Call Waiting: The Comic Incompetence of Gideon

Sister Mary Robert was nine feet tall and a hundred years old. She moved in a silent, icy glide, as if propelled not by muscles and joints, not by hips and knees, but by tiny, invisible rollerblades. When I was a senior, she appeared in the doorway of my English class. Without saying a word, she crooked one long finger at the first girl in the first row. The girl got up silently and followed her out. Both returned after a while, and the next girl was summoned with the same silently crooked finger. So it continued, through the whole ninety minute class, until the girls who were waiting to be summoned were mesmerized by curiosity. One by one by one, in alphabetical order, all of my classmates were called out by that silently crooked finger.

All but me. Sister Mary Robert looked me in the eye, then looked at the girl behind me and crooked her finger. I settled back into my desk. Everyone ceased paying any attention whatsoever to what Sister Mary Elberta was trying to teach us.

Unlike each of my classmates, I was not invited to join the convent. I was not even offered a five hundred dollar scholarship to the college run by this order of nuns. Nope. Not me. They were glad to see me graduate.

And I was instantly famous. It was the social highlight of my adolescence: the nuns didn't want me. At our twenty-fifth reunion a few years ago, the story was told again and once again everyone laughed, almost enviously. Catholicism had set me free of Catholicism; God had set me free of God. I graduated, threw away my school uniform, went off to the university, and quit going to church: what a relief. I was done with religion. I would never experience that great religious moment, God's call. I was safe. My life was mine. I did not have a "vocation." No one, not even God, would dare to disagree with Sister Mary Robert.

Actually, I think God did call me once, in about 1978. I listened for a minute, as I do to those men selling storm windows; then I hung up.

I was teaching a Great Books course at Northwestern University. We were reading the Bible. I had never read the Bible before. Until I had to teach this course, I did not even own a Bible. Parts of the Bible had been read to me, Sunday after Sunday, the sacred handed out in sound bites, in little snippets. But that's different from holding the whole book in your hands and setting out to read it carefully and seriously. I was twenty-seven or twenty-eight--omniscient, omnipotent, invulnerable, and skinny--and above all terribly serious about being an English professor.

On this particular morning I sat in my office, re-reading the assignment for that day's class. It included the scene where God speaks to Moses from within the burning bush. As you will recall, Moses has many arguments demonstrating God's very bad judgment in calling him to rescue God's people from the Pharaoh. God comes across as persistent, patient, and affectionate. Zeus, I thought to myself, has thunderbolts for mortals like Moses. As gods go, this character Yahweh seems pretty strange. He is practically pleading.

Moses' best counter-argument is that he is inarticulate, that he will have no idea what to say and no ability to say it well--even though he seems to be holding his own in his argument with God. God assures Moses that, when the time comes, God will put words in Moses' mouth.

I found myself urging Moses forward. "Maybe all this other stuff is silly magic tricks," I felt myself arguing, "but you can trust this business of finding words in your mouth. That's real. God does that all the time, trust me. God puts words in *my* mouth all the time."

What? How absolutely impossible. And how entirely undeniable. I sat there for a solid hour, unable to continue reading, unable to prepare the class I was supposed to teach, my brains frozen or locked up as if some cerebral computer had just crashed. DOS calls it Error #13: programs with conflicting commands. I walked over to my classroom at the usual time, still unable to think, unable to think about being unable to think, merely knowing it was time to go to class.

I stepped up to the lectern and took a deep breath--and nothing happened. Nothing at all. The more attentive students began to stare. I tried again. Still nothing. Now the whole class was staring--forty undergraduates, sitting there with spiral notebooks.

With an inner laugh that would have made Sara laugh too, I gave in. "OK, God," I heard myself thinking, "you win. Ok." My voice returned, I bluffed my way through the hour, and then my life went on as if nothing had happened. I blamed the whole event on some combination of stress and imaginative engagement with the text. God was not real. God was just a character in this incredibly powerful narrative: for a moment, I had entered the world of the story and for a moment I had been stuck in that fictional world. But it *was* fiction. God was fiction. God was fiction, I was an English professor, and that was that. I just needed some sleep.

