

May 10: Leadership Has No Gender (Judges 4:1-14)

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Good morning, and Happy Mother's Day! Welcome to our new series, Mosaic. This series is devoted to exploring the intentional diversity of our Bible, Jesus' ministry, and the world-wide church. We believe that diversity was always God's plan – so we'll be taking a closer look at how we can appreciate that diversity, work towards equity for a wide variety of individuals and groups, and make inclusion a core tenet of our faith and practice. Diversity, equity, and inclusion are not bad words in God's vocabulary – they are in fact essential to the love and transformation that God promises us as part of our personal growth and the renewing of the world. Together we'll discover how we can embrace this sometimes mess, holy reality and build stronger communities that truly reflect God's character and compassion. Before we get started on today's wonderful story, please join me in a moment of prayer.

Mosaic God, you seem to delight in raising up people whose leadership gifts surprise and scramble cultural expectations about gender or age or appearance. As we explore the story of Deborah and Barak this morning, may you surprise us, embolden us, and challenge us to become a community where everybody can live fully into the gifts you have given them, without shame or fear. Amen.

I was a late bloomer in the area of boys and dating, at least in the eyes of my beloved grandfather: I didn't enter into a romantic relationship until I was 24 years old, and as the years went by and my little sister jumped birth order and went through the stages of courtship, engagement, and marriage ahead of me, my grandfather became more and more worried. Finally, when I reached the advanced age of 23 and was still single, he visited me in my little apartment in Chapel Hill, NC, where I was working at UNC Hospitals to establish in-state residency before applying to graduate school. As we stood together in my tiny kitchen and I washed up after dinner, he lovingly confronted me about my lack of marriage prospects and gave me some dating advice.

"The problem with you and boys, Heather," he explained, "is that you're too competent. You scare them off." He assured me that he was so proud of me and my gifts and my intelligence, but that boys looking for romantic relationships might be intimidated by them. "I don't usually advise this," my Southern Baptist pastor grandfather admitted, "but you need to learn to flirt a little bit – in a Godly way, of course."

Now, I know my grandfather was speaking out of his great love and care for me, and that in giving that advice, his heart was completely directed towards desiring my happiness and fulfillment – but still, one of the clear messages he communicated was that competence is an inherently masculine trait, and that if I lived in a way that revealed my full abilities to the world, the good men who are worth dating would feel lessened and intimidated. There wasn't enough room in a relationship for both me and a potential male spouse to be fully competent and accomplished, and one of us would always have to be less in order for the other to be confident and secure.

That message, that a competent and gifted female leader somehow shames the men who accompany her, didn't originate with my grandfather. It goes way back, and one of the places that you can see it clearly is in the way that the story of Deborah, the great prophet and judge of Israel, has been remembered and interpreted throughout history.

It's impossible to read this morning's passage from Judges and argue that Deborah wasn't an effective prophet and a leader in Israel – it's crystal clear. And because Deborah's example contradicts accepted cultural understandings of what it means to be female and perform a feminine identity, there are centuries of interpretation that minimize her example by insisting that her brilliant leadership was a divine rebuke to Israel. The only reason that a strong woman ended up leading Israel, interpreters claim, was that Israel's men were weak and cowardly, so God raised Deborah up to disgrace them. Her gifts weren't normative to women, but were given to her with the express purpose of shaming weak men. And nobody bears more shame in the typical interpretation of this passage than Barak, the army general who recognized Deborah's gifts and asked her to partner with him on his quest to confront oppression; his request is commonly seen as a cowardly move that emasculated him and revealed Israel's spiritual weakness.

I believe that this kind of reading of Deborah and Barak's story hurts women and men and frustrates the work of justice and liberation in our world. And as we explore this story this morning, I'm going to argue that it's not a story of masculine shame, but of fruitful partnership – of recognizing the gifts of another, regardless of gender, and making room for those gifts to be fully exercised, because liberation and peace take precedence over personal glory.

