

✠ *In the Name of Jesus* ✠

According to the news, some experts are saying that our economy is headed for recession. Others say, “No, we’re not slipping into recession. We might not grow as fast as we did in 2017 and 2018, but the economy can keep growing.” I hope these ‘others’ are right. During a recession people suffer. Not everybody, mind you. Not even the majority. But some people do suffer. Unemployment can rise. Then there’s all the people who are underemployed. If you have no income or savings, or family or friends to support you, you may suffer deep hardship, like selling or losing precious possessions in order to keep a roof over your head or to put food in your stomach. If that’s ever happened to you, then you might begin to understand the suffering of the Israelites at this time. Except that theirs was still worse.

Just listen to how their situation is described in Judges 6. ¹“*Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord, and for seven years he gave them into the hands of the Midianites.*” Well that doesn’t sound like fun. But to be fair the Israelites had been behaving badly. There really is a right path through this life, and if anyone won’t walk on it, God sends trouble. Why? Because God is good and just. He knows that ‘not repenting of what is evil in his sight’ is the surest path to an eternity of suffering. He doesn’t want that for anyone. So sometimes he sends temporary sufferings in this life to pull us up short and get us to assess, “Where in my

life am I allowing myself to do the opposite of what God wants?” Take out your Catechism, review the Ten Commandments, and you’ll find plenty to repent of.

Assess the behavior of this country. Is America working hard to bring recession on itself? I’m not thinking about drugs or crime or hooking up or unkindness or greed or gluttony. I’m especially concerned about the 85% of Americas who on any given week won’t honor Jesus by attending worship. Yes, yes, a few of these absences can be attributed to mandatory work rotations, for example: police, firefighters, nurses, and others. But I’m concerned about all the people who absent themselves from worship because other activities are just more important to them. Which is a nice way of saying they don’t treasure God and his Word the most.

Now some of you, I hope, will ask, “Where’s the direct connection between skipping church and an economic slowdown?” And I freely admit that God has not whispered his plans in my ear. But in the Israelites’ case God gave his people over into trouble precisely because they were doing what is evil in his sight, and he loved them too much to let them get away with it.

Listen again to how bad Israel had it during their recession. ²*Because the power of Midian was so oppressive, the Israelites prepared shelters for themselves in mountain clefts, caves and strongholds.* How would you like to live in a cave

instead of your home? *3Whenever the Israelites planted their crops, the Midianites, Amalekites and other eastern peoples invaded the country. 4They camped on the land and ruined the crops all the way to Gaza and did not spare a living thing for Israel, neither sheep nor cattle nor donkeys. Our farmers may be suffering a recession right now because of the tariffs, but the Israelites were suffering worse. 5The [Midianites] came up with their livestock and their tents like swarms of locusts. It was impossible to count the men and their camels; they invaded the land to ravage it. They were purposely trying to be nasty to God's people. Unfortunately, they succeeded—for seven years. 6Midian so impoverished the Israelites that they cried out to the Lord for help. Why did it take them seven years? I'm guessing the Israelites tried asking the false gods for help first. But false gods exist only in the minds of the people who worship them—in other words, not at all. So when all else failed, the people decided, "Maybe we ought to pray to the Lord." Ya think?*

You and I have been in bad situations where we didn't know what to do. And it finally dawned on us, "Oh, I haven't prayed about this yet." Thank you, Lord, for being patient with us. Your promise is sure. You said, "*Call upon me in the day of trouble. I will deliver you, and you will honor me*" (Psalm 50:15). Help us remember your wonderful invitation and promise.

In response to the Israelites' prayers, the Lord visited Gideon, commissioned him to lead the army of Israel against the Midianites, and then strengthened Gideon's faith for the task. When Gideon called the neighboring tribes of Israel to arms, 32,000 men came to fight. Imagine Gideon struggling with the math. "I thank God for these 32,000 soldier, but how can they defeat a nearly uncountable enemy?"

Yet *2the Lord said to Gideon, "You have too many men for me to deliver Midian into [Israel's] hands."* Can you see the look on Gideon's face? "Too many men? Don't you mean, 'not enough men'?" But the Lord explained: "Look, I am about to give you the victory. And I don't want my people boasting, 'Look what we did! Look what we did!' That would be yet another slap in the face. I want them to acknowledge that everything good comes from me because I love them. So tell your men, 'If it frightens you to go into battle, it's okay to go home.'" I can imagine Gideon saying to himself, "I hope we lose only a thousand or two." But 22,000 men left. So if Gideon started with 32,000, he's got only 10,000 soldiers left. Again I can imagine Gideon saying to himself, "Going into battle with only 32,000 was crazy. The enemy army is huge! Going into battle with 10,000 is a suicide mission."

