

Judges 4:1-9, 15-17, 22

The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, after Ehud died. So the Lord sold them into the hand of King Jabin of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor; the commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth-ha-goiim. Then the Israelites cried out to the Lord for help; for he had nine hundred chariots of iron, and had oppressed the Israelites cruelly for twenty years.

At that time Deborah, a prophetess, wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel. She used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim; and the Israelites came up to her for judgement. She sent and summoned Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali, and said to him, 'The Lord, the God of Israel, commands you, "Go, take position at Mount Tabor, bringing ten thousand from the tribe of Naphtali and the tribe of Zebulun. I will draw out Sisera, the general of Jabin's army, to meet you by the Wadi Kishon with his chariots and his troops; and I will give him into your hand."' ' Barak said to her, 'If you will go with me, I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go.' And she said, 'I will surely go with you; nevertheless, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the Lord will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman.' Then Deborah got up and went with Barak to Kedesh. ... And the Lord threw Sisera and all his chariots and all his army into a panic before Barak; Sisera got down from his chariot and fled away on foot, while Barak pursued the chariots and the army to Harosheth-ha-goiim. All the army of Sisera fell by the sword; no one was left. Now Sisera had fled away on foot to the tent of Jael wife of Heber the Kenite; for there was peace between King Jabin of Hazor and the clan of Heber the Kenite...Then, as Barak came in pursuit of Sisera, Jael went out to meet him, and said to him, 'Come, and I will show you the man whom you are seeking.'*

Holy Teamwork - November 15, 2020

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This is not one of the prettier passages in scripture. We're talking about war, here, and war is never pretty, or nice, or sweet. We had a bit of a dilemma in school this past week. As you know, November 11 was Veteran's Day, the day we remember and thank those who have served our nation in military service. The problem is about talking to children about the military and what they do. The discussion must, if we are to be truthful, come around to mentioning war and war means talking about battles and battles means talking about people being wounded or killed.

Now we can't be too naive. The simple reality is that children are exposed to battles and killing and death from a very young age. One of the biggest movies of recent years was Marvel's Avengers:End Game which concludes with a very graphic battle scene and one of the major characters dying. Children from a very young age play video games filled with simulated violence and yes, let us be frank, children much younger than 17 are playing the games rated "M" for mature, where there is plenty of simulated violence and graphic death.

Why am I talking about such things in church? Well, violence and death are very much part of the biblical story. To pretend otherwise misses the point of scripture: The Bible is not about some Neverland that exists in human imagination, it is firmly grounded in reality and human experience. This is what many detractors of Christianity fail to see. Most have never read the Bible. Furthermore, most just don't grasp that the Bible is relevant to us precisely because there are stories and situations that cover every aspect of the human experience. While we might call Jesus the Prince of Peace, we often forget that this same Jesus also told his follows that he came to the world not to bring peace, but as he put it, "a sword." Jesus was controversial when he walked the earth. He remains just as controversial today.

So today we are telling a story from the book of Judges. A story about war. Judges is a book we seldom hear from. But if you've heard about Samson and Delilah, or Gideon, their stories are found here. Judges covers the period in the history of Israel right after they had with God's help successfully entered and controlled the Promised Land. Something often overlooked in the story of Israel's conquest of the land is that they did not necessarily displace the people who were already living there. Rather, they established their own settlements among the original inhabitants and were, of course, still surrounded by many other groups.

The book of Judges helps answer the question of what did the people of Israel do in their new permanent home? After all, the people had just arrived. There were many who remembered the wandering in the desert under Moses and spreading out in the land under Joshua. Last week, we talked about the people gathered with Joshua who reminded them of all God did for them and then

asked them whom they chose to serve. Of course, the people all agreed to serve the Lord God forever.

O how quickly they forgot! It didn't take very long at all for the people of Israel to forget about God and just do as they pleased. Many started worshipping other gods. The 10 Commandments were ignored. So much for the agreement they had made.

Yet, even though Israel "did what was evil in the sight of the Lord," God did not abandon them. That's the remarkable message of scripture — not only in the book of Judges, but in the rest of the Bible. Hear the good news! Israel may abandon God. We may abandon God, both as the church and even as individuals. But the good news is that God never abandons us.

As we see in today's story and you would see in all the other stories in the book of Judges, Israel is constantly forgetting about their commitment to God and God is constantly rescuing Israel from their foolishness.

Here's what would happen. There was no "central government" in Israel at the time. The only organization they had was the twelve tribes, each of whom had an area of Israel in which to live. Each tribe was descended from one of the twelve sons of Jacob. One of the tribes, the tribe of Levi, scattered themselves throughout the land because it was their job to teach the people and lead them in worship of the God who saved them.

To keep the people focussed on God, there arose a class of leaders called Judges. These Judges were men and women of high reputation who served both to arbitrate disputes between people but also to lead armies of Israelites against their enemies. Over and over again, the cycle of the Judges would repeat itself. A group of Israelites would get lazy and forget about the God who saved them. God would then allow people in that territory to get into some kind of trouble. Often, the army of a nearby nation would march in and subjugate those people. The Israelites would repent. That is, they would remember God and how much better life was when they followed God. Then God would raise up a Judge who would put together an army which would save them from the outsider. Everything would be good for a while until the people started forgetting about God again and the cycle would repeat itself.