The story of Deborah and Barak is in the Old Testament historical book of Judges, which tells the story of the Israelites' first few centuries in the Promised Land. This was an unsettled period, where the same pattern

happened over and over – the Israelites stop following God’s law and come under the oppressive rule of a tyrant; God raises up a judge to deliver them; that judge leads them for a time; then they fall back into disobedience & disaster and the same cycle happens again. The first few judges in the book (which include Deborah) are good and strong, and under their leadership, the land has rest for significant periods of time – usually 40 years. As the book goes on, though, the judges become less just and effective, the periods of peace become shorter and shorter – and the position and treatment of women deteriorates. The book ends with a gruesome pileup of graphic, dehumanizing violence against women.

When today’s story opens, the people of Israel are once again in a bad place – under the thumb of King Jabin of Canaan and his army general Sisera. Jabin rules a powerful kingdom with highly superior weaponry and the latest technology of war (think Russia invading Ukraine), and for the last twenty years, he’s been cruelly oppressing the Israelites. And immediately following Israel’s cry for deliverance in verse 3, we get introduced to the prophet Deborah, wife of Lappidoth, who was judging Israel (4:4). Verse 5 says that Deborah “held court under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim [a central location where people from both the north and the south could access her]; and the Israelites went up to her to have their disputes decided.”

There are a few things we learn about Deborah in that introduction. First, she’s a prophet – in fact, she’s the *only* leader in the book of Judges who was also a prophet. As a prophet, Deborah is a mediator between God and God’s people: she speaks God’s words and God’s truth to those who come to see her, and she carries the people’s concerns to God. Most of the men in Judges are introduced in relation to their family: “Shamgar son of Anath,” “Ehud son of Gera,” “Barak son of Abinoam.” In contrast, Deborah is introduced in relation to her vocation: “Deborah, a prophet”. That is her primary identity: a woman called and emboldened to speak with divine authority.

After Deborah is introduced as a prophet, we hear that she’s the “wife of Lappidoth” – at least that’s the way it’s translated in the NIV. But ancient Hebrew uses the same word – *eshet* – for both “woman” and “wife”; and the word Lappidoth is in feminine, not masculine form, and means “torch.” So *eshet lappidot* could mean either “wife of Lappidoth”, “woman of torches”, or “woman of fire” – that’s my favorite title. As we get to know Deborah, it’s easy to believe that she could have been known as a “fiery woman” of courage and boldness.

Finally, Deborah is introduced to us as a leader who's sought out and trusted to arbitrate disputes and judge cases for the people of Israel – the only one of the judges who was governing before they were called to deliver Israel, and the only judge who explicitly does more than kill enemies. In fact, the only other Old Testament leader who did this kind of arbitrating work before Deborah was Moses.

And then, in verse 6, Deborah steps expands her leadership and becomes a military commander and deliverer. She summons man named Barak, who immediately comes to her – this woman has influence. And when he arrives, Deborah orders him, with divine authority (“The LORD, the God of Israel, *commands* you”, 4:6), to muster troops and attack Sisera and his iron chariots. She includes specific details about how many troops to gather, what tribes to draw them from, and where to take his position. She tells him where the battle will take place and assures him of victory.

Barak doesn't question her command, her words, or the military strategy she sets out. He's completely willing to submit to her authority, with one caveat: “If you will go with me, I will go; but if you don't go with me, I won't go” (4:8). And Deborah doesn't hesitate in her response: “Certainly I will go with you; but because of the course you are taking, the honor will not be yours, for the LORD will deliver Sisera into the hand of a woman” (4:9).

