Leading the Parade in Faith ... and All That Jazz

by R. Reed Lessing
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by Rev. Dr. R. Reed Lessing

LEA Monograph
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Lyrics from “Giddyup, Giddalong Gideon” from MIGHTY MENACIN’ MIDIANITES. Words and Music by Dave Noel. Copyright © 1998 Praise-Gathering Music. All rights controlled by Gaither Copyright Management. Used by permission.
About the Author

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Foreword

How often do you need a little uplifting, affirming encouragement? Most professional church workers get precious little.

That’s why the editor chose an unusual topic and title for this LEA Monograph. “Leading the Parade in Faith … and All That Jazz” was the theme of the 2006 LEA National Administrators Conference in St. Louis. Rev. Dr. R. Reed Lessing delivered the theme keynote so artfully, so convincingly, so delightfully, so personally that LEA staff thought that all LEA members would benefit from it. Therefore, this LEA Monograph is a departure from the content and intent of past Monographs.

This LEA Monograph will inform you about Midianites, past and present (you might be jolted by their identity!) and provides a fast-paced Bible study, but its primary intent is to uplift and encourage you. If it does so the first time, be sure to give it an obvious place on your bookshelf. You’ll probably want to read it again. If you’re feeling confident and good about your ministry right now, you might want to save it for later reading. (Oh, go ahead … read it anyway.)

Edward Grube, Editor
LEA Monograph
Director of Publications and Communications
Introduction

It is my privilege to teach Hebrew and Old Testament at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri. But when I heard of your theme, *Leading the Parade in Faith ... and all that Jazz*, I was at a loss. I asked myself and even some of my colleagues, "Is there anything in the Old Testament that addresses parades and jazz?"

There is that text in Genesis 4:21 about Jubal who "was the father of all who play the harp and flute." Jubal was a musician alright, but there is nothing mentioned about him being in a parade. Noah certainly led a parade, but I’m pretty sure that included mostly animals and not people. And the scripture is silent regarding his musical abilities and instruments. Then it hit me. The only Old Testament passage where someone leads a parade in faith with jazz is in the book of Judges.

Judges 7:17–18 depicts Gideon as a leader of a parade. And it is definitely a parade of faith as it narrates the story of 300 Abiezerites fighting 120,000 Midianites. But what about the jazz part? It’s a stretch, I know. But we might say that the jazz is performed by means of the Hebrew horn called a *shophar*. Hear this word of the Lord from Judges 7:17–18: "Watch me," he told them. "Follow my lead. When I get to the edge of the camp, do exactly as I do. When I and all who are with me blow our trumpets, then from all around the camp blow yours and shout, For the LORD and for Gideon." Gideon is leading a parade in faith with a whole lot of Hebrew jazz! Let’s explore this.

Several years ago my children were in a musical at Immanuel Lutheran School in Olivette, Missouri. The name of the presentation was *Giddyup, Giddalong Gideon*. I can still remember these lyrics from one of the songs.

“They’re crop destroyin’, plague deployin’, quite anoyin’, mighty menacin’ Midianites! They’re fond of fightin’, strike like lightnin’, man they’re frightnin’. Mighty menacin’ Midianites! They steal, kill and destroy every man, woman, girl and boy! They are mighty menacin’ Midianites.”

Historic Midianites

“Oh no!” you gasp. “Not an essay about Midianites! This is going to be about as exciting as a college lecture on Hittites, Jebusites, Edomites, Moabites, Amalakites, Ninevites, Cushites, Hivites, Ammorites, Flea-bites, Mosquito bites, and maybe even Budlights!” You say, “This will be a bore, a chore, and a snore … no more. Say it isn’t so. Not a seminary professor whose main objective is to talk about Midianites!” Yes, I must warn you, this is about Midianites!

Who are Midianites?

I’m glad you asked! Midianites came from the union between Abraham and his second wife Keturah. Genesis 25:1–2 states, “Abraham took another wife,
whose name was Keturah. She bore him Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak and Shuah.” There you have it. Midian was the fourth child of Abraham and Keturah. Later, in the book of Numbers, these Midianites seduce Israel at the famous apostasy of Baal Peor (cf. Numbers 25). Now in the Book of Judges they come to the Jezreel/Esdraelon plain and down the Mediterranean coast all the way to Gaza unleashing on Israel their new, “top-secret” weapons of mass destruction: domesticated camels (cf. Judges 6:4–5).

