Everyone aspires to be Spirit-led, to be Spirit-filled, to be filled by the fruit of the Spirit. Everyone is ready to run on Spirit power! And I wish that for you—especially that you know the Spirit of God that has been shaped by Jesus and that you not change the gospel of power to anything less than what it should be. But this morning let me caution you about this combination of Spirit and power. For it is a combination incomplete without full knowledge; it can be potentially dangerous without full knowledge. It can be downright deadly!

Consider a Spirit text from the New Testament, 2 Tim 3:16: “Every scripture is inspired by God (God-breathed!) and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.” This is a text familiar to many.

Now a less familiar Spirit text from the book of Judges. We find Jephthah the Gileadite, the son of a prostitute, and a mighty warrior. Jephthah the outcast returned home to Gilead, an Israelite region in Transjordan, by request of its elders, to lead the people during an impending community crisis, a crisis caused by Ammonite military aggression. For Jephthah, the outcome of the community crisis will lead directly to a familial crisis, a truly heart-wrenching family calamity. Hear then Judges 11:29–40:

Then the Spirit of the Lord came on Jephthah. He crossed Gilead and Manasseh, passed through Mizpah of Gilead, and from there he advanced against the Ammonites. And Jephthah made a vow to the Lord: “If you give the Ammonites into my hands, whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the Lord’s, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering.”

Then Jephthah went over to fight the Ammonites, and the Lord gave them into his hands. He devastated twenty towns from Aroer to the vicinity of Minnith, as far as Abel Keramim. Thus Israel subdued Ammon.

When Jephthah returned to his home in Mizpah, who should come out to meet him but his daughter, dancing to the sound of timbrels! She was an only child. Except for her he had neither son nor daughter. When he saw her, he tore his clothes and cried, “Oh no, my daughter! You have brought me down and I am devastated. I have made a vow to the Lord that I cannot break.”

“My father,” she replied, “you have given your word to the Lord. Do to me just as you promised, now that the Lord has avenged you of your enemies, the Ammonites. But grant me this one request,” she said. “Give me two months to roam the hills and weep with my friends, because I will never marry.”

“You may go,” he said. And he let her go for two months. She and her friends went into the hills and wept because she would never marry. After the two months, she returned to her father, and he did to her as he had vowed. And she was a virgin.

From this comes the Israelite tradition that each year the young women of Israel go out for four days to commemorate the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite. (NIV)

In the pages of a story from long ago, we meet two people: one extolled for deliverance, one for blind obedience; one in the limelight, one in the deep foreboding shadows that escalate to a horrific death; one male, one female; one father, one only daughter; one named Jephthah, one left unnamed; one victory, one terrible tragedy!

These yikes texts, these “texts of terror” might (or might not!) get lightly touched upon in a Bible class, but should we dare to enter them into our holy space of worship? Is this proper handling of the Word of God?

Oh, but is this not a “Spirit” text? “Then the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah.” Must we not engage such texts if we are to affirm 2 Tim 3:16 as an item of our faith? “Every Scripture is God-breathed!” And furthermore, how dare we forget Jephthah’s daughter when God has decreed her memory! Why is it that we have texts like the one I have read today? For those who have the mind of Christ, the Apostle Paul would answer that the particulars of this story have happened “for an example” or “in a patterned fashion” and they “were written down for our instruction.” If that is true, will you consider this instructional text as well?

Though this text is indeed instructional, it is surely uncomfortable as well. It can be ignored, forgotten, repressed. The church will rarely invite you to such a text, but today that rare invitation is being made. I invite you into this uncomfortable situation.

The fundamental question the interpreter of this narrative must ask is: need we rescue Jephthah? Need we rescue Jephthah? And of course, inherent in that question is, need we rescue God? For Jephthah had the Spirit of God! Well, let’s give it a try. Like so much of the commentary tradition and like so many others before us, let’s try to rescue Jephthah.