These two verses are the most contentious in this story, and Barak comes under some pretty harsh criticism by commentators throughout history. John Calvin writes that “Barak's refusal to proceed without Deborah showed a cowardly spirit and unbelief, for which he was justly deprived of the honor of slaying Sisera.”¹ A contemporary Biblical scholar and journal editor was even more harsh: “Barak should have been embarrassed. What a sissy. A commander would rather die than say something like that. He would only be able to shrink away in shame. He would suffer a fate worse than death.”²

And it's not just Barak that gets torn down; commentators see Barak as a proxy for Israel itself, and the shame he brings on himself by asking a gifted woman to accompany him and get the credit for killing Sisera is emblematic of the shame of a weak and emasculated nation. A prominent Biblical scholar

¹ <https://network.crcna.org/topic/leadership/women-leadership/barak-cowardly-conscience-or-courageous-character>

² <https://faithalone.org/blog/barak-not-the-president-was-a-sissy/>

whose commentary I read couldn't stop writing about how Barak lost his honor and glory to a woman, becoming an object of "intense satire and ridicule." Throughout the story, this scholar wrote, women became "the means by which men are unmanned," highlighting "Israel's plight and her need to rely on foreigners and women."³

But is this actually what the Biblical text suggests? Is there any evidence that because a woman is the hero of this story, the men of Israel are shamed? When we read on, we see Barak doing exactly what Deborah told him to, while she goes up with him to the gathering place of Israel's troops. When the time is right to attack, Deborah knows it, and she lets Barak know: "Go! This is the day the LORD has given Sisera into your hands. Has not the LORD gone ahead of you" (4:14)? And Barak courageously leads his men into battle against Sisera's chariots of iron; and just as Deborah prophesied, Israel wins decisively, and Barak pursues their enemies until none are left.

But just as Deborah prophesied, Barak doesn't get the glory of killing Sisera, the great enemy general. And neither does Deborah. That honor falls to a third character, a non-Jewish woman named Jael who invites the fleeing Sisera into her tent, lulls him to sleep, and drives a tent peg through his skull. In the final analysis of the battle, though, it isn't even Jael who ends up with the credit for Israel's triumph: verse 23 of chapter 4 reads, "So on that day God subdued King Jabin of Canaan before the Israelites." It turns out that the whole story wasn't about the glory or shame of any particular human being. The whole story was about divine liberation from oppression, and all three of the main characters used their own gifts and strengths, regardless of gender, to successfully bring about that goal.

Chapter 5 of Judges is a poetic celebration of Israel's liberation called the Song of Deborah, since it's written from Deborah's point of view and is sung by her and Barak. Scholars believe this song was around long before it was incorporated into the book of Judges, and may well be the oldest piece of the Old Testament that exists – which means that Deborah's gifts also include poet, singer, and Biblical author. There is nothing in this song about weak men or sissy leaders or stolen glory or shame. Instead, it praises and lifts up Deborah and Barak and Jael and the people of Israel who offered themselves willingly to the work of liberation (Judges 5:1). And it ends with beautiful words of *shalom* – "Then the land had peace forty years" (5:31).

³ Trent Butler, *Judges*, Word Biblical Commentary (WBC), 2009.

So – what does this story mean for us, today? What does it call us to believe, to do, to hope for? How does it challenge us or embolden us? I'd like to point out a few things that jumped out for me.

First, I want to return to Barak and his refusal to lead men into battle unless Deborah went with him. Was it cowardice, or was it wisdom? In the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit wasn't poured out on everyone – it was only given to certain people, or at certain times. And it was pretty clear that Deborah, as a prophet, had the Spirit of God with her and was able to hear God's words and instructions in a unique way. Perhaps, by relying on Deborah, Barak was simply showing his faith and trust in the God who spoke through Deborah. When God first called Moses to follow him, Moses was reluctant, and God answered him with the promise, "I will be with you" (Exodus 3:12). When Barak asked Deborah to accompany him, she gave almost the same response: "Certainly I will go with you" (Judges 4:8). Barak knew that Deborah and God went together; and sure enough, by going with Barak, Deborah was able to tell him the exact right time to go out and attack Sisera's forces.

