and the refined symmetry of a neighborhood in good order, when in the distant shadows, perhaps a hundred yards away, your eye is drawn to a couple near the road. They are clearly not young but they are locked in an embrace more reminiscent of the young in so public a place. The two stand face to face, their bodies draped against each other, she with hands and arms stretched up and around his neck, one leg touching the ground, the other angled back, almost playfully, resting on the door sill of the car. He holds her strongly with the near hand, the other reaching for something on the far side out of view.

It is a touching, clearly intimate moment from which you feel a need to avert your eyes as you approach: two people in their September years locked in the embrace of April's youth. Then, as you draw near, you discover that all is not as it seems. He swings her body around and away from you and into the waiting thing for which he was reaching. He lowers her gently into the waiting wheelchair and snaps down the foot rest. She is paralyzed.

For them this is a polished ritual: three times each week to physical therapy, once to the grocery store; once each month to the doctor's office, and on rare occasions an out of town trip to see the children. There is the embrace of lingering vows well kept: for better for worse vows; in sickness and in health vows; 'till death us do part vows.

We need *good* vows, well conceived vows. Vows which pledge us to make each other's life secure in a world of insecurities. Vows which approve ourselves to God by pledging that which God approves. Not thoughtless, frivolous or foolish vows. Vows which do not linger over the conditions of our pledging, yet seek to resonate to the integrity of the one pledged to. Vows which, in short, confirm whose blessed people we are.

Amen.