Israel is spiritually, economically, politically, and militarily bankrupt. People are living in villages with no walls, with no standing army, no central government, and we are told four times in the Book of Judges “they have no king” (cf. Judges 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). For seven years Midianites are sweeping down like swarms of locusts not sparing any living thing (cf. Judges 6:4–5). Like locusts these Midianites were eating, consuming, and devouring all of Israel’s crops.

And just the mention of locusts brings to mind Mr. Locust himself, John the Baptist. Can you imagine eating locusts? Last year a man from Bloomington, Minnesota did. He made national news by eating thirty of them but then he ended up in the hospital with a rash all over his body. Systematicians at Concordia Seminary would call that “the theology of the cross.” Exegetes at Concordia Seminary would call that “just plain … dumb!”

Locusts may not be our insect of choice, but they certainly were in the Old Testament. Israelites were so familiar with locusts that they coined nine different words to describe these purveyors of powerful plagues. The book of Joel is literally all about locusts! Sometimes there can be as many as 80,000,000 critters in each square mile of locusts. One swarm that crossed the Red Sea in 1899 was said to cover an area of more than 1,900 square miles. And boy howdy, do locusts love to eat! Why, they can eat their own body weight each day. Just imagine eating your own body weight each day! On second thought, don’t imagine eating your own body weight each day! Eyewitnesses to locust attacks in modern Israel testify to seeing swarms that are ten miles wide and over twenty miles long. Like swarms of locusts, Israel’s enemy is “crop destroyin’, plague deployin’, quite anoyin’,” they are indeed “mighty menacin’ Midianites!”

Modern Midianites

Do you have any Midianites in your life, enemies that appear like swarms of locusts, ten miles wide and over twenty miles long, “not sparing any living thing?” Sure you do; so do I. Historically the Church has called them the Seven Deadly Sins. They are anger, pride, envy, greed, lust, gluttony, and sloth. “They’re fond of fightin’, strike like lightnin’ man they’re frightnin’!”

The chief mighty menacin’ Midianite uses these Seven Deadly Sins to “steal, kill and destroy ev’ry man, woman, girl and boy.” He goes by several names. Jesus calls him a “murderer” and “a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44). Peter calls him, “A roaring lion seeking someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8). In Revelation 9:11 John calls him Abbadon (that’s Hebrew) and Apollyon (that’s Greek); both...
names mean “Destroyer.” And in Revelation 12:9 and 20:2 John calls him, “the
dragon, that ancient serpent who is the devil and Satan.” Satan is marriage
destroyin’, perversion deployin’, and more than just a little bit anoyin’.

In light of such an imposing enemy, we shrink back. It reminds me of a story
about two cowboys from Oklahoma during the land run of the 1890s. They
began in Miami, Oklahoma and were headed for Tulsa. The cowboy in the back
of their wagon says to the one in front, “There is an Indian following us!”

The cowboy in the front asks the one in the back, “How big is he?”

The one in the back places his pointing finger parallel with his thumb with a
space of about an inch between them and says, “He’s about this big!”

A few moments later the cowboy in the front asks the one in the back, “Is that
Indian still following us?”

“Yes,” shrieks the cowboy in the back.

“Well, how big is he?” inquires the cowboy in the front.

The one in the back places his hands parallel with each other with a space of
about a foot between them and says, “He’s about this big!”

A few moments later the cowboy in the front asks the cowboy in the back, “Is
that Indian still chasing us?”

“Yes,” exclaims the cowboy in the back.

“Well how big is he?” inquires the cowboy in the front.

The one in the back places his hands parallel with each other with a space of
about five feet between them and says, “He’s about this big!”

So the cowboy in the front says to the cowboy in the back, “Shoot him!”

“I can’t,” says the cowboy in the back. Placing his pointing finger parallel with
his thumb with a space of about an inch between them he says, “I’ve known
him since he was this big!”

“I can’t.” These are two words straight from the pit of hell. They confine our
lives to a tight radius of don’t, won’ts, can’ts, and quits. The Lord wants to
replace our “I can’t” with “I can.” In fact in Philippians 4:13 Paul writes, “I
can do everything through him who gives me strength.”

I Can’t to I Can: A Lesson from Gideon
The Lord certainly changed Gideon’s “I can’t” to “I can.” He made him into a
leader of a parade of faith with a lot of Hebrew jazz. The Hebrew writer says of
Gideon, “And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies” (Hebrews 11:23–34). Here Gideon is specifically mentioned with those “whose weakness was turned to strength.” Just as the Lord changed Gideon, so he promises to change us into dynamic, godly, and victorious leaders.

But how can we follow Gideon’s lead (cf. Judges 7:17)? How did he become such a fearless leader? How was he able to motivate 300 men to go into battle against an army of 120,000? And just where did he get all of that Hebrew jazz?

