

Title: Our Story
Text: Judges 19-20
Theme: humbling grief
Series: Judges
Prop Stmtnt: It's impossible to play the game when the rules keep changing.

Read Text: Judges 19:1

The appeal of entertainment is it serves as a diversion from monotony, and a distraction from responsibility and difficulty. Go to the movies and forget about your problems for a couple of hours. Go on a cruise and pretend that this is your life. Listen to a comedian and laugh. Go to a concert and get carried away for a while. Smoke some weed, sip some vodka, just take the edge off and try to chill.

The truth is, life is hard. We live east of Eden. The old Irish blessing says, “may the wind be at your back.” It is a nice thought because most of the time, the wind is not at our back, it is in our face. We sigh. Sighing is an emotionally weighted exhaling. It is a physical and personal bowing of ourselves to that which we feel we are under. Now, I could choose not to talk about that. I could pretend that following Jesus is like Cedar Point, where there is one thrill ride after another. I could give you a steady stream of pep talks disguised as sermons that would energize you for a moment and like a good comedy routine, movie or cruise, make you feel differently for a little while. But, in order to do that, I would have to somehow disconnect you or distract from what your life is right now. I am not interested in making you feel better this morning. My mission is to help you get home safe. Your life is a marathon and I’m preparing for you miles 22, 23, 24, 25 and 26. This is what makes preaching through the book of Judges so hard and so necessary.

It is a bit humorous to watch a toddler look at herself in the mirror and try to figure out who that is. Adults will often say, “oh, look at the pretty baby. Kiss the pretty baby.” Only to have the toddler smack her face into the mirror in order to love that baby, which of course is herself. But, when we look into the mirror of the book of Judges, we do not say, “Oh look at the pretty baby.” In fact, like the couple who wouldn’t visit their sick friend, we often do not know how we are to think and respond to bad news. Judges 19 and 20 read like the scum and algae that one scrapes off the bottom of the barrel. It reeks, and what is worse, is, this is our story. The story of OT Israel is the story of a nation that represents the world. So, when we read these chapters and are tempted to recoil and want to distance ourselves from them, we need to grieve and feel the lostness even as we identify the sin and its devastating consequences.

We’ve learned by now that when the author writes, “*In those days there was no king in Israel*” that what follows is going to be bad and this account is one of the worst in the Bible. The setting is the hill country of Ephraim and it also involves Bethlehem in Judah. A Levite is sojourning. He is on a trip because his concubine who is from Bethlehem has left him and went back home. Now, right there, when we read “concubine” we should think, “Oh, no. This is probably not going to be good.” And it isn’t. A concubine was a woman considered to be the property of the man. She was higher than a slave, but lower than a wife. He is her husband, but she is not quite his wife, though she cannot be anyone else’s. If she bore children to him, they were not necessarily in line for any inheritance. So, she had to be faithful to him, but he did not

necessarily have to be faithful to her. But, in this case she was unfaithful to him, or she was angry with him (the Hebrew could mean that) and she left the Levite and went back home to Bethlehem and stayed with her father for four months. So far, this is the normal fare for a Tuesday afternoon soap opera. (Will Connie and Levi reunite? Will he forgive her? Will she realize that she really cares about him?) But, just you wait. This is the backdrop to an event that shapes the history of Israel. When you understand this, you will then understand why so many other things happen the way they do, even generations later. But, while that is helpful to know as far as the storyline of the Bible is concerned, what you really need to know is the big idea that the author is making and you have to follow the logic. In those days, there was no king in Israel. That means that practically speaking, there was no law-maker and no law enforcer. Therefore, people made up their own laws as they wanted and they enforced those laws as they wanted.

I am talking to people right now, who make up their own rules and do whatever it is they want to do. Publicly you look respectable. Privately, you are your own god and you really don't care more for others unless caring for others makes you look good. This is your story. When you or anyone else gives lip service to God's law, but in reality, you do what you want to do, your life will have all sorts of different standards that are inherently contradictory and various degrees of enforcement and punishment that will not make sense. It's impossible to play the game when the rules keep changing. So, I am summarizing that entire philosophy of life by saying, here is what happens when God's revelation, God's Word, God's law is rejected and ignored. So, when I say, "the law" think of God's Word.

I. Without the Law, life is confusing. (19)

The Levite goes back to Bethlehem in order to reclaim his concubine. He had his servant with him and a couple of donkeys and wants her back. When she sees him, she seems to be happy and she brings him into her father's house who is apparently really glad to see the Levite and insists that he stay for a visit. The Levite speaks kindly to her and she apparently agrees to go with him. They eat and drink for 3 days. Finally the Levite says that he really has to leave. His father-in-law gets him to eat and drink another day. It's a bit comical. When you are a guest, you honor your host and when you are a host, you take care of your guest. But, the Levite really wants to get back home. Finally, on the fifth day, the Levite gets up early to go and his father-in-law gets him to eat and drink some more, but this time, instead of spending the night, he puts his foot down and says, we are leaving and he actually begins his journey, even though it is already later in the afternoon. It seems like a lot of unnecessary detail, but the point is made how hospitable and generous, perhaps controlling his father-in-law is.

