

**Sermon - “Storyline: Unsettled”**  
**Judges 2:8-12, 16-18; Romans 5:6-8**

**Preparation**

The idea of “moving” is a loaded with imagery; it brings up many images, emotions, stories – some funny, some painful. It is not a neutral word. Listen to this internet post from an artist named Kristin. She writes, “Packing, unpacking, packing, unpacking, packing, unpacking. If you want to know about my life, that's a major theme: packing, unpacking, moving. In the past eight years I've had six studios and six home addresses. I've been to the department of motor vehicles through three cars and six changes of address. It didn't start here. When I was a child, my father was in the Navy. I didn't understand at the time that the Navy moves people around; I thought that my parents were whimsical. Other people who lived in home for longer than three years felt stagnant to me. Why didn't they move?” She goes on to reflect on her most recent move. “Those boxes unpacked me. They pulled out of me a deep sadness for packing, unpacking. For moving and transitions. I've been in the studio nearly a year and just now I set the books upon the shelves. When the books go in, that means, "I'm here." They are my old friends, but they are heavy and unwieldy, so I don't unpack them until I'm really here. My fears tell me that by unpacking them I will jinx myself into moving again and back into the boxes they'll go. It's inevitable. I always move.

I remember moving to Kingwood. Jennifer and I bought our first home, scared and excited at the same time...probably mostly scared though. Moving day came and the in-laws and high school students were ready to work. The truck made its way to Kingwood without any real drama. The boxes and furniture found its way through the doors and into their assigned rooms. Everyone was tired...I was restless. The only thing I hate worse than unpacking is the sight of boxes in the house. As we were formulating our plan of attack, we threw some clothes in the washing machine, grabbed a bite to eat...then it happened. The floors in the kitchen seemed to be shining, almost as if they were covered by a glossy, translucent substance...they were. The washing machine was overflowing and the kitchen was slowly, and by slowly I mean quickly, flooding! Of course, later that day, after a load of towels and a call to the local plumber, all was well.

**Information**

I can't help but wonder what it was like for the Israelites as they finally "moved in" to their promised residence. We have covered a lot of ground so far this year. We have read together the stories of creation and fall, the stories of the flood and the tower of Babel. Then comes father Abraham, many of us knew his song but maybe this was the first time we read his whole story. Called out of his home by God, Abraham travels from Ur, through modern day Syria and Israel, to Egypt, then back to what will eventually become the Promised Land. His offspring, as promised by God, become a great people, eventually displaced in Egypt. In fact, they became so great that the ruler of Egypt decides to oppress them and turn the people of God into Pharaoh's slaves.

God calls a man named Moses to deliver his people from slavery and lead to the land flowing with milk and honey – the Promise that the descendants of Abraham would become a great nation was to be fulfilled as the people inhabited their own land. However, the people wrestle with God and waver between faithfulness and unfaithfulness, bringing upon themselves a curse, resulting in their wandering in the wilderness for 40 years.

Moving. Never truly unpacking. The books stayed in their boxes because for all these years, the people did not have a permanent residence, no place to truly call home. Guiding them over these years was God, God's appointed leaders, and God's law. God's instructions for how the people should live with one another and with God. Following this Law, turning toward their God would transform the people into a mighty nation that would shine God's light and reveal the one true God to the nations of the world. The Promise to Abraham was not just a nation in a land, but a people with a purpose – to be a blessing to the world. Through these people God would bless the entire world!

And after years and years of wandering, it is time to unpack. As we read through the stories in Joshua and Judges we find a people settling into their Promised Land; however, the people seem to be far from settled.

It's not as if the Israelites were moving into a new home. In fact, the previous homeowners still occupied the house. God's people would struggle to remain faithful to their God in the midst of the religion and culture of the previous homeowners, the Canaanites. This happens today – maybe you have moved into a home that has history. Listen to one woman's description of moving into her new home: "It doesn't really feel like OUR house yet. The cat won't come out from under the bed. In every room there seems to be a reminder of the old owner. Behind ever

closet door a secret dying to be told. To date I have found 21 cans of diet soda, ten rolls of Christmas wrapping paper, 5lb hand weights, eight bottles of beer, three pairs of sunglasses, a model corvette kit"...an on and on. She goes on to describe the transition. "Curtains stayed on some windows. Candles still stand silent and dark in the fireplace. Expensive phones are still plugged in. When someone asked me what kind of housewarming gift the sellers left I didn't know what to say. These people didn't want to leave. Why would they want to thank us for moving in when they obviously didn't want to move out?"

