

Text: Judges 10:6-16. Fourth Sunday in Lent. **March 6, 2016.**

Grace and peace are yours through our suffering Savior, Jesus. Amen.

Have you noticed at times a “spiritual cycle” in your life? Let me tell you what I mean. You’re here on Sunday. Hear God’s Word. “I love Jesus! Jesus loves me! I’m ready to take on the world.” Then the kids are fighting in the car, on the way home, from church. You lose your temper. Thought I loved Jesus. Jesus couldn’t love me. Then you reflect a little more on the sermon, you open your Bible. You see and read and remember, “Jesus does love me.” You repent before God and apologize to your children. They know you have a temper, but they also know you love them. Then all is right again. Until later that afternoon when they start fighting again. And the cycle repeats. There’s actually a Bible, big word for that cycle. It’s called repentance. Repentance is an important part of Lent. We admit that our sins put Jesus on the cross. We see that on the cross Jesus forgave all our sins. We turn away from those sins and use God’s help to throw those sins in the garbage. We repent in Lent. We repent in Lent. Repent in Lent.

That same cycle of sin and Savior, or repent is very evident in this book of Judges. This is a very emotional and at times confusing part of the Bible. The Israelites had it all, spiritually. The LORD chose them as his treasured possession. The LORD rescued them from slavery in Egypt. The LORD brought them to the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey. The LORD showed them his love. The LORD even gave them ten special ways to show love back, the ten commandments. And what did Israel do?

They did evil in the eyes of the LORD. They imported false gods from every other nation. That makes no sense! They had the one true God. They had seen his outstretched arm and mighty power. They had seen his love in action! And then look at the gods they served. Some were fertility gods. The Baals and the Ashtoreths were supposed to bring more crops, more flocks, more children. They worshiped these gods by engaging with “priests” and “priestesses” in the actions that would bring more crops, more flocks, more children. They even served some of these gods by offering human sacrifices. What! Human sacrifice! Are you serious! Yes! That’s how they served some of these gods. And the Israelites were the only people who imported their gods from other nations. And the Israelites were the only ones who had the LORD, the one true God! It makes no sense! Sadly, it’s sinful human nature. It hurts the heart to read, “They forsook the LORD and no longer served him.”

The LORD became angry with them. The LORD burned with anger. Yes. God got angry, very angry. His nostrils flared is the literal expression. He got burning hot. God will not tolerate rivals. God cannot stand second place. God wants us all to himself. God knows this truth, “If God does not have all your heart, he will soon have none of it.”

He sold them into the hands of the Philistines. The LORD’s own people were shattered, crushed, oppressed, on all sides. They got it from the east side of the Jordan. The south side from the Philistines. The north side from the Ammonites. The LORD was not messing around. The LORD wanted his people to see how much better it is to serve the LORD than serve other gods. The LORD loved his people so much he was calling to them, “Repent!” And the LORD used whatever it took to get them to repent, painful as that was to him.

These people sound just like us, don’t they? The LORD has given us every spiritual advantage. Did you have Christian parents? Are you baptized at an age too young to remember? God’s Word available here

every week. We can worship without interference from the police or government. Free Bibles on the table or buy one for \$5 at the store. Christian friends to help us on our walk with Jesus. And we walk away to other gods. We let our love of the action that makes more children consume and define us. A “harmless” magazine is the priest or a website the priestess. Fertility, money, that’s the real number one in life. I have to work. No time. I have to work. Too busy. God might get one hour a week, but does he really even get that hour, your whole heart, your whole soul, your entire mind? God will not tolerate rivals. He burns with anger at second place. He can’t stand it when we give ourselves to our hobbies, our passions and don’t give ourselves to him.

And oh, the guilt that follows. Was it 18 minutes ago you thought that thought that you can’t seem to keep out of your mind? Was it 18 hours ago, you said that thing you would never say in God’s house? Was it the life you lived 18 years ago that you are still not quite sure if God could still really love you?

What does God do with all that guilt? He saves you! Look at him speak in love to his people. Didn’t I save you from their hands? Of course! For each of the seven false gods they served, God sent a new savior. Maybe you didn’t catch that and just thought these were long Bible lists. But look again. Seven false gods, Baal, Ashtoreth, Aram, Sidon, Moab, Ammon, Philistines. Seven rescues, from Egypt, the Amorites, the Ammonites, the Philistines, the Sidonians, the Amalekites, the Maonites. Seven is the number when the LORD interacts with people, when the LORD keeps his promises, when the LORD delivers, rescues, saves. One rescuer sent for each oppressor. Some with names better known than others, like Moses and Samson, others with names lesser known like Othniel and Ehud and Shamgar. But all of them pointing ahead to the one, great, Savior for all people, for all sin, for all time, for all guilt! Jesus! The LORD’s word for save sounds like Jesus. That’s who Jesus is, our Savior. That’s what Jesus did, saved us from our sins, our guilt, our eternal death. If it takes seven human messengers to deliver this message of salvation, God will send them. If we sin 70 times 7, the LORD will still forgive all 490 times we repent. While we are still a long way off, the LORD wraps us in his arms, calms our repentant hearts and says, “I love you. I forgive you.”

