

Sermon: "Deborah had a flexible understanding"

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Scripture: Judges 4:1-22

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We are in the middle of a series of sermons that explores the lives of biblical figures that faced difficult days. The concept behind the series is simple. We are living in the middle of a global pandemic, are facing challenging days of political division, and still continue through the everyday challenges arising from challenges like illness and grief. In other words, we know what it means to wake up realizing that today may be a difficult day.

What better time is there to look at some of the figures in our Bible than days like today? If we feel like our suffering is endless, we might look to the example of Job who sought God throughout his struggles. We might look to the story of Ruth if we feel like we are strangers in a strange land. There are many figures that can give us inspiration through a dark time in our lives.

Today we look at the figure of Deborah, but Deborah faces a different kind of trial. Deborah spends twenty years guiding her people through horrific times when an opportunity arises to save her people. When the time comes for deliverance, Deborah's best allies are a warrior who goes by the name that literally translates as "Lightning" and the arrogance of her enemy. Twenty years of challenge and suffering only to have to work with General "Call me lightning!") Barak and the hubris of her enemies. There's a reason why Deborah is here to teach us about being flexible during difficult times.

Deborah is often considered a favorite Biblical figure among feminist scholars. Deborah's story is a story of resiliency but it is also a story of empowerment and restoration. I want to be clear: for me, feminist research is a valid and powerful form of research into Biblical meaning. Just as womanist research blends the experience of women of color with scholarship, feminist research does us a powerful service by drawing attention to details which might be overlooked. You do not have to be a woman to understand the value of this scholarship.

I point out the value of this scholarship this morning because a lot of work done in and through feminist and womanist circles help us to understand what is happening in our text. Our text tells us that the people have been suffering for twenty years under the rule of foreign oppression, but feminist research points out the importance of paying attention to the words. Our text provides us with the story of a tense situation between the enemy commander Sisera and his hostess Jael, but womanist research shows us how incredibly rude and dangerous Sisera's actions were in the context of a country influenced by African, Asian, and Mediterranean cultures.

I had a professor who loved to say "A text without a context is a pretext for misinterpretation." The danger of Sunday morning scripture reading is that the text is read without seeing what

comes before or after. Looking before and after our story reveals a people struggling to find faithfulness. The scholar Walter Brueggemann wrote in “The Prophetic Imagination” that the great goal of the Exodus was to create a people that would break free from a cycle of violence, oppression, and godlessness in order to begin to live a new way. If Exodus is the story of the people struggling to come to grips with their new identity while wandering in the desert, then Judges is the story of a people struggling to remember their new identity while living in the Holy Land.

Our story comes in the context of a people continually remembering what it means to follow God, living faithfully for a season under the guidance of a judge who was meant to be a living embodiment of that new way of life, and forgetting how that life should be lived shortly after the judge passed away. Deborah herself was the first female judge found in the Book of Judges and that is notable.

The Canaanites who were oppressing the people of God are described in several ways. First, they have a technological advantage. Nine hundred chariots may seem very small in an age when we can muster thousands of troops within days of an insurrection, but for a people living without a standing army and without a centralized form of governance, nine hundred chariots was a lot of chariots. Think of it this way: you might be the toughest person in the world when confronted by one angry spider. As my wife likes to tell the rest of the family, “You are bigger than the spider!” Let me be clear: I don’t care what she says, if 900 angry spiders come charging out of the woods, I am out of there. If the kids are lucky, I will carry one or two with me as I run out the door. To put it mildly, the Canaanites were an intimidating bunch.

Second, the Canaanites were cruel. If we look at the context of our reading, we find that the next chapter of Judges contains a song celebrating the victory over the Canaanites. In the midst of that song, there is a description of what happens when Sisera does not return home to her family.

In some ways, the song is sad. Sisera’s mother is seen waiting by a window while looking out the lattice. Where is her son? Where is his chariot? He was supposed to be home soon with a trinket or two for her. Where is her son?

J. Clinton McCann writes in his commentary on Ruth in the “Interpretation” commentary series that we have to pay attention to his mother’s words which are echoed by all the women in Sisera’s home. In Judges 5:30 it says: “Are they not finding and dividing the spoil?—A girl or two for every man... The fact that the women in Sisera’s home are discussing dividing up the women from their raid is gruesome enough, but McCann points out what feminist scholars have long stated—the word used in Hebrew is not the word for woman. The word that the Canaanite women use to describe the women of Israel is the word for “womb.” In other words, the women of God are seen as little more than toys and breeding stock.¹

¹ J. Clinton McCann, “Judges: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching” (Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), [Kindle Version] location 1362.

In my opinion, when we say that Deborah is an interesting choice as a judge for this period is an understatement. Deborah is one of those women seen as a spoil of war or as what seems to be an understandable excuse as to why the men are returning late. The people of God are being oppressed and being treated horrifically, so God sends a woman to lead.

What's more, as we have already read the story, God sends another woman to put an end to Sisera's cruelty. Our focus today is Deborah, but I feel as if I would be doing a disservice if I did not point out the amazing womanist research that has pointed out how incredibly rude it was for any male to enter into the home of a woman in that culture without speaking to her husband first. Things are made worse when he makes demands of her rather than accepting freely offered hospitality and asks her to tell lies for him even though it would be greatly dishonorable. There are few things that Sisera could have done to further violate the cultural understanding of propriety that are worse than barging into a woman's home without her husband's consent, demanding provision, and telling her to lie for him while he slept. J. Clinton McCann rightly points out that there's something symbolic both in our reading and in the song in the next chapter of Judges that points out how he is penetrated by a stake and then lies dead at her feet. The rapist conqueror is laid low in his bed by a woman.