First, could it be that Jephthah misspoke? Jephthah didn’t mean to say whoever came out to meet him, but whatever came out to meet him. He had in mind livestock, not people. Not his family. Not his only daughter! While the Hebrew wording is ambiguous here, one still wonders why, if Jephthah himself knew what he meant (an animal), why he didn’t have confidence that God knew what he meant. Or had this been a public vow, taken before others? Did Jephthah need to save face, to avoid shame by enacting to the letter what he had said?
Hmmm? Moral of story: don't make a rash vow to God, and if you do, check your wording carefully, because God expects you to do what you say you will do, no matter what you say. (Let's put this off to the side for a moment).

Second, could it be that Jephthah didn't really sacrifice his daughter as a burnt offering; he simply condemned her to a life of perpetual virginity. Here some have tried to use Jephthah's daughter (by creating a metaphorical death rather than a literal one) to help rescue Jephthah (and God). But is this not interpretive gymnastics? This woman bewailed her virginity for two months with her friends because she would never marry, never bear sons and daughters, never fulfill her social role within the people of God. This was to have been her identity; it was no small matter, and it ended with death after two months! Oh, I suppose we might follow this blind path a little further: Jephthah's daughter willingly obeyed this metaphorical death; therefore, she accepted the vow as right and honorable. She would protect Jephthah's faithfulness to God by completing the requirement of his vow.

Hmmm? Moral of story: Creative interpretation shows that faithfulness to one's vow to God is holy above all else. Of course, the story leaves unstated why this might be so. (Let's also put this off to the side for a moment).

Finally, to cast the issue in modern psychological terms, could it be that Jephthah comes from a dysfunctional family? No doubt. The son of a prostitute and an outcast among brothers. No doubt ridiculed, humiliated, and sent away broken. Jephthah's status as a mighty warrior surely can be attributed, in part, to overcompensation. And certainly his return and reinstatement become for him sweet vindication. Yet, his life experiences only lead him to perpetuate more family violence, not to refrain from it.

Hmmm? Moral of story: get some help! Apparently Jephthah needed something more than the Spirit of God to keep him on course.

It seems to me that there are two Jephthahs: On the one hand, there is Jephthah, a man of strength, and self-confidence, and diplomacy, and humility, and at times even overt piety. Jephthah the mighty warrior, deliverer of the Israelites against Ammonite oppression. But on the other hand, there is also Jephthah the unfaithful, one who enters into a senseless, needless, and unfaithful vow—one who carries out the sacrifice of his only child.

I propose that this second Jephthah, this unfaithful Jephthah cannot be rescued. For Jephthah did not know his own traditions. Though Jephthah had the Spirit of God at times, maybe only one time, he certainly didn't have full knowledge to go along with this Spirit. For Jephthah, a son of eponymous Gilead, was parented by a community that failed to impart to him a full knowledge of Israel's past. Yes, Jephthah could remember conquest stories and lines drawn between small kingdoms and so forth, but he did not remember stories of God's creation of a righteous people. Jephthah cannot remember the full knowledge of the past, and because he cannot remember, he cannot participate in it, and because he cannot participate, he does not participate in the covenant and act in righteousness! This is why we teach the stories to our children—Sunday school, and VBS, and home reading. This is why we study scripture together at all levels of Christian education and why we are committed to biblical preaching. Will we commit to learning our traditions? We cannot afford to go out into the world without a firm grasp on our heritage as the ongoing people of God. We need to be guided by a firm grasp of the covenantal traditions and righteousness—right doing, doing right.

A young woman died! And 42,000 covenantal Ephraimites will die before Jephthah is through.

You've now heard my evaluation of Jephthah. But how would an Israelite evaluate him? I have in mind here a thinking Israelite who knew his or her traditions and wanted to learn from Jephthah's story. I dare say Jephthah would not fare well in such an evaluation either. Three reasons:

First, Jephthah failed at parenthood. And not only in the obvious way—sacrificing his daughter. Long before that act, he failed to impart to his daughter the character of their God and their God's covenant. He failed her as his family had failed him. Jephthah's daughter completed the vow out of loyalty—not out of wisdom, not out of knowing faithfulness, and certainly not out of covenantal faithfulness! She acted upon what she knew, but sadly she had learned from her father, who knew little.

