

Sermon – Deborah: Judges 4:1-10

I always like to start our conversation about these ancient stories by filling in the space between last week's story and this week's.

Last week, we left the Israelites, camped at the foot of Mt. Sinai, worshipping a golden calf as their god. That wouldn't be the last debacle in their wilderness journey. Through a series of misadventures and unfaithfulness, they end up wandering in the wilderness for 40 years. The entire generation of Israelites that left Egypt was gone before they actually could enter the Promised Land – including Moses.

The book of Numbers in the Bible probably isn't on anyone's must read list, and parts of it are literally numbers. But other parts tell the story of a crazy journey – sort of a 40 year family vacation gone wrong.

Joshua is the person who actually leads them into the promised land. Once there, they work to defeat the people who were already there and carve out a place for themselves. It continually shows God's efforts to keep the promise to Israel of land, a large nation of people, and blessing so that they could bless the world. But the book of Joshua is often a pretty troubling narrative of conquest and even cruelty and makes you wonder just how exactly this blessing for the world is supposed to work.

Most of Joshua is a better conversation for Bible study than sermon.

The book of Judges comes right after Joshua.

There's a couple things to say about Judges in general before we narrow in on Deborah.

The judges weren't just judges like we think of them. Arbitrating and judging was part of what they did. But they were much more than that. When Israel settled Canaan, each of the 12 tribes settled their own section of the land, except for the tribe of Levi who were in charge of the worship life of Israel.

Each tribe would have had their own tribal leadership. The judges were leaders who sort of held this loose confederation of tribes together. They arbitrated tribal disputes. They were the commander in chief when Israel needed to go to war to defend themselves. Some of the judges were prophets.

Deborah is one who is said to be a prophet...one who speaks on behalf of God to the people.

The entire book of Judges has a particular pattern.

It kicks off the beginning of what we read: **4** The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, after Ehud died. ² So the LORD sold them into the hand of King Jabin of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor.

A refrain like that is repeated over and over in the book.

The period of the Judges was not Israel's shining moment. There were Intertribal disputes, rampant disobedience to God, total self-interest instead of love for neighbor – they were completely off the rails as God's chosen people. Most of the judges were corrupt and contributed to an ongoing downward spiral.

The phrase "everyone did what was right in their own eyes" brings us back to the original sin of humanity: wanting to be our own gods and to judge good and evil for ourselves.

So the pattern would go like this – corrupt judges who were unfaithful to God would come into power. The lack of godly leadership would filter through the tribes. Infighting, greed, general disobedience, and chaos ensued.

Then God would become so frustrated with them that God gives up and lets their enemies overpower them. Here it says God sold them into the hands of the Canaanite king.

Each time they are defeated, their suffering becomes unbearable and they cry out to God. Moved, God raises up for them a new judge who is faithful. God works through this new judge to again deliver the people and lift them up. But it never lasts.

Overall, the downward spiral continues. The entire judges narrative works to set us up for what the people finally demand from God – a king. They want a strong centralized government that can protect them and serve their well-being.

That will lead us to the birth of the prophet Samuel and the anointing of Saul as the first king. David will succeed Saul.

We will learn that by and large the kings were just as unfaithful and disobedient to God as the judges. Under their leadership, Israel continued to fail in their call to share God's blessing with the world.

So, let's focus in on Deborah a bit and then figure out what the message for us might be.

First of all, you might be surprised to learn that not only is this judge a woman, but her leadership ability is commanding enough her chief military officer refuses to go to battle without her.

And that thing about God selling Sisera, the opposing general, into the hands of a woman? That happened. A woman named Jael was married to one of Sisera's officers. Exhausted from battle, Sisera hid out in their tent. While he was sleeping, Jael took a hammer and drove a tent peg through Sisera's head, killing him. She ended the war.

Centuries of male control of the Bible narrative never eliminates the presence of many powerful and influential women in the history of God's work.

We humans have always found ways to limit ourselves and limit others. We decide what other people might be capable of based on gender or race or some other characteristic. We create hierarchies that place certain groups of people in inferior categories. And we too often believe God agrees with us.

Into all the limits we impose on ourselves, on others, and even on God marches the story of Deborah.

In a world where men were expected to be the rulers and military leaders, God chose Deborah to be the judge that would rescue Israel from King Jabin. Anyone who says scripture limits women to certain roles sooner or later has to contend with Deborah.

How much good leadership do we miss out on because people don't fit our stereotypes of a good leader?

We create social systems that limit certain groups of people to certain jobs. Even today, positions of leadership and authority can be more difficult to crack into for women and people of color or people with disabilities. Even things like being too short or too heavy can limit people's potential in the eyes of others.

The story of Deborah tells us that leaders can come from the most unexpected places. Somewhere out there is a church leader or pastor who will help lead the church into whatever is next. There are future CEO's, legislators, governors out there. Somewhere there's even a future president.

I'm betting that God's got leaders out there waiting who are way different than what we expect.

The story also reminds us that God gives us all gifts to use for the protection and building up of our community...out there also are future soldiers, sailors and airmen, bricklayers and tree trimmers and welders, teachers, farmers, film makers, fire fighters, doctors, nurses, bankers and so on.

Deborah apparently had amazing gifts for leadership...God put her where those gifts would once again lift Israel out of the muck of its own making.

This story gives us a chance to think about our own gifts and how God might be able to use those. It gives us a chance to not accept limits society may have put on us for one reason or another.

Our main vocation as baptized people of God is to use our gifts – no matter what our position – to build up communities...to fight oppression and injustice...to love and bless the world.

Deborah's story give us the chance to believe that somehow, God will work through us to build up the church and bless the world God loves. Amen