

## *In Spite of Ourselves*

3<sup>rd</sup> Weekend of Easter – April 29/30, 2006  
Sermon Background Study

*Judges 2:6-19 (NRSV)*

<sup>6</sup>When Joshua dismissed the people, the Israelites all went to their own inheritances to take possession of the land. <sup>7</sup>The people worshiped the LORD all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua, who had seen all the great work that the LORD had done for Israel. <sup>8</sup>Joshua son of Nun, the servant of the LORD, died at the age of one hundred ten years. <sup>9</sup>So they buried him within the bounds of his inheritance in Timnath-heres, in the hill country of Ephraim, north of Mount Gaash. <sup>10</sup>Moreover, that whole generation was gathered to their ancestors, and another generation grew up after them, who did not know the LORD or the work that he had done for Israel.

<sup>11</sup>Then the Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and worshiped the Baals; <sup>12</sup>and they abandoned the LORD, the God of their ancestors, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt; they followed other gods, from among the gods of the peoples who were all around them, and bowed down to them; and they provoked the LORD to anger. <sup>13</sup>They abandoned the LORD, and worshiped Baal and the Astartes. <sup>14</sup>So the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he gave them over to plunderers who plundered them, and he sold them into the power of their enemies all around, so that they could no longer withstand their enemies. <sup>15</sup>Whenever they marched out, the hand of the LORD was against them to bring misfortune, as the LORD had warned them and sworn to them; and they were in great distress.

<sup>16</sup>Then the LORD raised up judges, who delivered them out of the power of those who plundered them. <sup>17</sup>Yet they did not listen even to their judges; for they lusted after other gods and bowed down to them. They soon turned aside from the way in which their ancestors had walked, who had obeyed the commandments of the LORD; they did not follow their example. <sup>18</sup>Whenever the LORD raised up judges for them, the LORD was with the judge, and he delivered them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge; for the LORD would be moved to pity by their groaning because of those who persecuted and oppressed them. <sup>19</sup>But whenever the judge died, they would relapse and behave worse than their ancestors, following other gods, worshiping them and bowing down to them. They would not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways.

*Last week, we saw that it is not Jesus' teachings that transform, it is the teacher. And this is an immeasurable blessing, for Jesus makes us over – in spite of ourselves.*

*Extreme Makeover . . .* Some of us would like to remake our lives from top to bottom. Others may not be looking for a complete remodel, but we sure can think of a few areas that need a lot of work. Yet perhaps none of us really comprehend the extent of the makeover that God desires for us – that we become whole and mature disciples of Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup>

*One step forward, two steps back*

In our *Thru the Bible* reading, we are now well along in the story of Israel. God has formed a people, saved them from

### The Book of Judges

After the Israelites conquered large portions of Canaan under the leadership of Joshua, they settled into a long period of consolidation. The book of Judges tells the story of this very difficult, indeed tragic, period in Israel's history.

Unlike the peoples around them, the Israelites did not have a human king, for God was to be their king. The leadership and administration of the twelve tribes was handled by men and women known as "judges." Generally, the judges of Israel were chosen from among the heads of the twelve tribes. They had the authority to settle disputes and promote justice. They also provided military leadership.

As we might expect, some of the judges were "minor" and of little note. But others were lauded by Israel as saviors who led the tribes in times of crisis when the existence of Israel was threatened. For example, Othniel was the first judge and is presented in the book of Judges as an ideal leader who rescued the Israelites from oppression. Other judges are better known, such as Deborah, Gideon, and Samson. Deborah was not only the legal and military leader of Israel, she was also a prophet. What an extraordinary woman she must have been to be accepted as the leader of the twelve tribes.