The Levite and his mini-van make it to Jerusalem, which is under the control of the Jebusites at this time. His servant says that they ought to spend the night there, but the Levite is afraid of staying in a city controlled by foreigners. Who knows what those pagans might do, right? So, they keep going. They get a few more miles up the road where they cross from Judah into Benjamin and come to the city of Gibeah. It was basic custom for people to take in travelers. But here at Gibeah, no one took them in. An old man, who was an outsider himself (16a) was coming in from the fields and expressed concern for their safety if they stayed in the city square for the evening and invited them to his home for the night. The Levite accepts the invitation and they go.

While they are eating and drinking, the men of the city surround the house and demand that the old man send the Levite out so they can rape him. If this sounds a lot like Lot, the angels and Sodom and Gomorrah, it is supposed to. That this author's point. The grammar, the syntax and the vocabulary are intentionally familiar to Genesis 19. This is confusing, isn't it? But this is not Sodom, this is Gibeah. This is not a city that belonged to the Canaanites, this belongs to Israel. The old man offers them his virgin daughter and the Levite's concubine. The old man who took them in. The old man who was concerned for their safety offers up the two girls and says, "*Violate them and do with them what seems good to you.*" (v.24) What are we supposed to think? This old man who was so kind, does not sound so kind anymore. What seemed good to him, was to throw out his daughter to these men and the Levite's concubine for them to rape. Unlike Sodom, the men of the city are not struck blind. There is no rescue. The old man's offer is not accepted and they keep up their demands. Finally, the Levite forces his concubine to go out to them and they assault her all night, while we are led to believe that the Levite and others sleep safely inside. So, the Levite who spoke kindly to his concubine to re-gain her affection now tosses her to the wolves. Gibeah looks just like Sodom and Gomorrah. We are left wondering, will god respond? The Israelites are no better than the Canaanites, in fact, in many cases, worse. This is very confusing.

II. Without the Law, life is violent. (19)

The men of Gibeah abuse the girl throughout the night. In the morning they left and left her for dead. She manages to make it back to the door, where she collapses. The author says, "her hands were on the threshold." If she screamed out, no one came to her aid. No one protected her. This is utter lawlessness. These are the men of the city. This is how things are. This, we are lead to believe is acceptable to them. If this is what civilized life looks like, can you imagine what else goes on? An entire city thinks that this is okay. The leaders of the city do not protect those under their care, they rape them and kill them. These men use their strength to intimidate, to tear down, to destroy, to violate and to kill. This is about as bad as it gets. This is life when there is no fear of God. This is life when there is no law, no law-giver and no law-enforcer. When everyone is doing what is right in his own eyes, there is rarely any good. We witness complete disregard for God and for others. And this is true for the men of the city, for the Levite, and the old man. There are no heroes in this story.

Do you ever get a bit frustrated with the fact that you always seem to get caught when you sin, or your conscience bothers you deeply when you do? Have you ever looked at others who seem to be able to sin and not get caught or not be bothered with a little bit of envy? Thank God that you not only know his law, but also thank God that his law carries enough weight in your life that it actually governs your thinking and decisions. A little bit of sin does not stay as a little bit of sin. A little bit of sin leads to a little bit more and a little bit more and this is another example of where it will lead anyone. We are no match for sin. It will take us to very bad places where we are not only scarred, but where we are capable of scarring others.

Again, we want to distant ourselves from this. We want to say, this is what ISIS does. This is what Boko Harem does. But, when you hear the national anthem before a ball game or are tempted to tear up to the tune of God Bless America, do not forget that our cities had "pride"

parades last weekend flaunting our lostness, our rebellion, and our (let's be honest), our hatred of God's Word. We pay taxes to support abortion clinics all over this land where, behind the doors of a medical procedure, we kill the lives of defenseless children, whose cries cannot be heard. But God hears them. It takes a lot to shock us, doesn't it? That is not a sign of civilization, it is a sign of depravity. Without the law, life is not only confusing and violent, life is calloused.

III. Without the Law, life is calloused. (19)

Notice how the Levite reacts in v.27. His concubine is lying at the front door with her hands on the threshold. She was reaching for the door. Reaching for help, reaching for comfort, reaching for care, reaching for her husband who had come all the way to Bethlehem to get her, but now threw her out to the dogs. And the Levite? Well, he gets up after a night's sleep, is ready for the day, ready to resume his travels, and says, "Get up, let us be going." He has no feeling for what has just happened. His intent and goal is to get going. He does not go out looking for her. In fact, you get the sense that if he did not almost step on her, he might have gone on his way without even worrying what happened to her. Apart from the statement, "There was no king in Israel" and "everyone did what was right in his own eyes" the author of Judges offers very little commentary. But, he clearly gives us clues and v.26 is an example of that where the Levite is not called her husband (which he is earlier in the story when he speaks kindly to her), but is called her master, because he is treating her like a piece of property. He shows absolutely no concern for her at all. There is no grief. He puts her body on the donkey "and went away to his home." What kind of a man is this who is so calloused to this girl that he treats her abuse as if it were nothing more than a minor inconvenience. "Get up, let us be going." Your making me late!

