

**Northside Presbyterian Church**  
Chattanooga, Tennessee

***“Your Personal Legend”***

Judges 6:11-24; II Thessalonians 2:13-17

*Sermon preached by Rev. Joe B. Martin, IV on September 3, 2006*

It was probably our tenth visit to Adopt-a-Pet in the first three months since we had moved to Knoxville. We were about six months away from welcoming Joseph into the family and Jodi and I thought that a puppy would provide us with some needed practice. But we were waiting to find just the right puppy, the one meant to be ours and so it took a few tries, but on that tenth visit, we saw him. He was a cute, tiny little black pup with some unique gray markings and clipped to his cage was a card that said, “Willie.” We got the attendant to let us take Willie out back to the pen for some play and the attraction appeared mutual. The attendant told us Willie had been abandoned two weeks before and now we were ready to rescue him. He looked like he would grow to about the size of one of those little dogs who can be trained to jump off of your back to catch a Frisbee in the air. He was perfect. We had dreamed of this. This was our dog.

However, when we returned inside, there was another card clipped to the cage: TAKEN. We were devastated. So many trips. So many puppies. We were so sure that Willie was supposed to be ours, but we had been beaten to the punch. While we agonized and looked around at the other puppies, we saw a man come up and start to play with Willie through the cage. We realized that this must be the guy who had interfered with fate and stolen our predestined pet, but I could see nothing to be done about it. Jodi, however, could. She shoved me in the back and said, “Get me that dog.” Now, as she was three months pregnant, I was accustomed to doing whatever it was that she asked without question. Wait a second, I had grown accustomed to this long before. So I approached the man. “Are you the one who is buying this puppy?” I asked. “Yes,” he replied, in a foreign accent I could not precisely identify, “but it is for my daughter. She has just moved into a new apartment by herself and I thought I would get her a pet. I do not know much about dogs. This is a good one, no?” The idea light went off in my head. “Oh, yes. This is a great dog, but this is an outside dog. He’s going to be a big dog. Is her apartment very large? Do you want a really big dog?”

Within a matter of minutes, the man’s TAKEN card was moved two cages down to a dog that would, in fact, do better in an apartment, and Willie was on the way to becoming ours and having his name changed to Kirby, who did turn out to be a much larger dog than we had really wanted.

When people ask me what breed of dog Kirby is, I usually reply. “Several.” On his name card at Adopt-a-Pet, it said, “Lab/Aussie Mix,” as if they really had any clue. It sounded like a nice mix to me, though. We have a friend with an Australian shepherd that used to run up and down the sidewalk in front of their house to keep the kids out of the street. It is what the shepherd does because it is what God built it to do. One of my friends used to bring his Labrador retriever to summer camp. We would stand in a little clearing and hit a tennis ball with a racket up over the trees and into the thick and twisted Rhododendron woods as far as we could and, very impressively, the dog would have it back to us in no time. It is what the retriever does because it is what God built it to do. My brother’s black lab will actually go to the refrigerator and retrieve canned beverages for him.

And so I am convinced that Kirby is indeed a Lab/Aussie mix because he retrieves exactly like an Australian shepherd and has all of the herding instincts one would expect from a Labrador retriever. I think God built Kirby to shed. No, you only think your dog sheds a lot. Maybe Kirby is part sheep because you could knit a sweater from the clumps of fur he deposits around the house.

I don’t suppose we could sell many mutt-hair sweaters, but Kirby has his usefulness. Unconditional loyalty and love for a family that he alertly and sometimes noisily protects around the clock, barking at all of the right things, though sometimes he is a bit of an overachiever. We all feel safe when we know Kirby is on the job, answering his created calling to watch out for us.

We each have a calling, too, something that God has built us to do. We all share one great calling to glorify God in every good work and word. We talked about that general calling last week, so this Labor Day weekend, let’s look at the particular work God calls us to do as individuals.

It is not the same for everyone. We share one great calling, but God issues to us personal callings, as well. I recently read a book called The Alchemist, by Paulo Coelho. This is going to be the first book we study in the Men’s Beta Team. An international best-seller, it is a sort of fable, tracing the life journey of one boy to a hidden treasure. Like one of Jesus’ parables, it is loaded with symbolism and wisdom. One of the points made by the character that symbolizes God is that we each have a Personal Legend. We each have a destiny; we Presbyterians would say “a calling from God” or perhaps a pre-destiny. Each one of us is called to some task or journey at the end of which we will find our heart’s desire, if we are faithful to that calling and follow the road signs from God along the way. Coelho claims that God has given each one of us a particular passion that will lead us to our goal if we follow God.

Your Personal Legend could be a lifelong goal or something temporary, a new challenge to follow the one you have completed. It may regard your occupation or your family, your work in the church or in the community. What passion has God placed in your heart? What gifts has God given you to live it out? What signs has God given you that you are forging ahead along the right course?