Though God raised up many judges who led the people back to God, their return was inevitably short-lived. Succeeding generations would fall further and further away from God, until God raised up yet another judge. It could be described as descending cycles of faithlessness. In the end, the people abandoned God's way entirely, doing "what was right in their own eyes" (Judges 21:25)

<sup>1</sup>In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells his disciples that they are to be perfect as their heavenly father is perfect (Matt. 5:48), though "perfect" doesn't quite mean what we take it to mean. The Greek here is *téleios*, which can mean "undivided" and "mature." Our makeover is about transforming us into mature children of God whose love for God and neighbor is undivided, as is God's love for us.

slavery in Egypt, brought them to the Promised Land, and led them in its conquest. Yet even the most casual reader of these stories has to be struck by the endless whining and faithlessness of the Israelites. They seem to be God's one-step-forward-two-steps-back people. And now, as they proceed with their settlement of Canaan, the Israelites slide further and further away from God. Every time they drift away, God raises up another judge who leads the people back to God. But each time, they never quite get back to where they started – the cycles of faithfulness followed by faithlessness drift lower and lower. One step forward and two steps back.

By the time the book of Judges ends, we wouldn't be surprised if the whole story ended right there. God has saved the people from slavery, taught them how to live as they were created to live, handed over to them a place to call home – all that, and still God seems to have so little to show for it. The Israelites are to be God's agents in the world, the ones through whom all humanity would be blessed. They are to be the light to the world, the city on a hill. Sadly however, the *Extreme Makeover* of the Israelites seems a complete bust.

Yet, the biblical story is of a relentless God who simply will not give up, who will pursue his people without end, who will chase them down time after time after time, sending prophet after prophet to call them home. This is the story of a God who loves his people despite their faithlessness, so much so that he provides one faithful Jew who will do and be for Israel what Israel is unable to do and be for herself.

*Simply Christian*, by N.T. Wright

Have you ever read a book only to realize much later how blessed you were to have found it? When I began serious biblical studies, I somehow stumbled upon N.T. Wright's *The New Testament and the People of God*. It was a revelation. Even then, I knew I had read something special. But only later did I learn just how special.

Even a casual reader of these studies has probably noticed how foundational is Bishop Wright to my work and my understanding of God, Jesus, and the Bible. People have often asked what they ought to read of his, but I've never been sure quite what to recommend. As marvelous and seminal as it is, few people are going to tackle *The New Testament and the People of God*. So, I've usually urged people toward collections of his sermons.

But a couple of months ago, Bishop Wright released a new book that I will recommend first to anyone, *Simply Christian: Making Sense of Christianity*. This is an introduction to Christianity unlike any you've read. Wright makes the case for the Christian claims in plain English and explains in simple, yet beautiful, prose the story we tell about God and his creation.

In the blurbs, William Willimon, formerly the chaplain at Duke Seminary and now a UMC bishop, writes, "We have no better interpreter of the faith than Tom Wright. *Simply Christian* is an amazing testimony to the vitality and truth of the Christian faith and to his skill." As Anne Rice (yes, the vampire lady turned novelist of Jesus) writes, "N.T. Wright is simply crucial; his writing can transform one's life."

I hope you will find time this summer for Bishop Wright's book. It is both an easy and a thought-provoking read. I'm pretty sure that you will never see your faith in quite the same way again.

All this God does *for* them. In spite of themselves, they are God's redeemed people.

*In spite of ourselves*

As it was with the ancient Israelites, so it is with us. Despite all our good intentions, we do what we know is unwise and sometimes hurtful. Likewise, too often we fail to do that which we know we ought to do. If our extreme makeover were left solely in our own hands, it would be doomed from the outset. Such is the power of sin.

Yet, we are not left to our own devices. Sin may still be a part of our world and of our lives, but its days are numbered. God's victory over sin was won 2,000 years ago on a cross outside Jerusalem. The proof of this victory is Jesus' resurrection and its power is the power of God's Spirit.

Despite the Israelites' faithlessness during much of the time of the Judges, God was present with them. The High Priest of Israel could come into God's presence by stepping before the ark of the covenant within the tabernacle. It was the place where heaven and earth met.

