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Judges 3:15-28

Bible Characters You’ve Never Heard Of: Ehud

Rev. Kerry Smith

Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Judges 3:15-28 New Revised Standard Version

So the Israelites served King Eglon of Moab eighteen years. But when the Israelites cried out to the Lord, the Lord raised up for them a deliverer, Ehud son of Gera, the Benjaminite, a left-handed man. The Israelites sent tribute by him to King Eglon of Moab. Ehud made for himself a sword with two edges, a cubit in length; and he fastened it on his right thigh under his clothes. Then he presented the tribute to King Eglon of Moab. Now Eglon was a very fat man. When Ehud had finished presenting the tribute, he sent the people who carried the tribute on their way. But he himself turned back at the sculptured stones near Gilgal, and said, “I have a secret message for you, O king.” So the king said, “Silence!” and all his attendants went out from his presence. Ehud came to him, while he was sitting alone in his cool roof chamber, and said, “I have a message from God for you.” So he rose from his seat. Then Ehud reached with his left hand, took the sword from his right thigh, and thrust it into Eglon’s belly; the hilt also went in after the blade, and the fat closed over the blade, for he did not draw the sword out of his belly; and the dirt came out. Then Ehud went out into the vestibule, and closed the doors of the roof chamber on him, and locked them. After he had gone, the servants came. When they saw that the doors of the roof chamber were locked, they thought, “He must be relieving himself in the cool chamber.” So they waited until they were embarrassed. When he still did not open the doors of the roof chamber, they took the key and opened them. There was their lord lying dead on the floor. Ehud escaped while they delayed, and passed beyond the sculptured stones, and escaped to Seirah. When he arrived, he sounded the trumpet in the hill country of Ephraim; and the Israelites went down with him from the hill country, having him at their head. He said to them, “Follow after me; for the Lord has given your enemies the Moabites into your hand.”

The Israelite people had a faithful, righteous leader, the Bible calls this person a judge. After forty years, which in the Bible means a long time, the good judge died. Then, the Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, but we don’t get any details as to what that evil is, and for 18 years the Israelite people are oppressed by a Moabite king. Then, the Israelites cry out to God and God sends Ehud. That’s the basic cycle: the people mess up; they get oppressed by an outside enemy, they cry for help, and they find help through a leader called a judge. Now, these judges don’t have a gavel and a bench and wear a robe. They are warriors who stepped up to lead when there was a crisis. They made the rules, enforced the rules, and they were the judge and jury where there was disagreement.

The Bible character that you’ve never heard of today is one of those judges. His name is Ehud. Have you ever heard of him? Ehud is from the tribe of Benjamin. In Hebrew Benjamin means “son of my right hand.” But, Ehud is left-handed from a right hand tribe. How many folks here are left-handed? About 10% of the population is left-handed. It seems like the world prefers folks who are right handed. Have you ever tried to buy scissors for left-handed folks? Or sit at a school desk made for left-handed folks? Even tools like power saws are made for right-handed people.

In certain societies people who are left-handed are considered unlucky or dishonest. Being left-handed is seen as not natural, as not good. After all, the right hand of God is the favored hand. Jesus sits at God’s right side. You shake with your right hand, you salute with your right hand, you fight with your right hand, you make the sign of the cross with your right hand. In the Bible there are over 100 favorable references to the right hand and 25 unfavorable references to the left hand. In the parable of the sheep and the goats, the sheep are on Christ’s right hand and the goats are on the left. Those on the right inherit the kingdom of God and those of the left depart into eternal fire. God’s left hand is the hand of judgment. The left side is the evil side, the scheming side. In Hebrew and in Latin, the word for left-handed means sinister. When the Bible tells us Ehud is left-handed that is our clue that he is crafty and deceptive. Ehud is a social outcast who most people would try to have nothing to do with.

