

Sermon Preached at Stouffville United Church for Remembrance Day  
By the Rev. Capt. Dr. John S. Niles MSM

# "You Just Might Surprise Yourself"

*November 7, 2021*

**Judges 6:11-18**

A man was praying, "Father, I want to thank you that so far today, I have not been anxious, worried, angry, violent, lustful, I have not drank, sworn or spoken an unkind word, but in five minutes I'm going to be getting out of bed and then I'm really going to need your help."

I too need God's help. I want to thank you for the opportunity to again to come and speak here in this historic Church at this significant time. To be invited once is truly a gift, to be invited twice well that's just a miracle!

Why, are people so angry? A number of years ago, my wife and I took a trip without the children to Florida. On the spire of the moment we decided to take a side trip to Disneyland. Now, if you want to make your children angry go to Disneyland without them; if you want to make them really angry show them pictures. When we stopped for lunch we saw Mickey, Minnie, Chip and Dale waving to people in the restaurant. With them was a young man. Not having children around, and having him right next to me, I asked him what he was doing. He said, he was there to guard Mickey, Minnie and chip and dale. I said, "You're here to guard Mickey Minnie and chip and dale? What on earth to you have to guard them for?" He said, "Sir, you wouldn't believe it. People are crazy. Just the other day, a man threw Minnie over his shoulders and into the bush. People are crazy."

It's pretty bad, when people are attacking Minnie and Mickey. Why are we so angry?

In this morning's Scripture reading we hear how Gideon was bitter. He was angry. Angry over what he and his people had suffered at the hands of others. Angry that the past successes in battle for and in taking control of the Promised Land were now taken away from him and so he says "If the Lord is with us why has all of this happened?" And the answer Gideon is given is not the one he was expecting and was certainly not the one he wanted to hear. He wanted to know what God was going to do about this problem of evil in the world. And God's answer was and is; "I'm going to send you! You are God's answer to this problem. You!"

**Edmund Burke said, “The one thing necessary for the triumph of evil is that good people do nothing.”**

**Now the rest of Gideon’s story is laced with incredible acts, and powerful deeds. He recruits 32,000 soldiers, and is given instructions to pick just 300 to go up against an enormous army with overwhelming odds. After which through Gideon’s obedience to God, he leads the people into 40 years of peace and prosperity. But that is the rest of the story.**

**It was his story, but it is also our story. For on this Remembrance Day we too recount decades of peace and prosperity in Canada because there were and still are those who when they heard the call – like Gideon – to step up; they did and still do. “Am I not sending you?” “But Lord,” Gideon asked, “how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family.” And he is told, You might just surprise yourself. “Go in the strength that you have.”**

**But Gideon was stuck. He was stuck in the bitterness of the past. Yes, he remembered where he came from but forgot all the sacrifices that others made to get him there. “But sir,” Gideon replied, “if the LORD is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all his wonders that our fathers told us about when they said, ‘Did not the LORD bring us up out of Egypt?’ But now the LORD has abandoned us and put us into the hand of Midian. Gideon remembered but was bitter. And that bitterness was breaking him and stopping him from fulfilling his destiny. It was stopping him from stepping up and doing his part.**

**Jimmy Davis may not necessarily a name too many of you would be familiar with. He was a man who climbed from poverty to plenty, from obscurity as a share-cropper country boy to prominence; from being a farm boy to a famous two-term Louisiana Governor. He also became famous at the same time as a country folk singer while in office and a man who knew first hand obscurity, poverty and hardship; but he never let that embitter him, steal his joy or rob him of his future. He used to quote from the Psalm 84:10 “No good thing will God withhold from them who walk uprightly.” He was also the man who wrote the song ‘You are my sunshine’- which became the official State song of Louisiana. What many people don’t know is that it was not written about his girlfriend or wife or child. It was written about his horse. He loved that horse and would often bring it into his office (the Governor’s office). It was said, by a reporter at the time; “That this was the first time in the history of Louisiana or any government that both ends of the horse were in that government office and not just one. It’s been said, “Those who fail to learn from the past are doomed to repeat it.” According to the New York Times (2003/07/06), in the 3412 years of recorded history – there has been only 268 years without war somewhere in our world. And since WWII**

there has been only 26 days without war. 26 days. And so yes we remember today the WWI veterans who have now gone from our sight and we remember the last of the WWII veterans still among us but we remember too those who have served since and that continue to serve to this very day in international and domestic operations and who know all too well that justice, peace and security always come with a price. And someone has to pay it.

Gideon forgot that, he forgot where he came from but he was being reminded and on this Remembrance Day we remember those who paid that price and who still pay it; who experienced the valor and the horror of war and who fought and fight for the very freedoms that we so often take for granted. Who risked life and limb and who left the comfort of home and hearth and some of whom never returned.

We remember, but we do so today with a renewed determination to not allow the bitterness to poison our minds and destroy our spirits and rob us of our future. We mark today the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the poem 'In Flanders Fields' written during the fog of war by Col John McCrea who before WWI was a Captain within The Queen's Own Rifles of Canada. It was written after the death of Lieutenant Alexis Helmer, who was a friend and fellow officer. On May 2<sup>nd</sup> 1915, as Helmer left his dugout he was killed instantly by a direct hit from the enemy artillery. The parts of his body that were left were gathered into sandbags and laid in an army blanket for burial that evening. Alex was 22 years old and had just graduated - before leaving for war - from McGill University in Civil Engineering. In the absence of the military chaplain who was officiating at other graves there in the field of battle that same night, Major John McCrae conducted a simple service reciting passages from the Church of England's Order of Burial of the Dead. It was after this that he penned the words - In Flanders Fields.

