



Signs and Numbers

TEXT
Judges 6:36–40; 7:2–7

July 28, 2019 — Sermon by Rev. Zach Walker

From the beginning, climbing Algonquin Peak wasn't my best idea.

I made plans to leave campus during Reading Week, a week without classes in the fall of my first year of seminary in New Jersey. I love the outdoors and camping, so I had brought all of my camping gear to campus with me and decided I would use Reading Week to climb Algonquin Peak, the second tallest peak in the state of New York.

No one else seemed to be planning to go anywhere during Reading Week — that should have been my first clue. And, despite my invitation, no one seemed interested in taking this fun hike with someone they had only met a few weeks ago ... except for my friend Erin — another new seminary student — whose skill at hiking and camping I knew nothing about, but I figured company is always a good thing.

If you do a very brief search online, here's a description of the Algonquin hike, from basically the first search result:

This hike has some great technical areas where you are on your hands and knees, grabbing tree roots, etc. As you climb you will come to a great waterfall

providing a good place to stop and take a small break before you really start to climb.

The second half of the climb provides some fun scrambling sections where you need to watch your footing and may need a helping hand every once in a while.

From here you will find another scrambling section where you may need to get on your hands and knees to get up. The angle of the rock is steep so if you are doing this hike in the early morning, in the early spring, you may want to have spikes because of the ice build-up on the rocks.¹

I did zero web searches before I actually went on that hike. So we had no spikes for the ice we didn't anticipate. We were totally unprepared to be on our hands and knees grabbing at tree roots to haul ourselves upward — all while carrying 40-pound backpacks. We were both a little spooked at the very real possibility of falling.

The sun was setting by the time we hit the summit, much later than we planned, which meant we would descend in the dark. Erin had borrowed a pair of hiking pants from a friend that were too long, so she kept stumbling, and ten minutes later her flashlight went out, and I quietly

went into freak-out mode, thinking, "This is how people take a bad step and break an ankle in the woods. This is how people get on the news because they get hurt and need to get rescued."

It was after 10 p.m. when we reached the camping area, exhausted and looking for signs that would indicate where we were allowed to set up tents. It was pitch black, and we had one flashlight. We didn't see signs. What we did see was claw marks on trees — evidence that bear activity in the area was high. We gave up and set up tents on the nearest flat spot, didn't bother with dinner, and called it a day.

The next morning I crawled out of my tent and immediately saw the tent sign we spent half an hour looking for in the dark. It was directly above my tent. We made it out of the woods safely, and the rest of the trip went better. But when I look back, there were a lot of signs along the way that I just plain missed.

When I got back to campus at the end of the week, it was immediately apparent that I really did have a lot of work I needed to get done — and everyone else knew that beforehand.

I should have asked Erin a little bit more about her experience with camping in the backcountry,

especially when she started borrowing gear from other people.

I should have tried looking up when looking for tent signs that first night.

And I should have looked at the internet, like, once, as I made plans.

Sometimes signs are so clear later. But at the time, we just miss them.

Gideon has spent a lifetime failing to see or hear God's signs. It's also possible (and maybe more judgmental than he deserves) that he wasn't ever really looking. So it isn't a surprise that much of his story is learning to see and trust, asking God for a sign, and then another . . . and another. Because in reality, seeing and interpreting signs isn't easy.

Have you ever thought about the process of just reading a sign? You have to be looking for the sign in the first place. Then you have to actually see the sign you're looking for. And even then, you have to correctly interpret what the sign is communicating. Last, and most important, you have to make the decision to act on what that sign is telling you. That's a lot of steps, and I don't think Gideon knew how to do that when his journey started. He needs practice — practicing the process of seeing signs and sussing out what he is to do. So he keeps asking for signs, slowly building up a history of reading signs that is also building up a history of trusting the God he isn't convinced is 'with' him.

So the issue in this story is not God sending signs; after all, the presence of a sign isn't enough. It isn't enough for Gideon to see

the sign; it isn't enough for him to recognize it for what it was. It is only enough when all those things happen, and then Gideon — or any of us — acts on what the sign calls or requires us to do.

If that's the case, then when I sometimes get frustrated with what I think is God's lack of presence, or lack of signs, needs to get flipped. It might be good instead to ask myself if I'm just missing or ignoring the signs God is sending. Me missing a sign is pretty plausible.

There are plenty of times when I find myself frustrated, saying, "All I want to know, God, is where I should set up my tent, and I'm looking and looking, but I'm so caught up in my own life and my own patterns and my own fears, and I'm so busy, and maybe I'm missing what God is calling me to do because I'm down here in this wine press with my head down just working and working and working, and if I really looked, what would I see?"

If I really started to see signs, does that mean I have to change how I'm living my life . . . does it mean I have to deal with something I'd rather not?

Maybe it's a sign that calls for action when racism has crept back into prominence. And maybe I need to do something about that.

Maybe it's a sign that calls for action when God's children are more likely to get shot and imprisoned in disproportionate numbers depending on skin color. And maybe I need to do something about that.

Maybe it's a sign that calls for action when we try to love

our neighbors as ourselves but end up building walls to keep them out. And maybe I need to do something about that.

Maybe it's a sign that calls for action when we make decisions that value the freedom of owning guns over the freedom from our children being shot by them. And maybe I need to do something about that.