Despite our own faithlessness, God is with each of us . . . present within us . . . dwelling within us . . . enabling us to be a faithful people. Paul wrote that each believer is a temple of God (1 Cor. 6:19-20), a place where God dwells, where heaven and earth meet. Paul spoke of Christians being "in Christ" and of Christ "in us." He wrote, ". . . you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him" (Romans 8:9).

The Holy Spirit is God's personal presence with us all, transforming and reshaping us, making us over in the extreme. It is only by the power of God, never by the teachings alone, that we can be made into the people we seek to be. As we strive each day to live out our discipleship, we can trust that the success of our extreme makeover lies with God and, hence, cannot fail.

## *Thru the Bible* Daily Bible Readings

April 30 – May 6

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p><b>Day 1</b> A day for reflection and catching up</p>	<p><b>Day 2</b> <b>Judges 13-15; Proverbs 18</b> The story of Samson begins</p>
<p><b>Day 3</b> <b>Judges 16-18; Proverbs 19:1-14</b> Samson and Delilah; Samson's death</p>	<p><b>Day 4</b> <b>Judges 19-21; Proverbs 19:15-29</b> The atrocity at Gibeah; an unholy civil war (These are grim stories! Where is God in all this mess? Is God about to do a new thing?)</p>
<p><b>Day 5</b> <b>Romans 1-3; Proverbs 20:1-15</b> God's Gospel and Righteousness; the challenge to the claim that God is righteous; God's faithfulness to the covenant [The outline here is from NT Wright's commentary in <i>The New Interpreter's Bible</i>. It is available in our library.]</p>	<p><b>Day 6</b> <b>Romans 4-5; Proverbs 20:16-30</b> More on God's faithfulness to the covenant; from faith to hope</p>
<p><b>Day 7</b> <b>Romans 6-8; Proverbs 21:1-16</b> Baptism and freedom; the life the law could not give; the inheritance guaranteed; nothing will separate us from God's love</p>	

## Sermon Notes

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### **Scott Engle's class, *Something More*, meets in Wesley Hall at 9:30 every Sunday.**

If you are not a part of a Sunday morning class, we hope that you'll visit our class. It is open to adults of all ages. We have more than ten small groups meeting now and a growing number of opportunities to meet other members of the St. Andrew community. If you are new to St. Andrew or just visiting, the class is a great way to begin getting connected. If you have questions, you are welcome to call Scott Engle at 214-291-8009 or e-mail him at [sengle@standrewcccl.org](mailto:sengle@standrewcccl.org).

### **May Book Recommendation**

***Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense*, by N.T. Wright**

See the page two textbox for more.

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

I wonder how often the ancient Israelites took the time to reflect on who they really were and what it meant. God was present with them, he dwelt with them, in a way that God was not present with any other people. God had named *them* as his people and given *them* his law. God had given *them* the tabernacle (later, the temple), the place where heaven and earth met. I guess that most of the time they identified with the world and its demands. They wanted to be like everyone else. They forgot who they really were.

I wonder how often we take the time to reflect on who *we* really are and what it means. Being transformed, made over, so that we become all that God hopes for us is not a matter of a few tips or techniques about living better. It has to begin with knowing who we are and then practicing Christian disciplines (such as prayer, Bible study, service, meditation, and more) that God uses to mold us into Christ-shaped people.

Paul's claim that each believer is a temple of God ought to blow us away. As a Pharisee, Paul knew the implications of what he was saying. The temple is where God was to be present, the place where heaven and earth meet. Each of us, Paul says, is such a place. 24/7. Without fail. In all things. If this doesn't stagger your imagination, then work on your imagination! When we go through troubled times, we can draw strength and confidence from the knowledge of who, and whose, we really are.

How do you think that most people would answer the question, "Who are you?" How would you answer it? Why does this business of our identity matter so much? Why do you think that time and again Paul would grab new Christians by the metaphorical collar and demand that they remember who they are . . . and act like it? What does the Spirit of Christ within you mean for the hopes and struggles of your day-to-day life?