Gideon was shaped and formed by four experiences; affirmation, revelation, confrontation, and motivation. The Lord begins with a word of affirmation. Judges 6:12 states, “When the Angel of the LORD appeared to Gideon, he said, ‘The LORD is with you, mighty warrior.’” Gideon receives these words of affirmation while he is threshing wheat, not with oxen and sledge on an open elevation, where the wind can come and separate the wheat from the chaff (cf. Psalm 1:4). Rather, he is threshing wheat in the cramped space of a wine press (cf. Judges 6:2). The guy is afraid of his own shadow. Gideon is the Barney Fife of the Bible! He’s only got one bullet.

You remember Barney? There was Opie and Aunt Bee and Ernest T. Bass. But the one who stole the show was Barney Fife. Barney was so bad with his bullets that Andy—the town sheriff — made his deputy “Barn” keep his lone bullet in his pocket. If the bullet was in his gun someone—probably Andy—would get shot!

And Gideon might as well come from Mayberry too! His home town is Ophrah. In Hebrew, Ophrah means “place of dust.” Now doesn’t that sound like a town where you would want to launch a national military campaign? It sounds about as imposing as Plains, Georgia, Hope, Arkansas, or where I served as a pastor for ten years, Broken Arrow, Oklahoma. (The locals still call it “Busted Stick”). Because Gideon is from “The Place of Dust,” he responds, “How can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family” (Judges 6:15).

So why does the Lord choose Gideon to lead the parade?

Welcome to the Book of Judges. Example number one is Ehud whom the Lord chooses to fight the malicious Moabites (cf. Judges 3). But there is a problem. Ehud is a left-handed man from the tribe of Benjamin. Benjamin in Hebrew means “son of my right hand” and Ehud is left-handed (cf. Judges 3:15)! Ehud is out of place; he doesn’t fit.

Then there is another judge named Shamgar. All he has is his “impressive” ox-goad (cf. Judges 3:31).
Example number three of this group of misfits is Deborah, who is Israel’s only female military leader and is called, “a mother in Israel” (Judges 5:7). Imagine a mother leading a bunch of men into battle against “Jabin, a king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. The commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth Haggoyim” (Judges 4:2).

Also in this motley crew is Jephthah, a rejected robber with a big mouth whose vow to the Lord in all likelihood killed his daughter (cf. Judges 11:34–40).

And then there was the ringleader of them all, Samson. This Nazarite among other things married a Philistine woman (cf. Judges 14) and then turned against her after a four-day marriage (cf. Judges 14:20). And, as we all know, Samson divulged all of his Nazarite secrets to a smooth-talking woman named Delilah (cf. Judges 16:18–21).

So why did the Lord chose these people to be his leaders?

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 1:26–29: “Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are so that no one may boast before him.”

And so today the Lord is recruiting us to lead the parade!

In spite of the fact that to a person we have skeletons in our closets that, if made public, we would die in embarrassment. He chooses us in spite of the fact that to a person we have a daily propensity to prefer darkness rather than light, lies instead of truth, and pride instead of humility. Yet hear this loving and life-changing word of affirmation: “The LORD is with you, mighty warrior.”

You and I have been given baptismal gifts to lead the parade. By faith in Jesus we have the belt of truth buckled around our waist and the breastplate of righteousness in place. Our feet are fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. Additionally, we have the shield of faith with which we can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Upon our heads we have the helmet of salvation, while in our hand is the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God (cf. Ephesians 6:14–17). Indeed, God says it—faith believes it—we are armed and dangerous, mighty warriors. We are dressed for spiritual success; dressed for a parade!

But with so many Midianites around him, Gideon not only needs a new view of himself, he needs a new view of his God. Remember the movie Honey, I Shrunk the Kids? It was about this scientist who developed a machine that could shrink just about anything and anybody. One day his children were playing with the machine and by mistake they shrunk themselves. All the father could say to his wife is, “Honey, I shrunk the kids!”
Gideon knows this same feeling. He had to confess, “Honey, I shrunk the Lord!” His fear and doubts had lowered his estimation of God’s power. Gideon’s watchwords were “if” and “but” and “why” and “where.” Note this conversation he has with the angel of the LORD in Judges 6:13: “‘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.’”

We know this vocabulary all too well. Problems arise and our vocabulary shifts to “if” and “but” and “why” and “where.” We must come clean. Our view of God can become so small. “Honey, I shrunk the Lord!” And so the Lord needs to enlarge our understanding of who he is.

