

**November 15, 2020**

**TEXT: [Judges 4:1–10](#)**

**TITLE: Deborah Presence**

*By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush*

My sermon today is about Deborah—a prophet, judge and military leader of old. You may not have heard much about Deborah before, but she is one of the judges who guided Israel in the days before kings like David and Solomon. In fact, she's the only female judge mentioned in the bible. At this point, it is good to pause and ask ourselves a simple question: If women make up more than half the population, why aren't more stories in the bible about women? A quick survey of scripture makes it clear that women of faith are woefully under-represented in the bible. One of the reasons we hear about Deborah is because a song about her wisdom and military prowess is one of the oldest pieces of scripture in the whole bible, just like a similar song about Moses' sister Miriam is another example of very old biblical material. So because the Songs of Deborah and Miriam were so well-known in ancient Israel's history, they had to be included in the bible despite the male authors' biases that downplayed women of faith.

In truth, once you silence the voices of patriarchy and let the women of scripture speak up at last, they add much to our story of faith. There is Eve, who is literally the mother of all humankind. There is Miriam and the midwives of Egypt who outsmarted Pharaoh and made Moses' life possible. There are Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and others who faithfully bore the ancestors of the tribes of Israel. There is Hannah who was blessed with her son, the prophet Samuel and in the New Testament there's Elizabeth who bore John the Baptist. There is Jesus' mother Mary, Jesus' close friend and the first preacher Mary Magdalene, plus Lydia, the leader of one of the first churches, and many others. Honoring these women, including Deborah, is an important corrective to the sins of the past that for too long kept women marginalized and in the shadows of the church.

Let's start again: My sermon today is about Deborah. I, as a male pastor, am speaking today about Deborah, the female judge and prophet. We are very fortunate to be a multi-staff congregation and for this church family to receive pastoral care and preaching wisdom from two exceptional women pastors, Pastor Patrice and Pastor Heather. Sadly, there are still many pulpits in the Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox world where women are not accepted as full leaders and preachers of the gospel. But change is coming every day. Having just elected a woman person of color as our Vice President, and knowing that our seminaries continue to prepare for ordination scores of gifted women of faith, we will work for gender parity in the pulpit and insist it is a heresy to believe half of God's children should be marginalized in the church any longer.

That's part of the reason why it is important for me to preach about Deborah; it is not something that should only be done by Heather or Patrice. It is not for women alone to challenge and correct the sins of patriarchy. Just as it is not for African Americans to educate whites about racism, or for Native Americans to teach us late-arrivals the lessons about stolen homelands and broken treaties, or for immigrants to convince us of the beauty of different cultures, or for gays, lesbians and transgender individuals to

explain once more about the God-given richness of human sexuality in all its expressions. Speaking up for others from our places of privilege is how we move from hierarchies of prejudice to communities of justice, compassion, and equality.

So, once again, my sermon today is about Deborah, a prophet, judge and military leader of old. Those are three titles we don't often hear associated with women in the bible. We hear about them as wives, mothers, helpers and caregivers—all of which have real value. But women should not be restricted to a small list of titles and roles. The African American preacher Howard Thurman once spoke about the dangerous time in American history in which everyone assumed segregation was normal—and believed if such racial bias was normal, then it must be correct; and if correct, it must be moral; and if moral, then it must be religious.<sup>1</sup> Suddenly religion itself was seen as a defender and guarantor of racist sin.

In a similar way, if “normal” women’s stories are only told in relation to their role as wives, then what does that say about those who choose singleness or live without a partner? If women’s stories are only told in relation to motherhood, then what does that say about those who do not, cannot, or choose not to bear children? Exceptional women have accomplished great things simply because they refused to be restricted to a short-list of male-approved roles. Think of astronomers Williamina Fleming and Annie Jump Cannon who catalogued stars in the late 1800s. Think of Mary Jackson, Katherine Johnson, and Dorothy Vaughan, the “Hidden Figures” calculating space flights for NASA. Think of the influence women like Eleanor Roosevelt, Shirley Chisholm, Barbara Jordan and Ruth Bader Ginsberg have had on scores of young women. Think of how young girls can now ask politicians like Amy Klobuchar, Nikki Haley, Hillary Clinton, Madeleine Albright, Nancy Pelosi, Michelle Obama, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and Kamala Harris— “Can I accomplish the things you have done?”—and hear back the reply, “Yes, of course. All this and even more can be done by you.”

News reporter Cokie Roberts wrote this in her book We are our Mother’s Daughters, “We have the scars to show that we knocked down barriers rather than jumped over them, [thus] making it easier for the women who followed us.”<sup>2</sup> Progress means shaking off the labels others would put upon us, like when slave women Araminta Ross and Isabella van Wagenen refused to be called by the names of their slave masters and rechristened themselves Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth. It means having the persistence of the widow described in Luke 18, who knocked and knocked on the door of the dishonest judge until finally he heard her case and granted her justice. It means believing and knowing that in Christ, there are no hierarchies defined by prejudice, no talents restricted to one gender, race, or sexual orientation, and nothing—neither height, nor depth, nor rulers, powers or anything else in all creation that can separate us from our common identity as beloved children of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

So, for one last time, my sermon today is about Deborah—a prophet, judge and military leader whose presence made all the difference in the world. She was a leader in a time when leaders were few and far between. People would go to her, men would defer to her, as she wisely judged civil cases and gave them counsel in solving their problems.

Deborah was inspired by God and a vessel of God's Spirit to others—hence her title as prophet. Deborah also had authority—the authority to call a military leader named Barak and have him summon an army of 10,000 soldiers to challenge and defeat the forces under the control of General Sisera.

But what stands out clearest from this story is that in the end, it was Deborah's faithful presence that turned the tide of history. Look, there are some things in this life we just do not want to do alone. There are times when we know we need someone to be beside us—someone who will have our back—someone who will not leave or forsake us. Sometimes this special person is a memory we carry within us. We imagine our mother or father, our grandmother, grandfather, teacher, mentor or best friend being right beside us, and we find strength in remembering their wisdom, courage, and love. Other times we literally need someone there beside us. Barak had an army of 10,000 men, but he wouldn't go into battle unless Deborah promised to be there beside him. He needed her wisdom; he needed her faithfulness and connection to God; he needed her presence.

And that is precisely why Deborah is so important for each of us today. Because whoever you are, whatever life has set before you or the world has laid upon your shoulders, you can still be a Deborah for someone. You can listen and counsel. You can guide, teach and support. You can pray and encourage. By being you—the gift of God that is your life—and being you for someone else, you can make all the difference in the world.

Remember, you are a follower of Jesus Christ, the One called "Immanuel" which means "God with us." Jesus is the presence of God in our midst, so that we are never alone—and by his grace, great things are possible. Therefore, accept your calling to a ministry of presence. Now more than ever there are people alone, afraid, anxious, and struggling. There are children needing someone to look up to, and elderly hoping to see someone who will stand beside them. As Deborah was present in a time of great need, may you be a Deborah for someone else—present beside them, encouraging them to trust and believe. May it be so.

AMEN

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<sup>1</sup> Howard Thurman, Jesus and the Disinherited, p. 43.

<sup>2</sup> Cokie Roberts, We Are Our Mother's Daughters, p. 4.