

“The Lord be with you.” (“And also with you.”) We all know the proper response, don't we? Unless, of course, you were raised with the Lutheran Hymnal, in which case the response would be, “And with thy spirit.” Nevertheless, saying “the Lord be with you,” is one of the most common phrases in the entire liturgy. We say it at least once just about every service. Sometimes two or three times.

Part of the reason for that is because it's a tremendously old part of the liturgy. Christians have been using it as a greeting and a service element for centuries. St Augustine describes his own congregation saying it in the 4th c. A.D. And that's mostly because variations of it occur throughout scripture. God's people have been saying, “The Lord be with you,” since the Old Testament. It's been around for a long, long time.

So long that we often forget what we're saying. It's just an ordinary greeting. It's just a meaningless thing we say during worship. But today, we read about someone who takes the phrase far more seriously. Today we hear about someone questioning, “Is the Lord actually with me?”

The man in question is named Gideon. Gideon is a young man working on his father's farm. He's just harvested some wheat, but he hasn't taken it to the threshing floor. No, he's taken it to a winepress.

Why has he taken wheat to a winepress? Well, because the Midianites are in the land. The Midianites are a group of kings who have banded their forces together to attack the Israelites. But the Midianites haven't tried to conquer Israel. They're content to simply show up, ransack their villages, kill all their men, steal all their food, and leave. Until the next time they decide to attack.

Gideon is terrified of being killed by the Midianites. Gideon is terrified of having his wheat stolen by the Midianites. And so he has taken his wheat to a winepress for threshing in the hopes that the Midianites won't look for him there.

While he's hiding in this winepress, the Angel of the Lord comes to him. As we've discussed the past few weeks, the preincarnate Christ comes to him. And he says two things that sound rather absurd to Gideon's ears: *“The Lord is with you, O mighty man of valor.”*

Let's deal with that second half first: *“O mighty man of valor.”* There is nothing mighty about Gideon, and Gideon knows it. He is hiding from his enemies in a winepress. He is just trying to survive. He has done nothing in his life to earn the title of “mighty man of valor.” But that's what God calls him.

Yet that's not what sticks out to Gideon the most. No, what catches his attention is that first half: the Lord is with you. Not, “The Lord be with you.” It's not a prayer. A hope. A desperate wish. No, the Lord IS with you. To which Gideon answers, “Yeah right!”

“Please, my lord, if the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all his wonderful deeds that our fathers recounted to us, saying, ‘Did not the Lord bring us up from Egypt?’ But now the Lord has forsaken us and given us into the hand of Midian.”

It turns out, Gideon is not only weak in physical strength. He's also weak in spiritual strength. He's weak in faith. Every word he says is dripping with doubt and cynicism. Several generations have gone by since the Lord brought Israel into the Promised Land. And as far as Gideon is concerned the whole account of the Exodus is just a bunch of children's stories. The Lord is with me? No, he's not! The Lord has forsaken them.

And yet, God has chosen him. Why? Why choose this cowardly man, hiding in a winepress? Why choose this doubting, faithless, skeptic to be a judge and military commander to lead God's people?

Well, simply put, because the Lord was with him. Whether Gideon believed it or not. Whether Gideon asked for it or not. The preincarnate Christ was with Gideon. And that made all the difference.

After Gideon finishes ranting about the Lord's failures, God replies, *"Go in this might of yours and save Israel from the hand of Midian."* What might does Gideon have to go in? God tells him: *"Do I not send you?"* That's all the might you need.

Still, Gideon won't believe it. Still, he insists, *"Please, Lord, how can I save Israel? Behold, my clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house."* And God replies, "Because I will be with you." And when God is with you, you can be just one man against all your enemies and still be victorious.

God was patient with Gideon, and eventually Gideon accepted his task. So God moved on to the rest of the Israelites. Because Gideon really wasn't any different than the rest of his people. All of Israel doubted. All of Israel was faithless and cynical. All of Israel needed to know that God was with them.

32,000 men were gathered for the army of Israel to stand against 135,000 Midianites. But it was too many. God wanted them to know that they were victorious because of his presence, not their own strength. 10,000 fearlessly volunteered to follow Gideon into battle. But it was still too many. This would be God's victory. Not Gideon's. Not Israel's.

Finally, 300 were chosen to attack. 300 against 135,000. But that was all Gideon needed. Because this battle would never be about strength of arms. This battle was about God handing Israel the victory they needed.

Handing them the victory not simply so that they wouldn't have to deal with raiding Midianite armies and the fear of death and hunger. No, he handed them the victory so that when they looked for the Messiah, they would know exactly what he would be. He would be like Gideon.

For the Messiah would be a mighty man of valor... who came in humility and weakness. He would be neither a religious leader nor a military commander. He would appear as someone who was the weakest of his clan and the least of his father's house.

He wouldn't command a grand army of thousands. He would lead just a few men, chosen seemingly at random. Into a battle where their greatest weapon would not be sword or shield, but only the promises of God. And he would conquer all his enemies, not by the strength of his arms, but because the Lord gave him the victory.

Gideon was the opposite of everything Israel expected in a judge. Gideon was the opposite of everything that Gideon expected in a judge. And Christ was the opposite of everything that we expect in a Savior as well.

Because if we really did think about those words – the Lord be with you – we might fairly often come to the same conclusion that Gideon did: yeah right! Where, God? Where are you? In a bunch of children's stories from a long time ago? Not good enough.

And yet, each and every time we say those words, we know that the prayer we ask has already been answered. The Lord is with us. The very name of this congregation proclaims it. Immanuel – God with us. He is with us.

He is with us in the child of Bethlehem. Born to the least of all the clans of Judah. He is with us in his cross and resurrection, promising us not just stories from a long time ago, but a hope and future. He is with us in His Holy Spirit, guiding our hearts to gather this evening just as he gathered the disciples on Pentecost morning.

But most importantly, he is with us in Word and Sacrament. In the preaching that comes from my lips. In the water that washes away sins. In the bread and wine that truly is the body and blood of Christ. The Lord is with you. He is a mighty man of valor.

And he calls you to be mighty men and women of valor. Not because you're so strong and important. Not because you're so faithful and righteous. Because, quite frankly, you're not. No, he calls you like he called Gideon and says, "Go in this might... because I have sent you. Go in this might... because I will be with you. Go in this might... because I have given the enemy into your hand." Amen.