But while this was taking place over 3000 years ago, it still is taking place today, isn't it? I'm sure many would disagree with me, but from a Christian perspective, cannot we attribute much of our world's and our nation's problems to ignoring God in Jesus Christ? How many so-called leaders have we chosen in the past few decades who only gave lip service to God? How much hatred and division has arisen among us because many cannot accept that God created all of us to be equal? How badly has our planet been affected by our refusal to care properly for the earth, ignoring God's request that

we care for creation, not abuse it. I can go on, but you get the idea. Human beings seem to be fated to call on God only when times are hard, and then ignoring God when times are good.

So here we have one of earliest examples of this cycle: the story of a Judge named Deborah. There are many lessons found in the story of Deborah the Judge which are very relevant today. I want to talk about a few.

First there is the obvious fact that Deborah was the first woman in scripture who had real authority over the people. Up to that point, the main characters were men. Women played a supportive role for their husbands and little else. Deborah was highly respected and people came from all over to listen for her advice. Sadly, there are few other examples of women with authority mentioned in scripture. That does not mean there weren't more. Obviously the Bible cannot contain every story, but clearly it didn't bother anyone back then that Deborah was a women.

Thus the foundation of our team: God and Deborah. It hardly needs to be said that God should be part of every team, whether it is something as small as a marriage, or something as large as the US Congress. Acknowledging God and actively seeking God's guidance in our decision making will always result in better decisions.

Now Israel was in one of their usual predicaments. They were forgetting about God and at least two of the tribes were invaded by a nearby nation. The people were in trouble and of course, they remembered their God and prayed for help. So Deborah summoned a man named Barak and gave him the job of building an army to fight for Israel. Interestingly, Barak refused to go to war unless Deborah came with him. Perhaps he knew how close she was to God and hoped that her relationship with the Lord would somehow help Barak's army win.

So we now have the third part of our team, Barak. We don't know much about Barak, other than he was a skilled soldier. It appears that in leading the people of Israel into battle, he expected some kind of glory for his efforts. Note that Deborah tells Barak flat out that Barak will not receive credit or glory for his victory. Rather, a woman would. Intriguing, since women back then were seldom regarded as military leaders. Was Deborah referring to herself? Stay tuned.

Now this was a battle Israel seemingly should have lost. The opponents, led by a general named Sisera, had chariots of iron — quite a technical development for the day. The assumption back then was the same as it is today: chariots of iron, cannons, stealth jets, etc. will always beat puny human efforts. I guessthat's why we're still fighting and dying in Afghanistan after nearly twenty years. We know that technology does not always have the answers. Faith and human effort often count for much more. Who knows? Perhaps Sisera and his iron chariots got bogged down in the mud. But whatever happened, they lost the battle and everyone had to get off their chariots and run for their lives. General Sisera included.

Now we see the arrival of the final member of the team, someone completely unexpected. Her name was Jael and she apparently lived close to where the battle was taking place. Quite unexpectedly, General Sisera shows up at her tent and asks her to hide him from the army of the Israelites. She did. But then, everything turns upside down! General Sisera assumes that he has come to a place of safety and because he is tired from running away from the battle, he goes to sleep. But quite unexpectedly, while Sisera was sleeping, this woman Jael kills Sisera in his sleep. When Barak shows up at Jael's tent searching for him, Jael shows him the body of Sisera, fulfilling the prophecy of Deborah that God would let a woman deal with Sisera and she would get the credit.

So our war story is over. Did we really need to hear about it in church? Yes. Throughout human history, war and battle is part of life and living. While not all wars involve actual physical struggle and possible death, we are mistaken if we think the world is a place where everyone respects each other and is nice to each other. Our recent election has starkly revealed two visions of what our nation should be, neither compatible with the other and unless we find a way to unify, I fear genuine fighting and genuine bloodshed will continue to be in our future.

We are certainly engaged in a war against the Covid-19 virus, not just fighting on the medical front, but struggling with the idea that somehow following the government's guidance on how to fight Covid spells a loss of our freedom! People are dying in this Covid war. Millions more are seriously sick. The Covid war is very, very real.

The point of our biblical war story is that God took three very different people and brought them together to serve God's purpose. This Holy partnership, this Holy Teamwork, should remind us of two essential truths:

First, we cannot go it alone. I know people in general are very reluctant to ask for help. And then, once they ask for help, they often find it was too late. The situation has spiraled out of hand. Deborah wisely called on Barak to help her. I wish more people would follow her example.

Second, when God is part of our team, God often forms unusual partnerships, which we should praise because they work better than what we could devise for ourselves. It is so easy when we are looking to build a committee to ask the same people again and again. This story put a group of people together with God's help to defeat a deadly opponent. A female leader, a male general, and another women, not necessarily an Israelite, finished the task. Only God would and could bring such a Holy Team together.

Once again, we see how God surprises us when we allow it. Too often, we are set in our ways and won't allow new ideas or new approaches make a difference. Remember Deborah. She knew what Holy Teamwork can do.