Quite often when God wants to give His people a life-changing revelation of himself he does it by means of an altar. Abraham knows that “The Lord provides” (Genesis 22:14), because of his altar on Mt. Moriah (cf. Genesis 22:9). The Lord appears to Solomon at the altar at Gibeon with the awesome promise, “Ask for whatever you want me to give you” (cf. 1 Kings 3:4–5). Isaiah is willing to say, “Here I am, send me” (Isaiah 6:8), because from the altar comes the burning coal, which, when applied with the words of absolution, atones for his sin (Isaiah 6:6–7).

The Lord also changes Gideon by means of His revelation at an altar. Judges 6:24 says, “So Gideon built an altar to the LORD there and called it ‘the LORD is Shalom.’” On this altar “fire consumed the meat and the bread” (Judges 6:21). There was nothing left. At this altar the Lord revealed that he is the God of shalom. Shalom means wholeness, completeness, and healing. If “all the king’s horses and all the king’s men couldn’t put Humpty together again,” then shalom is the Lord’s gift from his altar, which takes all of the fractured and fragmented pieces of our lives and puts us back together again.

On another altar, called Golgotha, the Lord reveals his ultimate gift of shalom. Not meat and bread, but the Father’s only Son is consumed on a Roman instrument of death. After the kiss of betrayal and the arrest, after the thorns and the spitting, after the seven words, the three hours of darkness, and the bleeding there is nothing left. This total loss would last for exactly three days, for in the glorious resurrection of Jesus Christ the Father reveals his free gift of peace, a peace that the world can never give, a peace that passes all human understanding (cf. Philippians 4:6). Jesus says in John 14:27, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.”

Our Lord’s first word to his disciples after his resurrection was “peace.” “On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you’ ” (John 20:19; cf. also 20:26).
The gift of shalom is delivered to us at another altar, which we often call “The Sacrament of the Altar.” The Bible does not teach Christ’s “real absence,” but his “real presence” (cf. e.g., Luke 22:19–20; 1 Corinthians 11:23–27). At this altar we receive the true body and blood of Jesus Christ that completely forgives all of our sins. This forgiveness works in us shalom.

In fact, our entire experience at the communion altar is one of shalom. After the consecration of the elements the pastor says, “The peace of the Lord be with you.” Many congregations then share this shalom with one another. The congregation then sings the Agnus Dei which includes the words, “O Christ, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, grant us your peace.” After we taste and see that our Lord is so very good (cf. Psalm 34:8), we cannot help but sing the Nunc Dimittis or Simeon’s Song, “Lord, now let your servant depart in peace.” And the last word spoken in the Divine Service is from the Aaronic benediction where the Lord imparts to us His shalom. Numbers 6:23–26 states, “Tell Aaron and his sons, ‘This is how you are to bless the Israelites. Say to them: ‘The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace.’” From beginning to end, our time at the altar is designed to put Humpty Dumpty back together again!

In this Holy Communion, we see God in his magnificent revelation in the true body and blood of Jesus, and so we break out in joyful song, “My God is so big, so strong, and so mighty, there’s nothing my God cannot do!” Know that his shalom puts your broken life back together again!

God is encouraging us to lead the parade, to follow Gideon’s example. And so He is forming us just as He formed Gideon; with baptismal affirmation and Eucharistic revelation, but also by means of a pointed confrontation. In Judges 6:25, the Lord says to Gideon, “Tear down your father’s altar to Baal and cut down the Asherah pole beside it.” Baal and Asherah were typical ancient Near Eastern deities that promised field and family fertility to those who performed their worship rites. These rites consisted of mega doses of sex and drunkenness and every form of indecency.

Let me explain. Israel has no major source of water. In biblical times the Mesopotamian empires thrived off of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, while Egypt’s source of life was the Nile River. Israel, on the other hand, was completely dependent upon rain for her source of water. This is where Baal came in. Ancient texts from Ugarit (northern Lebanon) picture him as the provider of rain, and this is how the rain would fall. A man would go to a “high place” (cf. e.g., 1 Kings 11:7; 2 Kings 17:11), enlist a “sacred” prostitute (much like Gomer, cf. Hosea 1), and have sex with her. This would, then, prompt Baal to engage in “cosmic” sex with Asherah and presto, instant rain!

What’s the Baal in your backyard? What’s the idol in your life? What are you allowing to erode your relationship with Jesus? Are you addicted to Internet pornography, binge spending, binge drinking, or binge church gossip? Whatever it is, the Lord says, “Cut it down.”
That’s what Gideon does – and so they nickname him Jerubaal—“because he broke down Baal’s altar” (cf. Judges 6:32). Gideon refuses to be conformed to this present age, he refuses to compromise with evil, he refuses to blend in. Paul puts it this way in Romans 12:1–2, “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God, this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” To all leaders today, the Lord has a direct word of confrontation. “See that Baal in your backyard? Cut it down!”