My story about God is obviously a long one, as intricate and as unlikely as a good story is apt to be. But so is your story about God, your story about why you are here tonight too. God is like this in our lives. This is what God does to us. Scripture warns us, in fact, that God is like this. One of the finest of these warnings is the story of Gideon in Judges chapters six and seven, and that's what I'd like to talk about tonight.

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The call of Gideon is, I'd argue, one of the great comic masterpieces of Western literature. Our day is singularly lacking in great comedy, because comedy is always about the triumph of love over cowardice, avarice, and exploitation, about the triumph of abundance and confidence over all that separates us from ourselves and from each other. Comedy, like Easter, is about the triumph of life over death. As Christians, as people called to laugh and to witness the triumph of life, we are chronic misfits in a world that has conceded victory to fear. The great comedy of Gideon is about triumph over fear.

The call of Gideon fits neatly into the fundamental literary pattern evident in all the Biblical accounts of God's call. According to this pattern, the person God calls always presents the same three excuses.

1. **Incredulity**. This just can't be happening. This isn't real. That was certainly my response in my office that day. It is also the response revealed by Sarah's laugh. It is Bill Cosby's version of Noah: "Who is this *really*?" Gideon has the best line of all. God shows up and says, "The Lord is with you, you mighty man of valor." Gideon's sarcasm is palpable: "Pray, Sir, if God is with us, why has all this befallen us? Where are all his wonderful deeds?"

That's a great question. It's the classic question. God is with me? Poo-bah. Look at this world. How can God possibly be real? Right away, we know that we like this guy Gideon. Despite the distance of thousands of years, we identify with him. He seems to live in the same kind of world we do.

2. **Incompetence**. The call narratives include every possible variation on that ancient human question, "Who, *me*???" We know that what God wants is objectively impossible. We know we are not capable of doing what God wants, so it hardly matters whether or not we are willing. Why should it matter whether I am willing to fly off the garage roof? The fact of the matter is that I can't fly. If I try, I'll just break my neck. And so we are told that Sarah is too old, Jeremiah is too young, Mary is unmarried, Moses cannot speak persuasively, and so on.

Any reasonable observer would also have to conclude that God's judgment in calling me looked pretty dubious as well. In 1978, I had not been to church in ten years, and furthermore it would be another ten years before I did start to go. And as I said, even the nuns didn't want me. Even as a child, I was notable not for piety but for asking pointed questions.

So Gideon probably has a point when he argues that he cannot raise an army to fight the Midianites, because he is the least son of the least family of his whole tribe. But as experienced readers, we know that God won't listen to his excuses. Nonetheless, here and elsewhere I find a deeply human, very gentle humor. The call narratives always manage to suggest that God's supposed omniscience has really gone off-line this time. That, or maybe God is just crazy. As readers, we are prompted to scratch our heads and to wonder what this crazy God is up to now.

3. **Unworthiness**. The unworthiness motif has two parts. First, at some point in the call narrative, the called person gives way to terror. Feeling incredulous and incompetent gives way to feeling stunned, feeling overwhelmed by terror and by awe at the presence of God. Such awe is often signalled by formulaic statements and traditional actions that no longer carry a lot of emotional force for contemporary readers. Gideon, for instance, is afraid he will die because he has seen God face-to-face. God reassures him; Gideon builds an altar. These are not expressions of terrified awe that resonate with us as Gideon's question resonates. Building altars is not something we do any more.

But there is one lovely and very accessible moment in this part of the tale: Gideon calls the place of his altar "God is peace." The word for "peace" that the story uses can also be translated as "health" or as "wholeness." God's intrusions into our lives promise wholeness? Or maybe there is some connection between human wholeness and facing our terror squarely? The story doesn't explain. Hebrew storytellers never explain much: these are incredibly dense little stories. Any

European storyteller of the last thousand years would take four hundred pages to tell Gideon's tale.