Tell me that you feel something here. But why? Why do you feel something? Pity, grief, anger, something. Why? If evolution is true, and we are here by nothing more than the sheer accidental collision and mutation of particles, then you have nothing to be upset about here. Do you see what God's law has saved us from? God tells us that life is precious. The strong are to protect the vulnerable. Men are to protect women. Adults are to protect children. Leaders are to protect their constituents. But, without any sense of respect for God's law, then man makes up his own laws. And that night, the men determined that the rule of the night was lust. Without God's law, we would be a calloused people.

Some of you justify exposing yourself to all sorts of profanity, vulgarity and even nudity in your entertainment choices because you say, "Oh, I hear that stuff all day at work or at school. I'm used to it." The lyrics don't bother me, I like the music. The language doesn't bother me, I like the acting. Yea, it can be a little crude, but that show is really funny." Listen carefully to yourself. I understand that when sin is so accepted by our culture, that we are no longer shocked that something like this happens, but when we are no longer grieved and bothered to the point where we accept it, tolerate it, permit it, even choose it, then we are calloused. Is it a sign of being strong when you are unmoved by sin? This is inhumane.

IV. Without the Law, life is dehumanized. (19-20)

One of the literary features of this account is the fact that so far, no one has a name. In a sense the Levite represents the Levites, the concubine represents the women, the old man represents

the outsiders, the men at Gibeah represent the men of Israel. As part of that, though, is this complete anonymity. There is no healthy sense of personal identity and community cohesion. If you have a name, you are somebody. But, this is what happens when everyone is in it for himself. There is distance from one another. Denigration of basic civility and then destruction. There is no hospitality, no care for the traveler. The outsider at Gibeah is the only one who cares for them. He knows that while they are inside of the city walls, they are really not protected. It is not the enemy out there, but the enemy in here. And yet, this old man who seems to care for them doesn't care for his own daughter or for this woman who has come under his roof. What is this? He cares for the Levite and offers his daughter as a trade and the Levite offers up his concubine in order to protect the old man. So, the men are willing to give away the women for their own sakes. We, of course have come a long way, or have we? The silent cries of unborn children being executed are shrugged off. People on the side of the road are ignored because we have too many other things to do. Elderly family members are a bother. The weak exist to be exploited. Without God's law, you do not matter. No one does. Initially we are sympathetic to the Levite, but no longer. This unnamed woman is the most disregarded of all. And this is when things get bizarre. Her death is just as dehumanizing as her life.

V. Without the Law, life is bizarre. (19-20)

When you read the story carefully, it is not clear if the woman was dead when the Levite found her in the morning. Later on when he recounts the story in 20:5, he simply says, "and she died" not, "and they killed her." The author leaves open the possibility that this Levite got her home, where he killed her. She was treated like an animal in life and now he is treated like one in death. He cuts her body up into 12 pieces and sends each piece by means of a messenger to each of the 12 tribes in order to arouse the nation. What is he saying? "Look at what these men from Gibeah did. But, what about the fact that you gave her to them? They were evil, yes. But so was the Levite. Everyone has blood on their hands. But then another bizarre thing happens. Chapter 19 ends with the nation doing something then that it never did throughout the entire book. It responded. All of the tribes were motivated into action, all that is, but one.

VI. Without the Law, life is tragic. (20)

I am going to pick it up here next week. Chapters 20-21 all work together with chapter 19 serving as the back story to why the tribe of Benjamin is almost wiped out. But there is more.

Every feature in this story is like a boring sample into the life of the nation and everything that comes up is contaminated. I remember when Nixon resigned. I remember believing that we really were a nation of laws. Now, we are decades past that, and the level of corruption is not just in the political leaders, but is now in the FBI and Justice department. What do you do, when the fire station catches on fire, or the police station is robbed? What do you do when the justice department is unjust and the church that is supposed to be a moral voice is full of immorality and corruption? What are you supposed to believe? What are you supposed to do? Please listen to me. Those of you who are over 30, listen. This is what our kids are experiencing. There is no one left for them to trust. Therefore, they don't care! They do not have the moral compass that can be drawn north. For them, it is not that in life you can experience tragedies; life itself is tragic. But,

this is what happens when there is no law. Everyone does what is right in their own eyes and when that happens, everyone is dead or is dying. It is tragic.

Do you know why this sad, sordid and revolting story is here? You and I need a mirror. We need to see ourselves. We need to see how hopeless and sinful we are. Otherwise, we would lie to ourselves about ourselves.

We need a good king who will make good laws.

We need a good and powerful king who will make and enforce good laws.

We need a good, powerful and righteous king who will make, enforce and exemplify good laws.

We have one. And he came from Bethlehem. Who would have thought.