You might see why I speak about the value of context. On the outside, the story we read today is somewhat crude and odd. Yes, Deborah leads her people after twenty years through oppression. Yes, God's victory does rely (in part) on the efforts of the lightning general Barak. Yes, Sisera might have survived if he'd hidden in a cave or just kept going. All of these things are true, but the context tells us more about what is happening in the story and the context matters.

How do you believe you would have handled spending twenty years as a woman in a culture where women were treated as little more than toys and a place for sowing your seed among your enemies? How do you believe you would have reacted knowing that many of the children in your village might be the offspring of the people who raided your village? How would you react if your friends and neighbors suffered in this way?

When we say Deborah is flexible, there's at least two layers to what we mean. Deborah is flexible in dealing with a showboat general and in letting the glory for the victory fall with Jael. Deborah does not need to be at the center of the story. Deborah can indeed be seen as a sort of totem in our story: going forward into the battle like how Ark of Covenant was carried into war. Deborah is seen as the judge and leader of the people when the story begins and she is flexible enough to not be at the center of things when the climax of the story comes. The story is laid out intentionally to make it seem as if Deborah is going to be the woman into whose hand Sisera will fall, but Deborah does not need to be that person in the story: Deborah's role is enough.

That is really where the second way of being flexible comes into play. Deborah is flexible in that she has the ability to make it through a difficult set of circumstances with her faith intact. We are told that Deborah is a prophetess and she seems to know how Sisera's journey will end, but that journey only ends after years of sitting beneath the palm tree and helping her people. We do not know when Deborah knew that the end would one day come, but she was present with her people through all of the ups and downs of the journey until the day that Barak would lead the people against the chariots of Canaan. Deborah is there through all of the challenges in a uniquely powerful way, even as Jael is blessed in song to be the "most blessed of women" in Judges 5:24.

A close reading of Judges shows that almost every judge arrives in a show of force and God's presence unless that Judge has a story that is trying to show us something greater. Deborah's story begins and ends with the struggle between Israel and Canaan, between the people and the forces of Canaan, between a cruel commander and the two women who with some help were his end. In the end, Deborah's clash with Sisera does not end with a grand show of force: it ends with a cruel man's life ending as a result of his own choices.

Sometimes in life, there's no way to force the outcome of what will happen. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said that "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice." In truth, the journey towards justice took far longer than any of the Israelites in our story would have liked. Many of us would like the world to be perfect tomorrow, but the journey forward is often long and arduous.

Deborah teaches us the value of being flexible on that journey. It may take far longer than any of us would like for this pandemic to end. Many of us would be grateful if it were to end tomorrow, but we need to be flexible through the challenges. From how I read the situation, Deborah would have rather have had the whole thing end sooner rather than after having to journey through a battle or even the rest of a war with Barak. Sometimes you need to be flexible with the circumstances in front of you even when that means you may end up facing challenges and situations you would rather avoid. There's a value to being flexible in your circumstances.

So, let's look for a moment at two things we can take away with us today. First, there is something powerful about accepting the fact that there are times in life when we need to be flexible both with the amount of time a challenge may take to overcome and how that challenge may end. There are times when the challenges we face may take days, weeks, years, decades, or even lifetimes to overcome. When we face challenges in life our deepest desire may be to have the challenge over in a moment. Sometimes our challenge will take longer to overcome that we would desire.

We are still in the middle of a very difficult pandemic. Even if you wear a mask today, the pandemic will not be gone tomorrow. Even if you wash your hands today, germs may spread tomorrow. As a people, those realities may make us want to give up.

Friends, there are things that are worth doing even if the challenge we face is not overcome tomorrow. There are difficult matters that will take time, courage, patience, and flexibility. We must not tire of doing good on this journey together. We may want to scream, shout, or holler, but we should not give up. Like Deborah long ago, it may take a very long time for things to come to a resolution. It is okay to admit that this may be a long journey and to accept that this work will take time.

Second, in the end Deborah does not need to have the ultimate final word or action in the conflict. We do not need to have that final moment of personal victory either. Deborah did not need to be at the center of everything. In the end, she was not even present when the villain faced the consequences of their actions. Why? Ultimately, Deborah understood that the conflict was not about her and Sisera. The conflict was between God and injustice.

All of the people we have looked at in this sermon series have at least two things in common: One, they faced challenges in their lives. Two, they had faith in God. Ultimately, God is seen at work in the lives of Ruth and Naomi. God's role is central to the journey and restoration of Job. God is at the center of things throughout these stories and the people in the stories have faith.

Friends, I do not know what challenges you may face this week. There are certain challenges we all carry in common, but you may have problems that nobody in the world knows about today. God knows you, God cares about you, and you are not alone in your challenge. When we turn to God in faith, we find ourselves journeying with a Companion that is with us through all things. For Deborah, the victory belongs with God as much as with Jael. For us, the victory we need in this life may rest in the hands of God even if we cannot see it.

In a moment or two, we are going to sing a song, share a blessing, and then head out into the world to seek after God and journey towards a better day. First, let us slow down for a moment of prayer.