The second part of the unworthiness motif concerns social status. In the call narratives, the person's sense of awe is commonly deepened by his or her insignificant social status. We must remember, for instance, that Abraham's culture would have regarded his infertility as a divine curse. Moses would have been regarded as an outsider both by the Jews, because he was raised in the Pharaoh's palace, and by the Egyptians, because he was Jewish. Scripture is full of stories about second sons and infertile women. These sociological cues hide in the footnotes for you and me, but for the original poet and his audience they were facts so dramatic and self-evident that very little development was needed. Underlying the universal human awe at the presence of God, then, these call narratives emphasize that this improbable God keeps showing up in the lives of folks that everyone else already knows to be among life's nobodies and life's losers.

And Gideon is unquestionably among life's real losers. As the story progresses, Gideon mismanages several of the basic social conventions governing hospitality. His judgment is demonstrably terrible. He is the prototype of Inspector Clouseau. The narrator's point is to make us see that God is making an incredible mistake in asking Gideon to raise an army to fight off the Midianites: water wouldn't follow this guy downhill. For instance, when we first see Gideon, he trying to thresh his wheat while hiding from the Midianites inside a wine press. Think about that a minute. You thresh wheat by pounding it a bit to break the hulls away from the kernels; then you toss the whole mess into the air. The light hulls blow away in the breeze; the edible kernels fall back into your pan. This is not a task you can do inside a huge barrel. What kind of guy is this?

God's greeting is abruptly ironic: "The Lord is with you, you mighty man of valor." Right. Threshing wheat inside a barrel: that's valor for you. What you have to picture here, I think, is Whoopi Goldberg as God and Tom Hanks as Gideon.

As I said before, Gideon's comeback is just as sarcastic: "Pray, Sir, if the Lord is with us, why then has all this befallen us? Where are all his wonderful deeds that our fathers recounted to us?" Or as one translation has it, "Pray, Sir, if God is with us, then why are we in this predicament?" Why is the world such a stupid mess? If God is real, if God is around here someplace, then surely things would not be as awful as they are. "The Lord has cast us off," Gideon concludes.

I know how that feels. I bet everyone does, sooner or later. All of us know Midianites and their camels, by one name or another. And we don't even live in Chechnya, or Rwanda, or Somalia . . . or whatever godforsaken place will show up in the news next week.

The only problem with Gideon's argument that God has forsaken us is that God is standing right there in front of Gideon--with her arms folded across her chest and her eyes sparkling with that intelligent and barely contained frustration that Whoopi Goldberg conveys so brilliantly. And Tom Hanks is staring right back at her, pale and blue-eyed and clueless, with chaff in his hair and down the neck of his shirt.

God's comeback enriches the comedy of the scene. "Go in this might of yours," God says, "and deliver Israel from the hand of Midian; do not I send you?" But Gideon does not seem in the least "mighty." *What is going on here?*

What's going on here, I suggest, is an ordinary literary maneuver, a common literary device: the storyteller is using irony to force a redefinition of the concept "mighty man of valor." What counts to God as courage or strength, the story suggests, is not what we count as courage and strength. As Isaiah explains, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:1-13). The comic art of the Gideon story emerges as Gideon repeatedly gives way to fear and as he repeatedly demonstrates that he knows as much about military matters as he does about threshing wheat. Whatever God means by "mighty man of valor," the story insists, it is obviously not what we mean.

And it is not what Gideon would have meant either. In this call and in other scriptural calls, and for that matter in your life and in my life, God blithely disregards the stories we tell ourselves about who we are. God steps in, with no sense of dramatic propriety, and God disrupts the probability and the verisimilitude of our own careful self-constructions. We think we know who we are and what we can do. Or at least we have invested a lot of care and a lot of energy in making reasonable sense of our own lives. But like that little beep on the phone line, God interrupts these conversations we have with ourselves.