*Take up our quarrel with the foe<sup>[SEP]</sup>To you, from failing hands, we  
throw<sup>[SEP]</sup>The torch: be it yours to hold it high<sup>[SEP]</sup>If ye break faith with us who  
die,<sup>[SEP]</sup>We shall not sleep, though poppies grow<sup>[SEP]</sup>In Flanders fields*

Gideon remembered where he came from and how much had been sacrificed by others to get him there but also he needed to remember who he was meant to be. "When the angel of the LORD appeared to Gideon, he said, "The LORD is with you, mighty warrior."

Gideon immediately dismissed the statement because he was so convinced of his inability, inferiority and insufficiency that what the messenger said about him being a mighty warrior went right over his head. After all he was hiding in the wilderness when the messenger of God came to him. He made excuse after excuse. He tried to avoid stepping up and taking responsibility by saying he was

from the weakest tribe and the least member of his family – the runt of the litter. Too often we feel ourselves inferior for the task and insufficient for the work; because life has beaten you down, or things haven't gone your way, or because of what you have done in the past or in the heat of the battle and the result has been that all of these things have broken your spirit and torment your mind.

For others it may be that the day in day out grind and hardships of life have caused you to believe the lie that Gideon had begun to believe that he was inferior, insufficient, or insignificant. That he was never going to amount for much.

Let me tell you what the Lord told Gideon that day is true for you today; that you are the child of the most High God. You were born with and for a purpose, and no matter what you have done in the past or how guilty you feel because you believe you failed to do what you thought you should have done; you are healed, restored, and forgiven. You are meant for more than to hide in the wilderness of life, but rather to be a leader, you are not meant to be a quitter but like Gideon a mighty warrior. The Lord was speaking healing into his life and encouraging his spirit and birthing a purpose for his life. And I believe He wants to do the same thing for you today.

Quite a few years ago now, I conducted a funeral for a 24 year-old veteran that had released from the Regular force. At the time I was a civilian minister with no thought of joining the military even though I came from a military family. This young man had come home, released, and as time passed isolated himself from everyone and overdosed. I never did learn his full story; though his battle with addiction was the final chapter in it. I was encouraged by his uncle a recovering addict himself at the funeral to tell people to use this as an opportunity to turn their lives over to a power greater than themselves so that they might be brought back to sanity and be given a fresh start – to encourage them to reach out for help, because he knew that there were some present who would be needing to have a wakeup call. And so I did. After the service many expressed gratitude, however, there was one guy who dressed like a biker who said to me, “Nice words. But I don't believe any of them. I don't believe in God; neither did my father or grandfather.” I said, after looking him up and down, “So how's that working for you?” He responded gruffly, “Just fine.” I said, “I'm glad to hear it. But if you don't mind, would you tell me what you do believe, given what you just experienced today?” He said, “Sure, I believe what my father and grandfather - who are dead now - believed. And that is, that we are put in the ground and return to become one with the earth. Later, we grow to become part of nature and grow into trees.” I said, “I can respect that” “But do you know what they do with trees?” “No. What?” “They cut them down. Then cut them up into bits and mash them up and then make paper. And on the paper

they print top selling books. Do you know what the number one seller is - Bibles." And then I looked him in the eye and handed him my bible and said, "Here, your grandfather has a word for you."

It was at that funeral that the seed was planted that led me to enlist; and after another encounter a few years later with the Commanding Officer and RSM of the Queen's Own Rifles at the time, I did. It was that moment with a dead soldier who tragically believed the lie that he had nowhere else to turn that caused me to later enlist so that others would.

What am I saying; I'm saying that God has a part for you to play – where ever you are in your life, no matter how inferior you might think you are, no matter how old or young or educated or not; no matter how many mistakes you think you have made – God is not finished with you and He has a part for you to play in making a difference and lessening the evil in this world. And like Gideon, it is up to you to decide whether you are going make excuses or step up Gideon, having been reminded of where he came from and how so many had sacrificed for him and who he was and what he was called to do was moved to give thanks and make an offering. *"Please do not depart from here, until I come back to You, and bring out my offering and lay it before You."* That too is why we pause on this Remembrance Day. It is to give thanks. It is to give thanks for the freedoms and privileges that we enjoy because of the service and sacrifices of others in the past and those among us in the present.

There was a man who met an acquaintance when he was out walking his pig with a peg leg. The man when they met, said, What are you doing with that pig?" The man with the pig said, "You don't understand this is a great pig. This pig saved my daughters life. Two weeks ago, we were swimming and my daughter nearly drowned. This pig ran into the water, swam up to her and pulled her to safety. This is a great pig. And this week, as we were sleeping, and the pig smelt smoke and woke us all up. It saved our whole family and house. This is a great pig!" "Wow, but what is with the peg leg?" "You got to understand. You don't eat a pig like this all at once." You don't eat a pig like this at all unless you're an ungrateful pig yourself.

Did you know that the etymology of the word Thank - where it comes from – is from the root word think? Perhaps, if we took the time to think more – and remember – we would thank more. There were two boys who grew up together in the same small town. They went to school together. They continually helped each other out of jams. They enlisted together and then they went to war together. One of the boys was wounded in no-mans-land. His friend heard his cries and started to go for him. When one of his Chain of Command stopped him and said it is too late you will get killed and your friend is wounded so deeply he will probably die. The young man said, 'you don't understand, he is my friend, I

**can't leave him out there and he begged until he was given permission to go. He crawled over the barbed wire and grabbed his friend and dragged him back to the foxhole. When he got back one of the others saw that the boy was died and said "I told you it wouldn't make any difference. And the young soldier said, "Your wrong. It did make a difference because when I got there he was alive and he said, 'I knew you'd come, I knew you'd come.'"**

**The world is crying out for people who will step up and make a difference. If not now, when? If not you, who? You think about that. Amen.**