To complete our leadership training, after the same manner as Gideon, the Lord gives us one more gift: motivation. Judges 7:2–7 reads as follows: “The LORD said to Gideon, ‘You have too many men for me to deliver Midian into their hands. In order that Israel may not boast against me that her own strength has saved her, announce now to the people, ‘Anyone who trembles with fear may turn back and leave Mount Gilead.’ So 22,000 men left, while 10,000 remained. But the LORD said to Gideon, ‘There are still too many men. Take them down to the water, and I will sift them for you there. If I say, ‘This one shall go with you,’ he shall go; but if I say, ‘This one shall not go with you,’ he shall not go. So Gideon took the men down to the water. There the LORD told him, ‘Separate those who lap the water with their tongues like a dog from those who kneel down to drink.’ Three hundred men lapped with their hands to their mouths. All the rest got down on their knees to drink.

The LORD said to Gideon, ‘With the three hundred men that lapped I will save you and give the Midianites into your hands. Let all the other men go, each to his own place.’” Gideon begins with 32,000 men. The ranks thin to 10,000. Then the army further decreases to the “imposing sight” of 300 Abiezrites who lap water like dogs! Now these guys can’t be the sharpest knives in the drawer. Gideon’s got less than 1 percent of his original army! The odds are now 450 to 1 against “those fond of fightin’, strike like lightnin’, man they’re frightnin’, mighty menacin’ Midianites!”

It looks impossible. Gideon needs motivation, and fast! Judges 6:34 states, “Then the Spirit of the LORD clothed Gideon.” Throughout the book of Judges the Holy Spirit clothes people for power. For example, Ehud is clothed with the Spirit (Judges 3:10), as are Jephthah (Judges 11:29) and Samson (Judges 14:6, 9; 15:14). The presence of the Spirit means that the Lord has come to bring victory. Zechariah 4:6 expresses this idea where the Lord promises, “Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit.” And so Gideon – not by his own might, nor by his own power – makes mincemeat out of 120,000 Midianites.

It looks impossible for us as well, doesn’t it? Listen to this poem that seems to get at the heart of the teaching/leading task.

The Average Child

I don’t cause teachers trouble; my grades have been okay,
I keep up my chores at home; I’m in school every day.
My teachers think I’m average; my parents think so too. I wish I didn’t know that; ‘cause there’s lots of things I’d like to do. I’d like to build a rocket ship; I’ve got a book that shows you how. Or, I’d like to start a stamp collection; well … no use trying now. ‘Cause since I know I’m average, I’m just smart enough, you see To know there’s nothing special that I would ever expect of me. I’m just part of that majority, that bump part of the bell Who live their lives unnoticed in an average kind of hell.

There are so many children we know who are living in “an average kind of hell.” Children living with dysfunctional and abusing parents; children caught in the hell of divorce, family debt, and emotional depression. Children whose hopes are dashed by lackluster mentors who consign these kids to “an average kind of hell.” The vision of the prophet Joel is far from us; “Your sons and daughters will prophesy … your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days” (Joel 2:28–29). There are so few who have visions, who dream dreams, who sing songs, who have a hope and a future (cf. Jeremiah 29:11).

But we are not left alone in this task. The Lord clothes us with the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, and the Spirit of Truth, who will be with us forever. Baptism delivers him. Holy Communion celebrates His presence. And the Gospel imparts His power. All to the end that we are Spirit-led and Spirit-filled, having motivation to begin, continue, and end victorious in our ministry with children.

And you thought all Gideon did was write those Bibles in hotels! No, for all his hesitation and weakness and doubt (I haven’t even mentioned the fleece episode, cf. Judges 6:36–40), finally Gideon, the Barney Fife of the Bible, stood up and led the parade in faith … with a whole lot of Hebrew jazz!

And so shall we, by the grace of God, stand up and lead. “Stand up, stand up for Jesus, as soldiers of the cross. Lift high his royal banner; it must not suffer loss. From victory unto victory his army shall he lead; till every foe is vanquished and Christ is Lord indeed!”

Amen.

Endnotes

1 MIGHTY MENACIN’ MIDIANITES. Words and Music by Dave Noel. Copyright © 1998 PraiseGathering Music. All rights controlled by Gaither Copyright Management. Used by permission.

2 Author unknown

3 Lutheran Worship 305, stanza 1