

Bargaining with lesser gods: Jephthah's story and ours

We pastors are not likely to encounter Jephthah. But we might encounter someone like the young man who sought me out after a stint in jail.

by [Bruce K. Modahl](#) in the [January 6, 2016](#) issue



[Jephtha's Daughter](#), 17th-century oil painting by Bon Boulogne.

Confirmation camp is a rite of passage for many middle school youth in Lutheran churches. As a pastor, I would travel with the confirmands, spending a week in a camp setting. The event became a rite of a different kind for the pastors. As fine as it was being with the youths, it was even finer to gather with friends in the evening. We would sit on the back porch, tell jokes, swap tall tales, and engage in a bit of what Luther called “the mutual conversation and consolation of the people of God.”

We also had time for our own continuing education. One year the week’s theme was “The Bible Stories We Did Not Learn in Sunday School.” These included the story about the 42 children mauled to death by bears because they laughed at bald Elisha, the one about the sacrifice of Isaac, the one about the fate of David and Bathsheba’s firstborn, and the one about Jephthah’s daughter.

Judges 11 tells us that Jephthah was the son of a prostitute. His father, Gilead, had other sons, and when they grew to manhood they drove Jephthah away, saying, “You shall not inherit anything in our father’s house.” Jephthah fled. The text says, “Outlaws collected around Jephthah and went raiding with him.”

In the ebb and flow of Judges, the people abandon the Lord their God in favor of the gods of their neighbors. The neighbors in turn make war on them. The people of Israel call on the Lord. They put away the foreign gods, swearing to worship the Lord God alone. God raises up a judge who leads them to victory. And so it goes, over and over. This time, however, God does not raise up a charismatic leader as judge to throw off the oppressor. This time the elders of Gilead go searching for a leader and turn to Jephthah. He agrees to lead them only if they accept him as judge over them. God shows approval of these arrangements, for “the spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah.”

The advent of the Spirit of the Lord apparently was not enough for him. “Jephthah made a vow to the Lord and said, ‘If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, then whoever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return victorious from the Ammonites, shall be the Lord’s, to be offered up by me as a burnt offering.’”

When he arrived home victorious, the first one out of his house was his daughter, his only child, dancing with tambourine in hand to celebrate his victory. In anguish, Jephthah tore his clothes and said, “Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low. For I have opened my mouth to the Lord, and I cannot take back my vow.”

His daughter submitted, asking only for a two-month reprieve so she might wander on the mountains with her friends to lament. At the end of the two months she returned, and Jephthah “did with her according to the vow he had made.”

The biblical writer spares us the details. Jill Peláez Baumgaertner does not. In the final words of her poem “Jephthah’s Daughter,” she writes:

She climbed upon the altar by herself
and smoothed her gown snagged on the rocks.
Her friends had garlanded her hair
so that what met her father’s nostrils first
was not singed hair but chains
of flowers crushed by fire,
this child of God.

The leader of the study broke down as he was reading the poem. We waited for him to regain his voice. He asked us: Why is this text in our scripture? There is no rescuing angel. Is there any word from God in this text? A word of judgment? A word

of promise?

Our discussion skirted the text. We hesitated to follow the trail into its wilderness. We considered the options. Perhaps it's an old folktale included by the biblical editors as they make their way to the conclusion at the end of Judges and the beginning of 1 Samuel: the word of the Lord was rare in those days, and the people did what was right in their own eyes. Or perhaps the text should be read in the context of Genesis 22, where God rejects child sacrifice.

Someone pointed out that both Abraham and Jephthah were intent on keeping a promise to God. Another commented that Abraham made no promise; he was obeying God's order. And Jephthah received no such word from God.

Perhaps, someone else said, the point is that the Spirit that came upon Jephthah should have been enough assurance for him. A rejoinder came from the other side of the room: the advent of the Spirit wasn't enough for Gideon, or old Zechariah, or Mary, for that matter, but they were not judged harshly. Another spoke up, "They asked for signs; they did not make bargains."

The leader asked, "Have any of us ever made a bargain with God that had unintended consequences?" Silence. Then someone spoke up. "I think I have."

"When I took this new call I promised God that I would work as hard as I could. I asked God to bless my efforts. I want to succeed. I want the congregation to grow and flourish. I see my children in the morning, but they are in bed by the time I get home. I am never home for supper. I eat at my desk as I get ready for whatever is happening that night at church. I don't take a day off. I think I am sacrificing my children and my wife." Our session came to an end.

The conversation continued on the back porch later that night. We talked about Luther's warning that no matter what we say, our god is whatever or whoever we fear the most, and whatever or whoever we trust to relieve that fear, and wherever we hang our hearts. We all saw ourselves in the portrait of Jephthah that our friend had held up for us. We fear failure. We trust in our own hard work to counter our fear. We hang our hearts on success.

This was a community of trust in which one man could weep over the poetry he read and another dared to confess his likeness to Jephthah. It was a community in which we spoke God's words of judgment and promise to each other, idolaters all, called

back to the baptismal font, where we put our idolatry to death in Jesus' death and seize the promises made to us in that water.

I don't recount this scene to highlight the plight of parish pastors. In my experience, as many of us rust out as burn out. I tell it to lift up the bargains we make with lesser gods and the bargain God in Jesus makes with us.

In the terrain over which we live and work we are not likely to encounter Jephthah. But we might encounter someone like the young son of the congregation who sought me out after a brief stint in jail. His wife was ready to leave him and take their young son with her. He told me he'd made a bargain with the devil. He had pledged his life in return for the drugs he craved and sold. I took him to the baptismal font and we read through the service of Holy Baptism, the covenant God made with him that predated the one he made with the devil. When I asked him, "Do you renounce all the forces of evil, the devil, and all his empty promises?" he responded with a firm "I do." We then huddled together over the words of individual confession and forgiveness.

I did not see him again. The drugs were his first love. They seduced him and lured him to the grave, as do all lesser gods. Does the baptismal tide have the power to wash him safely to heaven's shore? I assured his parents and myself that it does. He hung his heart on those drugs. God in Christ hung his heart on him.

This story is more dramatic and more obvious than most of what we encounter. But one pastor told us of the lament of the college graduate who works 85 hours a week and receives e-mails from work after midnight, followed by texts asking why she has not answered her e-mail. In a recent *New York Times* article about a company that is a household name, a man reflects on the harsh demands of the workplace: "Nearly every person I worked with, I saw cry at their desk."

We've counseled the father whose life seems pointless to him now that the children are out of school and out of the house and busy with lives of their own, and the college student weary of the condemnation she experiences in her church and the freedom she feels in the cohort of nones she has found in graduate school, and the middle-aged man ready to desert wife and children for another woman. Pastors hear these stories and offer what Luther called "soul care."

For me the summer camp revelations were twofold. Our life stories are told in the biblical narratives, and the more anguished of them are embedded in the accounts

we did not learn in Sunday school. The second revelation for me was the importance of the community of trust, which is the church at its best.