Gideon knew he was the least son of the least family and furthermore incapacitated by his own fears. I knew I was a hotshot young scholar. But God calls each of us by other names, by deeper and more intimate names. God has a different story about who we are. That's why baptism is so involved with the naming of the baby. At that very deepest human level of meaning, in the stories we act out and thereby call "ritual," we know that God knows our real names and give us our real names. And, sooner or later, we may discover that God is calling us by our real names.

God's little disruptive beeps can get pretty insistent. That's why I love how Gideon steadfastly refuses to believe, how repeatedly he demands some sort of proof. God keeps offering proofs. Each time, Gideon is convinced--but not for long. For an hour in 1978, I was convinced too. But just for an hour.

The most famous of Gideon's tests involves a sheep pelt. It's only five sentences, so let me read it. Five sentences! The compression and detail here are, from a literary perspective, nothing less than stunning. I am also entertained by how accurately the storyteller makes Gideon sound like any kid arguing "just once, just once, please"--for the second time. The theology is no less engaging. What kind of God is this anyway? Think about how this passage answers the question, "What kind of guy is this character called God?"

Then Gideon said to God, "If thou wilt deliver Israel by my hand, as thou has said, behold, I am laying a fleece of wool on the threshing floor; if there is dew on the fleece alone, and it is dry on all the ground, then I shall know that thou wilt deliver Israel by my hand, as thou has said. And it was so. When he rose early next morning and squeezed the fleece, he wrung enough dew from the fleece to fill a bowl with water. Then Gideon said to God, "Let not thy anger burn against

me, let me speak but this once; pray, let me make trial only this once with the fleece, pray, let it be dry only on the fleece and on all the ground let there be dew." And God did so that night; for it was dry on the fleece only, and on all the ground there was dew (Judges 6:36-40).

What kind of God is this? Very patient, obviously. Somewhat less obviously, I'd suggest, this God is persistent. What God is persistently claiming, in the Gideon story, comes down to this: we don't have to be capable. We don't have to be brave. We don't have to know how. We can be as clueless as Gideon, as vacillating and uncertain and reluctant.

Ultimately, the only thing we have to be is *willing*. God's definition of "valor" is that very simple willingness to try, that willingness to be an instrument in another's hands and not the whole orchestra, conductor and everything, all by ourselves.

God doesn't care that we are too old, too young, too burdened with responsibilities, too committed to being sensible or looking successful. God doesn't care whether we have wounded inner children or three kids in diapers. God does not need to fix us first. Redemption is not repair: you will recall that even Jesus' wounds were not healed when he was raised from the dead. The story of Gideon asserts, over and over again, that God can use us in all our ineptitude and in all our fear and uncertainty. All we have to be is willing to try.

No matter what our lives, any one of us can do something to be just a little more completely who-we-really-are. Look, for just a moment, around your own inner landscape. Where are you threshing wheat inside a barrel? What frivolous idea are you resolutely ignoring because you are mature and goal-oriented and because you know it would never work out anyhow? What fear, especially what embarrassing or ancient or silly fear, secretly yearns for reassurance?

Remember, of course, that God is not a career counselor on high, not a sacred human resources deployment officer. There is no one career, no one relationship, no one social role upon which our redemption depends. Our redemption depends not upon our own skills and our own competence but rather upon God. And God has already made up God's mind: God wants every one of us. God sees everything that is wrong in our lives, but God is not going to be thwarted by any of it.

God was not thwarted by Gideon, after all. And if God can manage Gideon, God can probably manage you and me. Eventually, Gideon stops asking for proof. But he remains inept, to the very end of a long story.

Nonetheless, he does lead the Israelites to victory over the Midianites. So there must have been some kernel of leadership in Gideon after all, some rich and fruitful core that, left to his *own* devices, Gideon would never have separated from the chaff and the straw of his life. People do respond to his call to fight the Midianites. There was something in Gideon, it seems, that these other people trusted. We don't see it, as readers, because we see the story from Gideon's point of view--and Gideon doesn't see this about himself.