Maybe it's a sign that calls for action when we dismiss the claims of sexually abused women rather than face the possibility that those in positions of power abuse that power in very real and personal ways. And maybe I need to do something about that.

Maybe it's a sign that calls for action when people in one place have too many resources and those in another have too few. And maybe I need to do something about that.

How many will it take before we see a sign for what it is and trust that God might ultimately be saying there's a need for a response from faithful people to stand with the oppressed, no matter who they are?

Make no mistake: God always stands with the oppressed.

Eventually Gideon gets the message, and he agrees to do what God is asking to fight back against those who seek to oppress. He gathers an army of 32,000 in order to fight back, but even then Gideon is still learning how this journey works because he basically goes to God and says, "I can't fight yet, I'm worried I don't have enough, God!"

Do you ever wonder if God gets frustrated? I think about that. I know God's grace and love and

mercy is deep and wide and is always embracing me, but I bet I frustrate God a lot. I wonder how many times God patiently tells us over and over, “You have MORE than enough! YOU are more than enough!”

Even when I see the signs, even when they are so clear, even then my brain immediately whispers back the same thing Gideon’s did, “Not yet, God! I don’t have enough!”

I think even faithful people in the Bible make occasional leaps of faith that they weren’t entirely at ease with. And I kind of like that. It reminds me that I can be nervous or uncertain and still be faithful. When we trust in the God who saves, it doesn’t mean our feelings go away. It means that whatever we feel, what we DO in light of those feelings is where we can be most faithful.

Martin Luther King Jr. said, “Faith is taking the first step even when you cannot see the whole staircase.”

So Gideon is worried about 32,000. And God says, “Well, that’s weird, because I was thinking you have more than enough, so if any of them are afraid, let them go home.” And 22,000 troops leave.

If Gideon was worried about 32,000, now he has 10,000. And God says, “It’s still more than enough. Let’s go down to the river, and I’ll tell you who should stay and who should go.” And by doing that, Gideon’s army goes from 10,000 fighters to 300 — 300!

If you do the math, 300 is slightly less than 1 percent of 32,000. Gideon thought he didn’t have enough to begin with, and

now he’s got less than 1 percent of what he started with, and THAT’S when God says to him, “OK, now let’s get to work.”

I can’t imagine how Gideon was feeling about that, but I do know that whatever he was feeling, he made the decision to take the next step, and he went go into battle trusting God’s math more than his own.

Theologian Will Willimon said, “When we make a moral decision, the work for that decision happened before that moment.” You do the work of a moral decision before you make the decision. Neuroscience backs this up; studies show that in the moment of a decision like that, you don’t think your way to the conclusion. You react. And you react in ways that are the result of what has come before — tiny moments and discussions and decisions in your life.

Andrew Carnegie, in 1904, commissioned something called the Hero Fund that has to date awarded just over 10,000 medals. The medal is given to “those who risk their lives to an extraordinary degree while saving or attempting to save the lives of others.”

One recipient, a construction worker named Wesley James Autrey, received the award in 2008. We are going to listen to a clip from a podcast called RadioLab where they interview Mr. Autrey about his award. When we join the clip, they are discussing how Mr. Autrey was standing at a subway stop with his two daughters when a man suddenly has a seizure and falls down onto the tracks.²

What if we dared to say, “I can do this”? There is a certain audacity to that statement. Mr. Autrey recognized the signs. It wasn’t a calculated decision; it was a reaction born of moments and reflections that happened prior to that day at the subway. It’s a snap decision, and he literally jumps in.

Gideon had to do the same. He begins, by his own words, as a member of the weakest family and the least of his clan. But then he begins to look. He starts to do the hard work in himself to face the challenges that were laid before him. And in doing so, it was not God’s presence that changed, but Gideon’s ability to see that presence and do something in response.

Are we any different? I hope not. Because it means that we too can learn to see the signs. It means that whoever we were, or whoever we are, we can discover God to be closer than we know. We can be the very people God calls us to be, and do that which God calls us to do.

See the signs.

Take the leap.

Don’t get too caught up in your own calculations.

Trust God’s math.

¹<https://www.theoutbound.com/new-york/hiking/hike-algonquin-peak>

²RadioLab Podcast (January 9, 2018): “How to Be a Hero”

At this point in the sermon, we listened to a clip from a podcast. In the clip we hear an interview with Wesley James Autrey, a construction worker

who was at a subway stop in New York in 2007. While waiting for a train with his 4-year-old and 6-year-old daughters, a 20-year-old man has a seizure and falls down onto the tracks just as a train is approaching. In a split second, James has to decide what to do. He jumps. He tries to pick the man up but can't, so just as the train is upon them he flattens his body over the unconscious stranger, and the train passes over them, grazing Mr. Autrey's calf. He saves the life of this stranger. As he reflects on the moment, he reveals that when he saw the man fall he heard a voice telling him he could do this — he could save that man. Mr. Autrey then reveals that just as he jumped from the platform, he remembered an event in his past. Twenty years prior, there was a moment when a gun was held to his temple, but when the trigger was pulled, the gun misfired. He began to wonder shortly after if his life had been spared for a purpose. He became more and more certain that he was meant to finish the purpose for which he had been spared. When he saw the man drop down in front of the train, when he heard the voice, Mr. Autrey felt this was the moment. The clip ends with Mr. Autrey saying, "I can do this."

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.