4But the Lord said to Gideon, "There are still too many men." I wonder if at this point Gideon got a little wobbly in the

knees and sat down. Hopefully it took only a minute to remember that it's foolish to argue with the Almighty. So now Gideon is wondering, "How do I send men home who are willing to fight?" But the Lord has a plan. He tells Gideon, ^{4b}*"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."* ⁵*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."* Now, maybe you're wondering: "What's the difference between these two drinking styles?" I'm not sure what God has in mind, but lapping like a dog seems a silly way to drink water. And maybe that's the point. Maybe God wanted to choose the silliest men for this mission. But regardless of why God chose these men, listen to the results. While the 10,000 were being sifted, ⁶*Three hundred men lapped with their hands to their mouths. All the rest got down on their knees to drink.* ⁷*The Lord said to Gideon, "With the 300 men that lapped I will save you and give the Midianites into your hands."*

If you were Gideon, would you believe God? Because that's the lesson for us. Gideon did believe God's promises. He and the 300 went on to defeat the Midianites. Well, actually the Lord brought about a great victory for his people.

Now you're not Gideon. You may not face enormously unfavorable odds, like Gideon's small army versus the countless hordes of Midianites. But when you face odds that are even a little unfavorable, you need help. And God helps. He told Gideon, **WITH THESE 300 I WILL SAVE YOU.** Think how many times in life we can replay those words in our minds as a promise from God: **WITH THESE 300 I WILL SAVE YOU.**

Let's say you're in a church that struggles to keep going. Oh, wait, you are. (In truth, almost every church struggles forward into its future.) Look around. Are all 300 seats in this worship area filled? Even if not, recite God's words in your heart anyway: **WITH THESE 300 I WILL SAVE YOU.** You "300" are up against, not the uncountable Midianites, but the forces of Satan. If you care even a little about our church, you are concerned for our future. Is there hope for us? Yes, there is! Our hope comes from God's promises. Hear what God says in Isaiah: *"My Word...will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it (Isaiah 55:11).* In our Gospel two Sundays ago Jesus said: *"Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom"* (Luke 12:32). **There's** the hope for our church. God is going to deliver our future into our hands through you.

As Gideon's 300 had to go into battle, so do you. Spiritual battle. Take those hands of yours out, fold them in prayer, send up petitions for individuals in this church, and for our leaders, and for our church as an institution. God worked through previous generations to build up this congregation and erect this worship facility and our school building. God placed all this into your hands. You are the "300" through whom God will deliver St. John's into the hands of the next generation. Are you working at it? Are you putting your abilities on the line for God's people? Are you dedicating four to twelve hours of your time each month to make this ministry better? Are you praying for acquaintances and relatives, asking God to help you create opportunities to bring up God's goodness in conversations? Are you inviting friends to come to Bible study or to worship? Don't worry about them bringing up your faults. I hope they do. That's when you thank them for pointing out where your words or actions are inconsistent with following Jesus. Thank them, and tell them St. John's is full of sinners just like you, people who know they've stepped over God's lines and want his forgiveness in Christ and want his help to overcome temptation. You are the "300" through whom God will deliver St. John's into the hands of the next generation. Unless our bylaws require you to take a year off because you already served six, now is not the time to step back from the ministry of this congregation and "let someone else

do it." There isn't any someone else. There's only you "300." But don't be afraid. God said, **WITH THESE 300 I WILL SAVE YOU.**

Don't say, "I don't work well with others, so I can't do anything." There's all kinds of things you can do by yourself at St. John's to thank Jesus for washing you clean. | Don't say, "I'm too old." You know God wants everyone to be saved. You have a telephone. You have pen and paper and envelopes and stamps. | Don't say, "I'm too young." Did you know that young people are considered far more believable than middle aged white guys? You have God's Word, so you know what he has done for you and for everyone. | Don't say, "I'm a woman," as if that somehow disqualifies you from gospel ministry. You have a heart that loves the risen Redeemer. You have a mouth that's good at communicating. You know people who aren't strongly connected to Jesus. | Don't say, "I don't know what to say." Come to Bible class. Breakfast and all your other projects called me on the telephone this morning. They all told me they are very happy to wait a second hour while you attend Bible class so more of God's Word can be poured into your heart so that you can know what to say. The same God who gave 300 Israelites the victory over 135,000 Midianites still has the power to work through you. God said: **WITH THESE 300 I WILL SAVE YOU.** May God have all the glory.