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*Hot Mess Monster*—Sermon #6 in the “Uncensored” Series  
A reflection on Judges 20-21  
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When we left off last week, we left quite a mess. A Levite had spent the night in the Benjaminite town of Gibeah, and the men of the town come to the place where he’s staying and demand to have sex with him. The master of the house says, “Please, no, don’t humiliate my guest in this way—you can have my virgin daughter or this man’s concubine, just don’t do this to this man.” The men won’t listen, and the Levite grabs his concubine, which is kind of like a second-class wife, and throws her out to the men of Gibeah, who rape and abuse her all night. The Levite finds her on the doorstep the next morning, puts her on his donkey, and heads back home, where he cuts her body into 12 pieces, one for each of the 12 tribes of Israel, and sends her throughout the territory of Israel as a kind of “call to arms,” with the message: “Has such a thing ever happened since the day the Israelites came up from the land of Egypt until this day? Consider it, take counsel, and speak out.”

We pick up today with our 3<sup>rd</sup> scripture reading, Judges 20: 3b-11. . .

When there’s a bad situation, what can you do to make it even worse?

Step one: Distort the truth. The Levite isn’t giving his fellow Israelites the whole story, is he? Did the men of Gibeah really want to kill him? No! They wanted to humiliate him by raping him, which is BAD, but it’s not the same as wanting to kill him. Did they really rape his concubine until she died? Well, she was alive enough to make it back to the doorstep of the house where she and her master had been staying. We don’t know exactly when and how this poor woman died. And notice how the Levite conveniently leaves out the little detail that he himself was the one who threw out his own secondary wife to the gang of men. He’s told the

story in a way that makes him look as good as possible, while making the men of Gibeah look as awful as possible, and in a way designed to stir up the anger of his fellow Israelites.

Step two: When there's a bad situation and you want to make it even worse, don't just stop at an eye for an eye—how about a whole body for an eye? Or a whole family? When the armed forces of the Israelites go to confront the tribe of Benjamin, the tribe refuses to hand over the men of Gibeah. That's bad. What's worse is the civil war that comes next. Israel has 400,000 armed men. Benjamin has 26,000 armed men, not including the men of Gibeah, whose violent crimes started this whole mess. So now, instead of only the criminals getting punished, a whole nation is going to war, eleven tribes against one.

Step three: Ask God the wrong questions. Before the Israelites go to battle against their kinsfolk the Benjaminites, they go to Bethel, which is the top holy place in Israel at that time. That's where their most important sanctuary is. And they decide to consult with God. And you know, if it were me, and I was risking thousands of lives for a cause, I might start with something basic, like, "God, what do you want us to do?" Not the Israelites. They start with this question: "Which of us shall go up first to battle against the Benjaminites?" And the Lord answers, "Judah shall go up first." So the men of the tribe of Judah go up first, and guess what? Benjamin mows them down. Well, the Israelites are naturally pretty upset to lose 22,000 warriors. So they weep and wail a bit and then they ask God, "Shall we again draw near to battle against our kinsfolk the Benjaminites?" And God says, "Go." They march out again, and this time they lose 18,000 men. But they're learning. This time they ask, "Shall we go out once more to battle against our kinsfolk the Benjaminites, or shall we desist?" This time God says, "Go up, for tomorrow I will give them into your hand."

If you're keeping score here, so far we've got one dead Israelite concubine, and 40,000 dead Israelites men, with no dead Benjaminites yet. When something's bad, and you want to make it worse, what do you do?

Step four: overdo it. Get carried away. The Israelites go out again, and this time they set up an ambush and attack the Benjaminites from two sides, killing 18,000 of them. That means only 8,000 men are left. But the Israelites keep going, and kill all the rest, except for 600 men who flee and go into hiding at the Rock of Rimmon. Then they kill all the Benjaminite women, all the children, all the animals, and burn their towns to the ground.

Step five: take no responsibility for your actions, and refuse to acknowledge your role in contributing to the current situation. We come now to our fourth scripture reading of the day, Judges 21: 1-12, starting with just verses 1-3. . .

Why??? It's such a dumb question that God doesn't even bother to answer. What do you mean, "Why," Israel? It has come to pass because you wiped them out! Out of a tribe of thousands, you have just 600 Benjaminite men left and that's only because they're in hiding. You went after the tribe of Benjamin seeking vengeance as though they were an enemy, forgetting that they, too, were part of you. You're like a cat, chasing your own fluffy tail, forgetting the tail is part of you, and reacting with shocked surprise when you bite it and it hurts. What now? Now that you have experienced the devastating consequences of unbridled violence, will you learn from your mistakes and take a more measured approach? Let's find out in the remainder of our reading, Judges 21:4-12. . .