There’s deep emotions from the LORD that go throughout this part of the Bible. There’s burning anger at sin. There’s selling his own people to oppression so they repent. There’s saving, over and over and over. And finally, the LORD could bear Israel’s misery no longer. Literally, the LORD’s soul couldn’t stand it. The LORD’s soul cut short this misery. These were his people. Every time they turned to him in repentance, he couldn’t help but look with mercy, love and pity on them.

I know I’m skipping ahead to the end of the story, but we need to know the ending to understand what can be a kind of confusing middle. The LORD angry with his people? The LORD saying, “I will no longer save you?” The LORD getting downright sarcastic. Cry out to the gods you have chosen. Let them save you. Wow! That doesn’t sound like the God I know, the calm, quiet, loving, grandpa. Well, here’s the deal. The LORD gets emotional about you! The LORD cares deeply about you! The LORD will show whatever emotion it takes to win you back, to get you back, to lead you to repent. Remember our theme? Repent in Lent.

The emotion worked! The sarcasm was successful. The LORD’s shot to the heart, “YOU! You! Have forsaken me and served other gods,” hit the mark, bull’s eye. The people repented. They cried out. They admitted, again and again. They accepted the consequences. Their actions backed it up. Let’s give the Israelites the benefit of the doubt, that this was real and sincere repentance. Let’s look at the LORD’s

reaction and realize this was the real deal. Yeah, they fell back into the same sins, but look at the guy in the mirror. He's not much different. The Israelites displayed the signs of true repentance.

They cried out! They looked to the LORD for help, for forgiveness. They admitted their sin, again and again. They weren't deterred by the LORD's burning anger. They didn't give up at the LORD's sarcasm. They saw a God who was right, a God who was calling them to repentance, a God who loved them enough to point out their sins. They were even willing to accept the consequences. Do with us whatever you think is best. They weren't like one of the very first sinners, Cain, who upon hearing God's punishment said, "This is more than I can bear." True repentance owns the sin. True repentance also owns the consequences for that sin. True repentance understands, "The only thing that would really be fair is if God instantly sent me to hell for my very first sin. Anything less than that is just God being nice and loving and patient." Anything less than instant and eternal death is just God being nice.

The people even backed up their words with their actions. They got rid of these strange, foreign, fertility, human sacrificing gods and served the LORD, not as unwilling slaves, but as loving children. It wasn't just talk. There was action. It wasn't lip service. It was heart service. That's true repentance. There's really an amazing exchange between the LORD and his people. We don't know exactly how the LORD spoke to them, but it seems very direct, very pointed, very right at the heart. This is the most detailed account of such a back and forth between God and his people. He never stopped loving them, even in his anger. He never stopped trying anything, even sarcasm, to win them back. He never stopped saving them, every time they repented. He could bear their misery no longer.

They repented, even without Lent. We repent in Lent. We have this special season for God to work in our hearts. Let's just say that clearly. Anything we say about repentance is all the LORD's working in us. Anything we do in repenting is really God doing it in us. Repent in Lent is not a list of things we have to do, but the action of a loving God in our hearts. First God has to convict us of sin, so we cry out to him. And call upon him first in the day of trouble. Not call upon him when we've tried everything else. The LORD has to lead us to admit our sin, come totally clean, no excuses, no he made me, no everybody does it, no what about you. There's a reason we put the admission of our sin right away first in the service, we can't be admitted to God's presence before we admit our sins.

Part of repent is also accepting the consequences. The gentlemen I visit in prison often share very emotional accounts of their repentance. They don't expect to be instantly released. Many of them realize, "The punishment I endure on earth is nothing compared to the punishment from which God saved me." They have often shared, "I can look back now and say, 'I'm glad I got caught.' I was on a path away from God and he brought me back. I should have learned my lesson before I ended up here."

And let's not forget about changing our actions. Saying to God, "I'm sorry I make work more important than you," and then continuing to make work more important than God isn't repentance. That's a pig going back to wallowing in the mud. Claiming to be sorry for sexual sin then continuing to carry on is like a dog going back to its own vomit. Repentance is not a condition of our forgiveness, it's a change of heart that God works in us with his forgiveness. Yeah, the cycle will continue and we will still sin. But God brings us to repent in Lent and breaks the chains of sin. God convicts us, leads us to cry out, leads us to admit our sin, lead us to accept the consequences and change our sinful ways, all because we know God can bear our misery no longer. Amen.