

Pentecost 24A Proper 33

The Book of Judges is quite a story. It picks up after the death of Joshua. It is a cautionary tale about disloyalty to God and its consequences. It is also a tale about improbable heroes. Those are always the most interesting stories; when someone of unlikely stature or position is chosen to do something amazing and heroic. That's an inspiring story to learn that God chooses ordinary people to do extraordinary things. It gives us all hope and encouragement that we too are chosen to do amazing things for God in this world.

In this passage today we are introduced to one of the Judges. As in our day, Judges were in the business of settling disputes. If you had a problem with a neighbour then you went to a Judge to get some kind of resolution; so, you could all get on with your lives. However in this scenario there were lots of disputes among the people that resulted in warfare. The people had been disobedient, worshipping Baal and Astartes and abandoning their worship of God. Therefore, God was angered and things went very badly for the people of Israel as they broke the covenant they had with God. They were plundered and fell into the hands of their enemies. Misfortune and distress came upon them. Then they were sorry and God forgave them. Then they went back to their evil ways. It became a cycle between loyalty to God and disobedience.

During their periods of loyalty when they cried out for help, God sent them deliverers, the Judges.

Judges, in this eponymous book of the Old Testament, were also military leaders. In our passage today we hear about Deborah, a female judge of Israel who is also a prophetess. Therefore, her military instructions come from God. She speaks with God's voice. Deborah was an enthusiastic and faithful follower of God. She loved the people. She felt a huge responsibility for the welfare of God's people. She took their troubles upon herself. Her fellow Israelites trusted her and turned to her for guidance, for judgment. Her influence was great and she was well known among the tribes of Israel. She must have deeply felt the misery of the people and was waiting for God to instruct her on how to take action. She believed in a God of action.

The message comes to her from God and she calls Barak to come leading 10,000 warriors from the two tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun taking a position at Mount Tabor. She will draw out Sisera, the general of an opposing army, and give them into the hands of Barak. Now Deborah must have been greatly respected for her leadership because Barak says he won't go without her. She does not hesitate and she goes with him as they prepare for battle. God gives her the strategy and tactics that she passes along to Barak and Sisera's army is delivered into the commander's hands. God causes panic among them and

Barak wins the battle while Sisera flees on foot to the tent of Jael wife of Heber the Kenite.

Sisera thinks he's safe since Heber is allied with Sisera's King. Jael does give Sisera shelter and welcomes him. She gives him some milk to drink and covers him with a rug. He even gives Jael instructions to not give him away if anyone comes to her tent looking for him. Well, Jael is not some timid woman. She knows who Sisera is and he won't be leaving her tent alive. When Barak finally arrives at her tent she goes out to meet him and shows him Sisera's dead body.

This is an incredible story of two women who help defeat a terrible enemy of God's people. Once again God comes through for the people of Israel. This time two women are the heroes. Jael is a laywoman. Deborah is a well known leader and God's prophetess.

Deborah is the first and only female judge mentioned in the Book of Judges. Her life of devotion is crowned by a sweeping victory over the enemies of the people of Israel. Of all the women mentioned in the Old Testament she is the only one who settled the people's disputes and brought it to victory. The power of their Canaanite enemies was broken with God working through Deborah. Here she was an older woman who may have been a bit frail

physically, but she was wise and determined and faithful. She earned the trust of her people and her God. She accomplished a great feat with God's help.

In this story of Deborah, we see a God who responds to the pain of God's people. We see a God who responds to the people's cries for help. We see a God who acts through women as well as men. We see God act through people who have a more formal societal role like Deborah and people like Jael who as a tent-dwelling woman has no power and was just minding her own business when she comes face to face with a dangerous man. God gave both of them the courage and fearlessness to act in difficult situations that put them in personal jeopardy. God was with them and ended the threat, protecting them and the people of Israel from further harm. Deborah marks this whole occasion with a Song which you'll find in Chapter 5 of the Book of Judges.

With God we never know who God will send to deliver us from oppression and injustice. God pays attention to our needs and our gifts. We never know when God will call upon us to use those gifts to make this place a better world. Whether it's calling someone on the phone and asking how they are coping during this pandemic or just saying a kind word to someone who may be having a tough time, God responds. Whether it's praying for guidance as we face a challenge or asking God to carry a burden for us, God responds. Whether it's reducing our use of single-use plastic to help the environment or

wearing a mask to mitigate the spread of Covid-19, God responds. God does not ever leave us to face life on our own. Throughout our lives, God sends people to us to bring us comfort or to make us uncomfortable about injustice and stir us to action or changing how we understand an issue. These people could be family members, friends, fellow parishioners or total strangers. They could be someone we least expect. God may choose them because of a gift they have, a relationship they have with us or because God's Spirit burns so bright within them that we surely won't miss it. God sends them. We may not realize it at first. Sometimes it takes us some time to realize it.

The gospel lesson for today is the parable of the talents, in Matthew, where Jesus warns against burying a gift that God has given. Deborah is an example of someone who seems to put her gifts to work in surprising, creative, and inspiring ways. Like Deborah, sometimes we are the person who God sends to use our gifts to help change a life or bring justice or bring love to this broken world....demonstrating that God is present in this world that God loves so much. And God lives in us.

Preached by The Rev. Karine Snowdon at Grace Church Milton on
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