Gideon's crucial attack on the Midianites is dubious on military grounds, but it is brilliant narrative theology. Gideon and his troop of fellow-losers do not win an open battle. No. They

make a terrible racket in the middle of the night, like older kids terrifying the youngest kids at summer camp. Gideon and his small band frighten the Midianites so badly that the Midianites all run away. This is not quite "we have nothing to fear but fear itself," but that's a first approximation. When we meet Gideon, the Midianites are his terrible predicament. They are his evidence that God has abandoned him. And like his benighted efforts to thresh wheat, all of his actions are distorted by his fear of them.

Yet when Gideon seizes fear not simply as a predicament but also as a resource, he wins. God works through Gideon and Gideon's fears to attack the Midianites' fears.

We are all afraid, the narrative suggests. Our fears oppress us as the Midianites of old oppressed the Israelites. One fights fire with fire, the saying goes; the storyteller here demonstrates that God fights fears with cowards. The point of the tale of Gideon is to console our fears, to get us to stop threshing wheat inside a barrel and instead get on with our lives. We can give in to our fears--or we can scare them off, we can dare to discover that, with God's help, we are braver and stronger than our own fears. The crucial "battle with the Midianites" takes place not upon some dusty plain but deep in our hearts.

I never considered laying out a sheep pelt, but after some years back in church I did conclude--with considerable disgust--that if God wanted me to write for God, then by golly God would have to figure that out on his own. I could certainly see for myself how thoroughly impossible it was. But God does seem to have made it possible. I am embarrassed to admit this, but it does seem to be true. The most unexpected and improbable people started calling. Every once in a while the phone rings and someone invites me . . . to smite the Midianites. And none of my excuses succeed.

Like Gideon, I have never really developed the courage I need to do this work. Don't think that for a moment. I'm very shy, for instance. Terrified voices in my head keep insisting that I have no business *whatsoever* on this side of the micrphone. *And furthermore all of you see that, every single one of you.* I have not outgrown or silenced such terrors. All I've grown is this grey hair.

But I do it. "With God's help," as the baptism liturgy says, over and over again. "With God's help."

My point tonight is that call is not the demand, "go do this: here is a list." Call is an invitation to become more clearly and more profoundly who we are. Because character is always developed and revealed in action, these changes may get you into something unexpected. Nonetheless, God is not a manager handing out assignments. God did not say to me something like, "Arise, go hence, leave thy husband and thy children and the icy slush of Chicago in March; go, spend a week in the Florida sunshine, as poet-in-residence at a parish I will show you."

God said nothing of the sort. God just did something like whistle sharply and wave at me and then laugh really hard. God laughed at me from deep within the depths of the depths of my knowledge of myself. Over here, God whistled, just a writer, passionate and impetuous and vulnerable. Not over there, the scholar, analytic, philosophic, distant--and safe.

I did not want to hear any such thing. But, well, God was right. And here I am. All the writing and talking I have done in recent years is something like the byproduct of that deeper revolution. Wondrous are thy deeds, oh Lord, and mighty thy creation.

And that's the relentlessness of God, that's the relentlessness we see in every single call narrative in the Bible. The truth is in our hearts, and there is simply no way to get away from it. If you see who you are, if you dare to see that you are in God and that God is in you, then who knows what Midianites you may chase out of your life.

The Midianites came up like locusts, we are told; they left no sustenance in Israel. They wasted the land as they came in. And it really doesn't matter at all, the story tells us, that we are afraid of these guys, that we look around at that wasteland and want to hide. Left to our own devices, the story says, we will hide forever in winepresses, getting chaff down our collars and slowly starving. We will never know who we really are, or what we can do to feed ourselves and our friends, until we put our trust not in ourselves--we know ourselves too well to do that--but rather in God.

And this is good news? Well, that is certainly what our stories tell us. This is supposed to be good news. The Lord is with us; we are people of valor.

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