Consider Gideon. During the period after the children of Israel had made their exodus from Egypt and entered the Promised Land and before the coming of the Davidic Kingdom of Israel, there was a time when God sought to order society in Israel through the judges. During Gideon’s day, society was anything but ordered. Many in Israel had been worshiping the Canaanite fertility god Baal to the great displeasure of the God of their ancestors and so God had allowed the Baal-worshiping Midianites to subdue them. They would steal their cattle and destroy their produce, leaving nothing for Israel. This was why Gideon was ungallantly beating out his wheat in a wine press when an angel of the Lord appeared and addressed him, “The Lord is with you, mighty warrior.”

Gideon apparently missed what should have seemed to be sarcasm and replied, "If the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us?" What about all those stories we have heard from our parents and grandparents about plagues raining down on Egypt and seas being parted and battles being won? We are perishing at the hand of Midian. Where are the wonderful deeds now?

And then the Lord spoke. "Go in this might of yours and deliver Israel from the hand of Midian; I hereby commission you." It sounds like God has another wonderful deed planned and that God plans to use Gideon to get it done.

Gideon was not so sure about this. Me? This might of mine? My clan is the weakest in a small tribe. I'm not even the best one to pick in my own family. "But you have me with you," answered God. God showed Gideon his path to his heart's desire: a faithful nation free of the shackles of their oppressors, a desire they shared. God laid out Gideon's Personal Legend right before him, but he was still unconvinced of the calling. So Gideon asked God for a sign and said, "Wait right here." He went in the house and brought out some food and as the angel directed he put it on a rock and then doused the rock, meat, and all with the broth and even still, when the angel touched the food with his staff it all went up in flames. O.K. Gideon was in.

The first task God set for Gideon was to pull down the altar to Baal that his father had erected and then build an altar to the Lord in its place. And Gideon, mighty warrior, did it, albeit under the cover of night so no one would know it was he. He was discovered anyway, but his father backed him and his tribesmen followed suit. However, just as God surely planned, the Midianites also found out that the altar to their god had been desecrated and they amassed their forces in a camp nearby where they were described to be as thick as locusts.

Gideon began to have his doubts again, so he asked God for another sign. This time he said, "I am going to lay a fleece of wool on the threshing floor; if there is dew on the fleece alone, and it is dry on the ground, then I shall know that you will deliver Israel by my hand." And in the morning, so it was. Good enough for you? Not for Gideon, but, of course, it was his life at stake. So one more try, this time wet ground, dry fleece, God. And so it was.

So it was time to attack. Some of the Israelites from other tribes had gathered around Gideon, too. But not too many. Well, God thought it was too many and told Gideon to pare it down so that when they were victorious, they would not think they had done it, but know that God had. Gideon obeyed, sending the 22,000 most fearful soldiers home while 10,000 remained. Still too many, God said. Take the troops down to the water and let them drink. Watch them and if they bend down and bring the water up in cupped hands, send them home. If they lap like dogs, keep them. There were not many lappers and so Gideon was left with a force of only 300 brave, though apparently poorly mannered, soldiers; and if he was not then wondering what in heaven God was thinking, he would be in a minute, because God's battle plan was that the 300 Israelites would surround the vast Midian camp armed with torches, trumpets, and clay pots.

But God was with them that night. At a safe distance, they burned the torches brightly, broke the clay pots noisily, and blew their trumpets with zest; and the Midianites were startled and scared into such disorder that they turned their swords one against the other as they fled. Israel was free again. God had wondrously done it with Gideon.

We can learn several lessons about our own Personal Legends from Gideon. Sometimes we might not think we are built for the specific individual calling God puts before us and we may not be. But God is. It may seem too hard for us. But it is not too hard for God. Maybe we are afraid to take on a battle against giants like racism and poverty. Maybe the one thing we wish we could change about the world just seems too big. Maybe we figure that we are too young or too old to have much of an impact. I would contend that for the one who follows God in faith, our great fears are of little consequence. God is the one who does it. We are just the ones who do whatever it is that God built us to do and calls us to do.

When Gideon obeyed God and followed God's calling faithfully, things worked out and great things happened. If we follow the God-placed seed of passion in our hearts and actively, through prayer and the study of scripture, look for the road signs, God will lead us to our heart's desire and accomplish wonderful deeds along the way through us.

What passion has God given you? What is your Personal Legend? What is your particular calling through which you are to live out your great calling to glorify God?

Where are God's wonderful deeds today? Perhaps... No, I am sure of it. God is calling you to them.

Let us pray:

Almighty God, we know that you created us for a reason and that you built us for a purpose. We know that we are here to bring glory to you for the sake of your Son Jesus Christ, but sometimes the particulars are a little cloudy to us. Who would you have us be? What works would you have us do? What words would you have us say or sing or write? By the power of your Holy Spirit, open us up to the calling you have for us that is already within us. Show us our path. Remind us you are there with us on it and teach us to trust in you so that nothing can stand in the way of our reaching your intended journey's end. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we ask these things and for His glory that we strive. Amen.