

A Lectionary 33 11.19.23

Judges 4:1-7 [8-24]

Focus Statement: We all have our part to play in God's unfolding victory.

Today we get our first and only drop into the book of Judges and whoa buddy, is that whole thing a crazy action-adventure drama. Tresa just gave you the front end of the story of Israel's battle with the forces of King Jabin of Canaan. I want to give you the rest of the tale because one, it is ripe for adaptation for an HBO series, get ready for crazy. And two, I hope Gloria's watching from Florida, because this is a story of not one but two super tough women saving the day for Israel. One commentary I read hypothesized that the lectionary committee gives us this story from Judges instead of one of the more well-known ones because it highlights God's use of both men and women as vessels for protecting and leading God's people.

First off, some scene setting. And remember, history nerd, so this may have more fun facts than you want, bear with me. The period of the Judges lasted from the death of Joshua until Israel went to a monarchical structure, got a king is an easier way of saying that, a period that lasted from about 1200 to 1020 BCE. In this time, the plan was that the Israelites would live together peacefully under the law God had given them through Moses, and they wouldn't need a single overarching ruler to guide them. They were, not surprisingly given all we know about them, terrible at following God's law and leading themselves. It was also, in fairness to them, a very tumultuous time in the region. There were lots of other tribes and nations fighting for power and territory. So at various times of desperation, the text tells us that the "Israelites cried out to the Lord for help" and God would send a judge to both act as arbitrator of communal conflict and provide military leadership. The first three

of these Judges were Othniel, whom God raised up to help the Israelites when they were attacked from the far north, Ehud, when they were attacked from the east, and Shamgar, who led them against the Philistines, their neighbors to the west. So when King Jabin of Canaan, a land and a people located essentially within the same territory as Israel, and the Israelites cried out to God for help, the assumption would be that the next person God raised up would be another Judge to guide them both in their society and against their enemy. Instead, the next person we meet is Deborah.

Now Deborah was a judge. The text tells us she would “sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel... and the Israelites came to her for judgment.” She was also a prophet, which meant that God spoke to her truths about the situations her people were facing, and she passed those truths along. What she wasn’t was a military commander. She couldn’t lead God’s people in battle against the Canaanite army and their mighty general Sisera, that wasn’t her skill set. So Deborah did what any good leader does when faced with a task that is outside their ability level, she found the right person to fill that job. That is the last part of the lesson Tresa read, Deborah called Barak son of Abinoam and told him all that God had told her about how to lead God’s people to victory.

Now here’s a fun historical fact for you that you may not have caught unless you’re super into ancient near east history, but did you notice the detail that Sisera the Canaanite general had “nine hundred chariots of iron”? That detail is important because the period of the Judges is also the start of the iron age. Iron is cutting edge military technology. Iron is the, I don’t know, drones or stealth bombers or fancy expensive whatever of today. Canaan has

iron because they are an older, wealthier, more established society. Israel, having only just recently arrived from Egypt, does not. This is not an evenly matched fight Deborah was calling Barak to lead an army into. So Barak said to Deborah, I'll go, but you have to come with me. Deborah agrees, with one final detail, "the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the Lord will sell Sisera into the hands of a woman." Spoiler alert - be on the lookout for tough woman number two, and off they go.

So they get to Mount Tabor, the location decided for the battle, and just as Deborah had announced, the Israelites win a near total victory over the Canaanites. All the fancy iron chariots are thrown into a panic, the Canaanites retreat with Barak fast on their heels. But, crucially, Sisera gets away. This is important because Sisera is a military mastermind. As long as he's still out there, Israel will never be safe from the threat of the Canaanites.