Now, having moved into their home, the tribes of Israel were spread out over a large area of land. Miles and rivers and mountains separated them. They were nothing more than a loose federation with only their common faith to unite them. There was no political or social structure in place, only God's Law. Unfortunately, for the people of Israel, God's Law was not enough. The book of Joshua ends with a generation of people, faithful to the leadership of Joshua, who are committed to following the Lord and remembering the great deeds of God on their behalf. Sadly, the book of Judges basically begins by telling us that after the death of Joshua and his generation, "there arose a generation after them who did not know the Lord or the work that he had done for Israel." The bible goes on to tell us that the "people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Ba'als", the fertility gods and goddesses of the Canaanites, the religions of the previous homeowners.

The book of Judges goes largely ignored today. We hear the stories of Gideon and Samson; however, the message of the book of Judges may well be one of the most relevant messages for us today. Judges is a book of ethics and morals; a book of truth. The main question becomes, whose ethics and morals will guide the life of the people of Israel; whose truth will guide us today? As the people move into the land, will the ethics and morals prescribed by God guide them or will the land and its many pagan gods form the patterns of their lives?

If the first 5 books of the bible are God's prescription for life, Judges is the description of life without God's Law. One scholar puts it this way: "The main ethical thrust of Judges could be summarized as follows: The very capacity to make moral judgments itself arises from the desire to obey God. The community of faith is the context in which this obedience is learned and practiced. When the relationship between God and God's people is neglected, it not only becomes impossible to do right, it becomes impossible to know what it right." "There arose a generation after them who did not know the Lord or the work that he had done for Israel."

Many of you have seen recent studies about the decline of Christianity in America. Statistics are what they are, but a recent study posted on MSNBC.com reports that Northern New England has now surpassed the Pacific Northwest as the least religious region in America – the state of Vermont reporting that 34% of its population claims no religious identity at all. It goes on to report that every state has seen a decline in the Christian faith – no other religious system has seen a decline in all 50 states.

Morality in our day has become primarily an issue of personal preference. To our detriment, my generation and those who have followed have cynically determined that the truth of their parents and grandparents may not be universal truth; in fact, it may be nothing more than mere opinion. We look cynically on the society that preceded us, always asking “why”; why do I have to live that way? Why can’t I choose my own path as long as I’m trying to be a good person? Why can’t I establish my own moral and ethical code as long as I’m not hurting anyone?

The book of Judges offers three statements that reflect the distance the people of Israel traveled away from God; and I think these statements give important insight into our current culture.

“The people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord.” As the Israelites moved further away from the stories of their ancestors, they moved further away from the desire to please God, further from the ability to make sound moral judgments.

Toward the end of the book we find this phrase - “In those days there was no king in Israel.” Some argue that this statement simply points out the fact that Israel had no central governing or political institutions, so their behaviors were not guided or regulated. However, I see an element of irony in this statement. In those days there was no king in Israel – it’s just not true –Israel had no king because it did not accept or turn to the kingship of God, the true king of the people of Israel. Because Israel had no king, refused to acknowledge God as king, society was falling to the point that they no longer had the means of discerning the will of God, they wandered aimless and lost. “Over time, by the habitual neglect of the covenant relationship with the living God, Israel lost its story and forgot the one who brought them into the land.

Society fell to the point where the final line of the book of Judges, the final haunting reality that these narratives guide us toward; “In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.” It is difficult to image a more relevant description of the human condition in our time than this line written thousands of years ago. Today, everyone does what is right in his or her own eyes. Great portions of society have disintegrated to the point that all

morality is subject to the will and desire of the individual. Ethics and morality are not individual in nature, they only matter in the context of community, how we treat and interact with one another. As a society, are we closer to resembling the faithful generation of Joshua who refused to turn away from the God who delivered them or do we resemble the generation of the Judges, a generation that did not even know the Lord or the great deeds he has done?