Today we will hear his story. We will also hear about a Moabite king named Eglon who can take whatever he wants from the Israelite people for his royal coffers. The king has all the power and he demands a tribute or a tax or money or produce to remind the Israelites that they are being ruled by the Moabites. It sounds to me like extortion, like a bully at school that demands your lunch money so you don’t get beat up. This tribute could be protection money so the Israelites are protected from other nations or it could be pay off money so the Moabites don’t attack them. Left-handed Ehud is chosen to carry the tribute to the king and Ehud has a secret plan to bring down the Moabite king.

READ SCRIPTURE.

Did you get what happened? Ehud made a double-edged sword that was a foot and a half long, and fastened this sword on his right thigh under his clothes. Then he could cross over with his left hand and draw the sword. Since most people are right-handed, the bodyguards would assume that Ehud is right-handed and only check Ehud’s left thigh for a weapon. They wouldn’t see the concealed weapon on his right side. Being left-handed made you dangerous in battle because everyone was used to fighting right-handed men.

Ehud had just given the king a lavish tribute or offering and by giving this tribute of money to the king, Ehud and the Israelites are offering a sacrifice to acknowledge the power and the people’s allegiance to the king. That may be why the Bible says Elgon was a fat man. The name Eglon comes from the Hebrew noun egel which means calf. So, the king is literally the fatted calf, which is an animal that is killed or sacrificed on an altar in an offering to God. Here is Eglon, the fatted calf, who is about to be killed and offered as a tribute and a sacrifice.

Ehud had just left the money with the king, and he comes back and is allowed to speak to the king again. Ehud says he has a secret message. The Hebrew word for message can mean a word or a thing. Either Ehud is a smooth talker or the king thinks he is going to get more money from Ehud because the king tells everyone to leave. The king and Ehud are alone and Ehud says he has a message from God for the king. The king starts to stand up from his throne to receive the secret but now divine message. The king is unseating himself from the seat of power.

Ehud reaches with his left hand, takes the dagger from his right thigh, and thrusts it into Eglon’s very fat belly. The Bible doesn’t leave anything out! Eglon’s fat swallows up the sword, handle and all, and Ehud doesn’t take the sword out. The phrase that is translated as “the dirt came out” has an uncertain meaning. It could mean the king’s intestines came out. Ehud locks the doors to the roof to keep the guards out and makes a quick getaway. The attendants come back, and assume the king is on the royal toilet. They wait until they begin to be concerned and they find their lord lying dead on the floor.

There was also this bit about the sculptured stones. The NIV translates sculptured stones as the idols. These sculptured stones or idols are mentioned twice. Once before the king is killed and once after. First, Ehud leaves with his Israelite companions but turns back at the sculptured stones. Then, Ehud kills the king and on his way back home he passes by these sculptured stones or idols. The Bible might be wanting us to get the connection that now that Ehud has killed the Moabite king or the fatted calf, Israel is to leave behind the idols or the Moabite gods that have oppressed them for 18 years. Ehud is made the military leader of the Israelites and he rallies the tribes against Moab and leads them as they ambush 10,000 Moabites and they earn their victory and independence. No more subjugation, no more paying tribute, no more hoping not to get hurt. For 80 years the land has peace.

The Bible isn’t all flowers and beautiful stories. It is story after story of broken people who God uses. God uses the least likely, even a left-handed social outcast, to help save God’s people from unjust rule and oppression. God uses Ehud and other imperfect people in Judges to save the people of Israel. God works through the unexpected and God still chooses to work through the unexpected, the underqualified, and the unwilling.

Each of us is broken in our own way. We might look pretty on the outside but inside we are held captive by what people think. We might be laughing and smiling but inside we are grieving or worried or anxious or uncertain. Proverbs 29:25 says, “People are trapped by their fear of others; those who trust the Lord are secure.” We fear what people think so we hide our real self. We are worried we won’t be welcomed. We crave validation and affirmation from others, and God affirms us, God validates us, God loves us. God will use what we think is broken to help make others whole, to help save others and ourselves. Thanks be to God, Amen.