A Hesitant Hero

Department of CHRISTIAN EDUCATION ORTHODOX CHURCH in AMERICA

This weekly bulletin insert complements the curriculum published by the Department of Christian Education of the Orthodox Church in America. This and many other Christian Education resources are available at http://dce.oca.org.

September 26th is the feast day of Gideon, an Old Testament hero who is named and praised in Hebrews 11.

But Gideon's story is not altogether heroic. He first appears in Judges 6, which begins with a melancholy description. God has delivered faithless Israel into the hands of her enemies. Now, whenever the Israelites plant seed, the Midianites "encamp against them and destroy the produce of the land as far as the neighborhood of Gaza, and leave no sustenance in Israel, and no sheep or ox or ass" (6: 4). The Israelites have cried out to God to deliver them from the Midianites' ravages.

Gideon is humbly beating out wheat—doing it in the wine press to hide it from the Midianites—when the angel of the Lord appears to him and says, "The Lord is with you, you mighty man of valor."

Gideon isn't feeling valorous. He answers, "Pray, sir, if the Lord is with us, why then has all this befallen us? And where are all His wonderful deeds which our fathers recounted to us...?" When the angel tells Gideon that he will be the one to deliver Israel from Midian, Gideon replies doubtfully that he is the least of his small clan.

Yet when the angel asks Gideon to destroy his pagan family's idol and build an altar to the Lord, he readily does so, an indication that there is courage in him. He does it by night, however, fearing his family and the townsmen.

Gideon's hesitation continues. He asks God (named in 6: 36) to produce dew on a fleece, leaving the ground around it dry, as proof that He has chosen Gideon to deliver Israel. Then he asks God to leave the fleece dry while wetting the surrounding ground. Father Eugen Pentiuc writes in "The Old Testament in Eastern Orthodox Tradition" (Oxford University Press 2014), that Gideon is "...redundant and almost ridiculous in his request." Even so, God is patiently compassionate: "Instead of being indignant at Gideon's nagging tests, God responds without hesitation."

As Gideon's confidence grows, God requires him to act with greater faith. He radically reduces the size of Gideon's army (using some tests of His own to determine which soldiers are fit for battle) so that Israel must depend on Him and won't be able to boast that "my own hand has delivered me" (7:2).

God supports His successful warrior, whose stature becomes so great that the men of Israel ask him to become their king, because he has saved them from Midian. But Gideon's faith in God has also increased, and he tells them, "I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the Lord will rule over you" (8: 23).

But Gideon, like many Biblical heroes, succumbs to temptation, described in 8: 24-27. After he dies, the people again turn to pagan worship, forget God, and fail to show kindness to Gideon's family.

Israel will continue to test God's patience, and Gideon, like all the Old Testament personages listed in Hebrews 11, will have to wait for God to send salvation so that they can be "made perfect."