### **Inspiration**

Did I mention that Judges is a book about hope? As difficult as the heart of this message is to hear, our God is the great physician, the healer of all pain, even the pain that comes with moral and ethical failure and our tendency to turn away from God. Despite stories of their individual sins, certain people within the community of Israel were faithful and turned toward God on behalf of the people. As bleak as our society looks today, regardless of our sense of hopelessness that future generations will turn back to God, back to the church, there are good faithful people in the church and in the world today who point us back to our God. This is the pattern of hope we find in the book of Judges. Even before the people turn to the Lord in repentance, listen to this passage in Judges 2. “Then the Lord raised up judges, who saved them out of the hand of those who plundered them...Whenever the Lord raised up judges for them, the Lord was with the judge, and he saved them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge. For the Lord was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who afflicted and oppressed them.” Even if we forget about God, God will never let us go...

A close friend of mine shared with me a story yesterday that has left me reeling. His cousin suffered for years with depression. Battling his internal pain, he turned to drugs and alcohol becoming addicted to both. His tragic situation played out in front of his entire family as his body broke down due to the abuse of drugs and alcohol. He needed a kidney transplant to keep his broken body alive. His mother was a match. Now the entire family confronted the mother, challenging her to rethink her decision to give her son her kidney. They just knew that he would continue to abuse his body and her sacrifice would be wasted. Regardless, the mother gave her kidney to her son. At first, he made efforts to change his life, but in the end, he fell back into that cycle of substance abuse and his body eventually quit on him. Regardless of his mother's sacrifice, the story ended the same way, in his death. However, the mourning mother never flinched, never doubted her decision. “That was not a waste, he is my son and I love him, and given the opportunity, I would do it again.”

Undeserved Grace. The God of the scripture is the God who hears the cries of his people even in the midst of their unfaithfulness knowing full well that unfaithfulness will continue. Listen to Paul as he writes to the Romans; “For while we were weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly...God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” As difficult as it is for us to understand as we read the Old Testament, this Jesus who died for us while we were still sinners is the same God that sent judges and grieved over the sufferings of an unfaithful people. God’s grace for us is beyond anything that we can comprehend. When we acknowledge the reality of our sin and our faithlessness, God enters in with grace upon grace; ready to deliver us from the circumstances we have made for ourselves. It is truly by grace that we are saved through faith in the one who would deliver an unfaithful people and die for sinners.

### **Transformation**

The call is to turn away from this individualistic philosophy that we are the kings of our own kingdoms and the relative view of truth, ethics and morality and trust in the Lord revealed to us in the person of Jesus Christ. One writer explains, “Community is the place where attention to God is taught, learned, nurtured and internalized. The Christian community’s role, now as much as ever, is to strengthen the commitment to God. That role is carried out by teaching and celebrating the stories of God’s dealings with God’s people, and by being counter-culturally serious about the practices of worship, prayer, fellowship and charity. Christians today are not the first generation to have experienced a loss of our moral sense. Judges makes clear that it is an age-old problem. Holding on to the gift of moral discernment comes through prayer, repentance, immersion in God’s word and a daily hungering after the Holy Spirit.”

This is the very goal of our community as we walk through the scriptures together this year. It’s the analogy of entering into a moving river. We stand on the shore, and one day, we set foot in the river and feel the current begin to take us. As the current leads us down the river, we doubt, we turn back and fight against the current. But if we just turn downriver once again, turn toward God, the current will take us. It’s an adventure that we cannot take alone. We journey with one another, keeping each other afloat in times of doubt. It may not always feel safe, we are certainly not in control of where the river leads, but we are submitting our lives to the will of our Creator, we are turning to him undeservedly with open hands, ready to receive the gift of grace which leads to true life, not mere existence...life as he intended for us from the beginning. May it not be said about us that “they did what was evil in the sight of the Lord”; that “the church in that day had no king”; or that “everyone did what was right in their own eyes.” Let us return to

the Lord, realizing that he is a God of love and compassion that never lets go of those who live in relationship with him.