The common interpretation is that when Deborah told Barak this his road would not lead to personal honor and glory, she was pronouncing a punishment for his reliance on a woman. But nowhere in the Bible does it suggest that a person should focus on pursuing their own glory and honor; Moses is honored for his humility (Numbers 12:3), and even Jesus said that he didn't seek his own glory (John 8:50). Barak seemed to care more about successfully leading Israel to liberation than securing his own honor, and later Biblical writers portray him as commendable. Samuel names Barak as one of the leaders who rescued the Israelites from their enemies and brought them into safety (1 Samuel 12:11), and the New Testament author of Hebrews includes Barak in the list of heroes who did mighty deeds through faith (Hebrews 11:32). There's no mention of shame!

Both Deborah and Barak were focused on a goal beyond themselves – to rescue Israel from cruel oppression – and they both recognized and encouraged the gifts of the other. Deborah summoned Barak, commissioned him, and trusted him to lead 10,000 troops. Barak submitted to Deborah's summons and divinely inspired military strategy and asked her to continue leading him on the battlefield. And both of them celebrated Jael's feat of taking down Sisera; neither of them seemed to feel as if she had stolen any glory or shamed them. Everybody was just happy that Israel was free. Deborah even praised Jael as "the most blessed of women" in her song (5:24).

In our modern American world, younger men and boys are beginning to fall behind in educational achievement and mental health markers.⁴ And too often, the problem for this is identified as the correlated rise in women's educational attainment and vocational accomplishment. Books like *Manning Up: How the Rise of Women Has Turned Men into Boys* clearly connect women's success with men's shame. And while I agree that there is a growing problem, I strongly disagree that it is caused by women who are finally finding the freedom to live into their gifts. I refuse to believe that flourishing is a zero-sum game, and that one gender can only live up to their potential at the expense of the other. Perhaps part of the solution is for us all to look towards a cause beyond our own personal glory, to the liberation and flourishing of all of creation, a destination we can't reach without each other's unique gifts. Perhaps, when we keep our eyes on that goal, we'll be able to encourage and celebrate each other's accomplishments and competencies when they move us all closer, even if they challenge gender stereotypes.

There's a line in Deborah's song that I love. She sang about the fear the oppressors engendered and how villagers in Israel held back from confronting it "until I, Deborah, arose, until I arose, a mother in Israel" (5:7). Isn't that beautiful? Instead of calling herself a ruler, or a judge, or prophet, or military commander – even though she was all of those things – Deborah identified herself as a mother to her people. We don't know if she was ever a literal mother – the text says nothing about biological children, because they're not what qualified this fiery, competent woman to be a mother in Israel. Deborah was a mother in Israel when she showed empathy for her people's pain and took care of them in a stressful and bewildering period. She was a mother when she listened to her people's quarrels and helped them solve their disputes. She was a mother when she recognized the gifts of her people and called them out. She was a mother when she boldly went with her people into danger. She was a mother when she rejoiced in her children's accomplishments and celebrated them publicly. And like a good mother, Deborah didn't care about her own glory or honor as much as she cared about the future and well-being of those she loved. She was determined to be and do all that she was capable of to help her family flourish. She burned brightly.

And on this Mother's Day, I want to honor all of the mothers out there, those with biological children and those who walk in the steps of Deborah, fiery woman and mother in Israel. Like her, you are all women of valor.

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/13/upshot/boys-falling-behind-data.html>

I've quoted a lot from theologians whose takes on Deborah I don't agree with, so I want to close with a quote I do resonate with. Saint Ambrose of Milan was a 4th century bishop, and I love his words about Deborah. Here they are:

“There were many judges in Israel, but no woman before was a judge, and after Joshua there were many judges, but none was a prophet. And I think her judgeship has been narrated and her deeds described, that women may not be restrained from valor by the weakness of their sex. A woman, she governs the people; a woman, she leads armies; a woman, she chooses generals; a woman, she determines wars and orders triumphs. So, then...it is not sex but valor which makes strong.”

May we all share the valor of Deborah and lift up the mothers of valor among us. Amen.