Enter Jael, wife of Heber the Kenite. Jael is a double outsider in this story, being both a woman and not an Israelite. Nevertheless, as we'll see, Jael was a follower of the Israelite God, unlike her husband Heber, a friend and supporter of the Canaanite King Jabin. Knowing the relationship between Heber and King Jabin, Sisera fled to the Kenites for safety. When Jael saw Sisera coming, she welcomed him into her tent, promising him a place to safely rest from the pursuing Israelite army. She lured him in, tucked him in under blankets, gave him a glass of milk, and then, at his request, stood outside the tent flap to guard him against enemies. But she didn't stay outside the tent flap. Because check what happens next. And as a word of warning, I'm taking advantage of the fact that Levi is two and thus not really listening. If he was older, I'd wait on this story until he was at least

twelve, because this is not a kid-friendly part of the bible. I'll just read this part straight from scripture, this is Judges chapter 4 verses twenty-one. "Jael wife of Heber took a tent peg, and took a hammer in her hand, and went softly to him, and drove the peg into his temple, until it went into the ground—he was lying fast asleep from weariness—and he died." Here I should point out there are any number of great memes reminding us that in the attributes of biblical womanhood, willingness to drive a tent peg through the heads of tyrants is in that list. Fairly shortly there after, Barak showed up at the tent, and Jael was like, I got that guy you were after, and shows Barak Sisera the general, in her tent with a tent peg through his temple. The chapter finishes, "So on that day God subdued King Jabin of Canaan before the Israelites." And we are drawn away from the specifics to the greater drama. There has been a struggle going on between God and the forces of evil seeking to destroy God's people. Deborah, Barak, Jael, and even Sisera are just characters in this greater drama, a drama in which God always triumphs.

Here's why this story, weird and gruesome as it is, is an amazing one. And not just for the tough women doing tough woman things. God's people were in danger. Real, mortal peril and suffering. They had been struggling under Sisera for twenty years the text told us. They needed liberation. And they got it, not by one hero, but by three. Deborah, Barak, and Jael each brought their unique skills and gifts to this work of defeating Sisera and his forces. Without any of the three of them, the mission would have failed. Deborah was a great prophet and advisor, she knew how to pick the right people for the right positions and lead them well. Barak was a master military leader who, in what I have to assume was a bit unusual for the time, was not only willing to take but saw the need for advice from a

woman. And Jael used the tools at hand to take a bold risk when the opportunity presented itself. Here's a thing I didn't know, setting up tents in this time period was women's work. Jael knew her way around a tent peg because in the very limited scope of authority her society deeded to her, tent pegs were in that list. None of the people in this story cowered to the expectation society limited them to, they made bold decisive choices to stand up against the forces of oppression to protect their people.

Now, to be clear, we do not live in 1200 to 1020 BCE, and I am in no way advocating tent pegs as a means of solving disputes, but. But there are still forces of evil that threaten and control our society. Violence, poverty, racism, xenophobia, climate change, discrimination, the list goes on. There are any number of Siseras with their seemingly intractable armies of iron-clad chariots oppressing God's people. This text both assures us that the whole job is not ours, while challenging us to use the gifts we have to do the work we can. Maybe you are a Deborah, good at hearing the stirrings of God and seeing and raising up the gifts of others, sharing advice and wisdom. Do that. Maybe you are Barak, a master middle manager. You can take direction well and move others visions to concrete action. Honestly, I'm pretty sure that's my skill set. Do that. Or, maybe, you may find yourself in Jael's position, faced with the need to take quick, decisive action, to drive a--again, metaphorical, I'm not advocating for violence here--tent peg through the temple of some oppressive force. To say here and no further to a racist joke or an unjust structure or the suffering of a person in need. A tent peg was driven through homelessness when Co-op opened our building to community groups serving the homeless population last week. Kathy led our tent peg against hunger at the crop walk, Eileen and the food pantry group hits the hammer against

it a little further each time we serve there. We have a tent peg against illiteracy in the Little Free Library. It got taken down by a car, but John's working on putting it back together. Freeze Pops are a tent peg against isolation and loneliness.

Dear people of God, we know from this story, from countless other stories in scripture, and from our own stories, how things end. Beyond us is always God moving us forward in love. May this story of Judges encourage you to do your part in God's story. To step forward with courage into whatever role is best suited for you, trusting that others will do their part, and together oppression will not prevail. Thanks be to God. Amen.