Second, Jephthah followed the letter and not the spirit of the law. Israelite law codes indicate flexible interpretation and application of laws, always with an eye to concern for the oppressed. Who is Jephthah's daughter if she is not oppressed in this situation? Treated as guilty by her father! Though she had done no wrong! Human sacrifice is hideous in Israel's traditions. What does the Torah—letter or spirit—have to do with a senseless vow misdirected to a family member? Does anyone remember the story of Abraham and Isaac, and what it says about the character and will of God? Whatever happened to "Thou shalt not kill"! Praise God that someone mourns, someone remembers. And who is it who remembers, who is it who renews the covenantal traditions in our text? Is it not the women of the people of God, the daughters of Israel?

Third, and finally, Jephthah has lost sight of the cultic system established by Moses. Has someone unwittingly sinned? Has someone unwittingly misspoken? Let him or her make sacrifice and confession before the Lord. You see, a prideful Jephthah could not place himself humbly in the hands of the one supreme God. For Jephthah, Yahweh was only one
God among many. O brother Jephthah! Do you not remember the foundation of the covenant, the first commandment? One never owns the Spirit of God; the Spirit comes and goes at will. But one is responsible for one's humanness for the extent of their life. We should be prepared!

Does this story of Jephthah and his daughter speak to Christians leaders like ourselves? Those of us who are recipients of the comings and goings of the Spirit for ministry? Certainly there is more here than avoiding rash and ill-worded vows. Certainly there is more here than trying to rescue Jephthah, or God, or God's Spirit from wrongdoing. If we are to learn from Jephthah, we must learn not to follow him in the way of unfaithfulness. Disciples of Jesus respect the Spirit of God, and they do not neglect the knowledge of their traditions. Nor do they forget to cultivate their ability for proper reasoning and application of the things of God. Leaders do not protect their pride and place of status by entering into evil acts rather than humbly asking pardon before God. In interpreting the purposes of God, we should be found standing on the side of what is right—taking our place beside God as those who stand for the oppressed and the excluded. Jephthah's daughter could only have wished for what you have right now—a new reality in Christ Jesus that welcomes all into full participation without distinction. In such a reality she would have lived and flourished. Friends, is it not time to renew our commitment to our traditions again? Even to the most difficult ones? And is it not now, in our time, for all the daughters to be liberated? I hope you want to be stretched; I hope you want to know and wrestle with the fullness of your God-given traditions.

But don’t mourn for Jephthah’s daughter, remember her! Are we not Christians? Do we not see through the eyes of faith? Maybe there is an analogical meaning to this text, maybe there is yet some hope lingering. Although the historian and the community have forgotten her name, although we have too often forgotten her text, the powerful God, the God who crafts from nothing, has chosen to preserve her story. Consider a question: Does the Spirit of God still speak to the churches? Is there still a good word to be uttered for testing among the saints? If so, then hear and test these words: The day is coming when each of us will sit before Jephthah's daughter and we will be taught by her! And she will tell us the story of our God who brings to life those things that are not, who redeems the victim and the powerless, and the outcast. And this daughter of Jephthah will be named again, and she will teach us about all that we were given, which is all that she had longed for—peace and wholeness, love and participation in the reign of Yahweh.

Go then from this place, struggle if you must over this text; but above all walk in a manner that will bring you no shame when you meet Jephthah’s daughter in the coming Day of our LORD.

Notes
1. Compare 1 Cor 10:11, “These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come” (NIV).
2. When first preached, the author here included a personal illustration about entering into an uncomfortable situation. Discomfort led to hesitation and fear, as is often the case when approaching an uncomfortable biblical text. Someone adapting this sermon for their own use might choose to insert a similar personal illustration here.

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