

August 6, 2017

TEXT: Judges 4:1–9, 17–22

TITLE: Judges' Wisdom: Women of Might

This morning we have heard the bible stories about Deborah and Jael—two strong women from the book of Judges. There's a real challenge, though, in preaching on these passages. In telling their stories, in fleshing out the events around the leadership of Deborah and the initiative of Jael, I run the risk of reinforcing patriarchal stereotypes about women even as I lift up two women for special notice. I could say "Look at Deborah, giving great advice to Barak the military commander," implying that what she did was highly unusual for a woman. I could say "Look at Jael, risking so much to kill an enemy commander in her own tent," which, if a man had done this, we might not have thought twice about this act of violence. Before a word is spoken about women in the bible, presumptions and prejudices affect everything that is heard. That is why it is important to hear these stories about Deborah and Jael as much for what they say as for what is left unsaid. Even today, we still have much to learn about women of might.

I'm quite serious about this. I recently read a review of a book about the Lakota who live on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota. A young tribal activist was asked to speak at a conference focusing on indigenous people. When she took the stage, she said this: "[Too often] others rewrite history and erase our stories. But what my mind hasn't been allowed to know, my body has always known. I am an undeniable, inconvenient body of knowledge. Read me." She then proceeded to stand before the crowd in silence for 15 minutes.¹ Deborah and Jael deserve that same focused attention.

Judges 4 opens with an all-too-familiar pattern in human history. The people did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. The seeds of their sins and injustice led to a time of oppression. The Canaanite ruler of that region, a man named Jabin, along with his army of charioteers led by Sisera, made life hard for them for 20 years. The people couldn't trade freely or travel freely, so they were slowly being reduced to poverty. Deborah is identified as the Israelite leader in the land. She is a wife, whose husband is only mentioned in passing; a prophetess, who passes on the wisdom of God without hesitancy; and a judge—one who has authority over God's people in that land. The bible places no special emphasis on the fact that Deborah is a woman—which should raise the question in our minds of why we haven't gotten to a place where gender is not a factor in choosing our leaders. If I ask you to picture in your mind a doctor, lawyer, politician, CEO and your mental images are mostly men, then that proves we still have work to do.

When God sent the prophet Samuel to anoint the next king of Israel, Samuel was surprised to be directed to a young shepherd boy named David. The answer from God is just as true then as it is today: *The Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.* (1 Sam 16:7) To which we might add: The Lord looks on both male and female hearts.

One day the wise judge Deborah has surprising news for her people. She wanted them to break the yoke of oppression from the Canaanites. She told Barak to raise up an army of foot soldiers and use them to defeat Sisera's army of charioteers. She used the landscape to her advantage—fighting on the side of Mt. Tabor favored the men over the chariots. A subsequent rainstorm, clogging the chariot wheels in mud and water, made the victory absolute and total. Yet Deborah's might was not limited to her military skill. It was also seen in her faithful presence and truth-telling. When Barak received her instructions to recruit a militia of 10,000 fighters, he said he would only do this if Deborah came into battle with them. He wanted the spokeswoman of the Lord to be there on Mt. Tabor—as a symbol and reminder of the Lord's presence and promised victory over one's enemies. But too often military leaders claim credit themselves for that which happens by the skill and dedication of others. Too often swagger and machismo take over. So Deborah spoke truth to Barak's masculine power. She said, *"I will go with you, but this road will not lead to your glory. God will deliver your enemy into the hand of a woman."* Deborah the mighty judge initiated a plan that would ultimately be completed by a single woman acting bravely in her tent against a known enemy. Deborah kept her word: she traveled with the army and loyally stayed by their side and she corrected the false pride of her general, so he would always remember who the true Lord of the battlefield is.

Jael is the other figure introduced in Judges 4. She too is first identified as someone's wife; however, her role and authority did not come from her husband but rather from her own faithfulness and the powerful choices she made. We are not told explicitly why Jael acted as she did, although in the next chapter (Judges 5), she is celebrated in an ancient song as the most blessed of women—so something in her violent act against the enemy general Sisera was seen as in keeping with the Lord's plan. Now I am not a fan of violence. I cannot condone or explain away Jael's choice to drive a tent stake into the temple of her enemy. I might wish that the bible was only filled with peaceful images—words of prophets and saviors telling us how blessed we are. But even the Beatitudes Jesus spoke to the crowd—Blessed are the poor, Blessed are those who hunger, Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted—even the Beatitudes end with a word about violence: *Blessed are those whom people revile and persecute and utter all kinds of evil against falsely on my account, for your rewards will be great in heaven.*

We exist in a violent world and a violent nation. Almost 33,000 Americans die every year from gun violence—1/3 of that total are murdered, 2/3 are suicides. 1300 American children die each year from guns; 16 kids every day are treated for gunshot injuries. One out of five murders in America involves a person killed by an intimate partner; domestic violence leads to over 18 million mental health visits a year in America. Violence and war are part of the human condition. The statistics are sobering and important. Yet every act of violence comes down to an individual life; all violence, whether in a battle with chariots or an assault with a tent peg, affects and changes individual lives.

So here's the deeper value of these two stories: because both the protagonists here are women, their stories have been remembered. Rather than hearing about another male

general or male warrior, scripture tells us about these two women of might so we will learn to see war and violence in a different way. At the very least, their stories tell us that God uses surprising people, unexpected people, to be agents of God's justice. These stories also remind us about the inherent power all women possess—a power too often neglected or dismissed by our male-dominated culture.

And most importantly, these stories make us pause and see the connectedness of all life. Power and wealth and might can be used to dominate others or to empower others as we empower ourselves. Jabin, the Canaanite king, used power to oppress the Israelites, foolishly trusting in his iron chariots; but Deborah's wisdom and Jael's courage destroyed his army, killed his general, and ended Canaan's dominance in the land. Are the decisions we make today—individually and nationally—based on true justice for all?

U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon challenges us to remember the big picture. He said: *Saving our planet, lifting people out of poverty, advancing economic growth...these are one and the same fight. We must connect the dots between climate change, water scarcity, energy shortages, global health, food security and women's empowerment. Solutions to one problem must be solutions for all.*² The choices we make are always interconnected; so each step of the way, we too need to ask, "How is God honored by this choice—by my words or actions? And if God is not honored, if others are not healed or empowered, why am I doing this?"

Interestingly, in the same speech Ban Ki-Moon included these words about women's rights: *Women hold up more than half the sky and represent much of the world's unrealized potential. They are the educators. They are natural leaders and increasingly the drivers of economies. We need their full engagement in government, business and civil society.* Women hold up more than half the sky— another reason why stories about Deborah and Jael need to be told.

In closing, I shift from Ban Ki-Moon to Cokie Roberts, the well-known American political commentator. In her book, We are our Mother's Daughters, she challenges us not to give up, not to accept patriarchy and violence and oppression wherever it may be found, and not to accept anything less than justice for all. As she told her story and the story of the women who have gone before her, she was proud of the progress that's already been made. She said, "*We have the scars to show that we knocked down barriers rather than jumped over them, making it easier for the women who followed us.*"³ In the end, let us all be known for knocking down barriers. Let us be faithful people of might, making it easier for those who walk beside us and those who will follow us here in the Lord's creation.

¹ Review of Quiet Until the Thaw by Alexandra Fuller; review by Emily Eakin – NYT Book Review, July 23, 2017.

² Ban Ki-Moon, "We the Peoples" Address to 66th UN General Assembly; 21 September 2011

³ Cokie Roberts, We Are Our Mother's Daughters, p. 4.