When something's bad, and you want to make it even worse, step six is: make vows in front of everyone, that nobody asked you to make, and then do whatever it takes to fulfill them, even if whatever it takes is something far worse than breaking a vow. If we needed any further

evidence that the tribes of Israel have completely lost their moral compass, we find it in their plan to kill everyone in the city of Jabesh-Gilead in order to provide wives for the remaining Benjaminites. The one city that didn't participate in Benjamin's destruction now faces its own destruction in order to save a tribe it had no part in destroying.

But wait . . . there's more! There are 600 surviving Benjaminite men. There were 400 young women captured from Jabesh-Gilead. Oh no! What now? Well, leave it to the Israelites of that era to come up with another brilliant solution. They still insist on keeping their vows not to give their daughters to Benjamin in marriage. This time, there's not even a pretense of asking God for guidance. They just send the Benjaminites to the annual festival of the Lord at a place called Shiloh. They say, go hide in the vineyards and wait until the young women of Shiloh come out to the vineyards to dance in the dances. Then, each of you grab one and carry her off to be your wife. That way, each of you gets a wife, but since you'll be abducting them against their will, nobody will be guilty of actually GIVING the women in marriage. And that's what those poor, wife-less Benjaminites do.

Step 7: If you want to make a terrible, horrible, no-good, very bad situation even worse, treat entire groups of people—like teenage girls, for example—as objects to be used in the accomplishment of your goals. Throw in some human trafficking.

You know, I was reflecting on this story this week, and all of a sudden an old episode of "The Little Rascals" came to mind. This one first aired in 1933, and it's the one where the gang is stuck babysitting their little brothers and sisters on a Saturday afternoon, but they want to go swimming, so they leave six or seven babies and toddlers with Spanky, who is barely five years old himself. While Spanky is busy gluing a baby to the floor to keep him from climbing the staircase a third time, the toddlers in the next room take the fish out of the fishbowl and throw

them on the floor, and while Spanky's trying to round up the fish, the toddlers wreak havoc, spraying flour around the kitchen, throwing pots and pans and dishes on the floor, knocking over lamps, overfilling the bathtub, building towers out of the cups and saucers, you name it. The chaos keeps building until the viewer starts to wonder, isn't it time for an adult to show up?

And that's a little bit of what's going on in these last few chapters of the book of Judges. The chaos keeps building until we absolutely ache for a grownup to come along. After the abduction of the girls at Shiloh, the book of Judges concludes on this note: "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes." Israel is a hot mess. And even though it wasn't what God may have originally wanted for them, it's now clear that these people are in dire need of the leadership and structure that a king and a kingdom would provide. That's one of the main points these stories are trying to get across.

But it's not the only point. Even as we read the story of this ancient people and the terrible choices they make, another point emerges, if we're willing to see it. As we watch all of this evil unfold, with no one taking any responsibility for any of it, it prompts us to look at our own lives and ask: what about us? Do we ever tweak the truth a little bit to make ourselves look better—do we emphasize some points and leave out others, in order to motivate others to do something we want them to do? Do we ever over-react, perhaps out of anger or fear? Do we make problems even worse by reacting more strongly than a situation warrants?

What about the way we talk to God? Do we assume God wants what we want? Do we humble ourselves and ask what God wants, waiting patiently for God's reply, or do we immediately jump to asking for God's help in giving us the outcome we've already decided we should have?

What about the way we see people? Are there groups that we automatically view with fear and suspicion today, because of the bad behavior of a small number of people in that group? Like people from particular countries, or people with a particular skin color, or political affiliations?

What about the way the Israelites seemed to have no clue about their own role in bringing the tribe of Benjamin to the brink of extinction? When we look at some of the problems and the suffering in the world today, are we able to see the way we contribute to it, or is the problem always “out there,” always with somebody else?

What about the way those Israelites clung so fiercely to their vows and used their vows as an excuse to disregard other laws, like not stealing, not murdering, stuff like that? They took one law and elevated it above all the others. They insisted on privileging that one value even if other people had to suffer for it. Does that ever happen today? What about treating people as a means to an end, like the Israelites did with the girls of Jabesh-Gilead and Shiloh?

It’s easy to read an ancient story and see all the failures of the people in that story, to pinpoint each wrong choice and blindspot. It’s easy to recoil in horror, assuring ourselves that we would never behave the way they did. The gift of a story like this one is the invitation to look more deeply at our own lives, to look at our own world with eyes wide open. The fact is, this is not a story about other people. This is our story, too. All of these sordid stories in our series these past weeks are our stories. And the same God who allows people to experience the full consequences of their sin is also the same God who ultimately saves us from it. In Christ, God takes all of that outrage, all of that evil, all of that pain into Godself and holds it for us and transforms it. Thanks be to God.

