

Deborah the Judge – Judges 4:1-9 – November 19, 2017

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In the three-year lectionary cycle of biblical readings, the book of Judges only shows up once. And today is the day. The book would not be considered a favorite by most, except perhaps scholars who are enamored by the ancient history of the Israelite people prior to the establishment of the monarchy. And it's not so much a history as it is a collection of tales told by the ancients to understand their existence in relation to God. The theme running throughout Judges is a simple one – the Israelite people turn away from God, God allows them to be conquered by some neighboring tribe, the Israelite people cry out to God from their oppression, God hears their cries and raises up a judge to refocus their attentions on God and to provide military leadership. The army succeeds in overthrowing the oppressor, and the people thrive. Time passes, and the cycle repeats itself.

In the fourth chapter of Judges, we meet Deborah. She is identified as a prophet of God and as a judge, arbitrating disputes among people. This is a tad surprising as she is the only female judge in the book of Judges. At God's directive, Deborah calls for Barack, a military leader, to take 10,000 Israelite troops from the area tribes and stand against the Canaanite army of King Jabin. Jabin's army is led by the fierce and feared general Sisera and boasts 900 chariots decked out in iron. God promises to be with Barack and give him victory over Sisera.

Despite the assurance, Barack lacked courage, and said to Deborah, "I will only go if you go with me." Deborah agreed to join him in leading the army, but tells him that he will no longer have the honor of defeating Sisera. God will now place Sisera's defeat in the hands of a woman. Now that was an interesting turn of events. Women tended to be absent from the front lines of battle. War was typically centered in the realm of men. If Sisera were to hear of this prophesy, he would have been insulted. A general of his prowess would never fall to a woman, who obviously would not have been skilled in combat.

Barack gathered his troops, and he and Deborah led them to Mount Tabor. Sisera saw this as a challenge and assembled his army and chariots to meet them. Deborah gave Barack the word from God to attack, and God caused the opposing army to fall into a panic and was thus defeated by Barack's troops.

When Sisera saw that things were going badly, he fled the battle. He arrived at the tent of Heber the Kenite. The Kenites were allies of the Canaanites, so this was a good place for him to hide from the Israelites, who no doubt would be hunting for him. Heber's wife Jael invited Sisera in, and when he asked for water, she gave him milk. She tucked him into bed, like a caring mother, promising to stand guard at the entrance of the tent. But when the general

fell asleep, she took a tent peg and with a mallet, drove the peg through his temple into the ground beneath his head.

Lovely story, yes? It seems jarring to us, but it was typical story of survival for these people in this ancient time period.

When we look at the story to see what it is that we need to learn from it, the blatant message is that God uses unlikely people to do God's work in the world. And in this case, God's work was the survival of the tribal people of Israel. The story surprises us several times. Deborah's gender is a surprise – perhaps more so now than at that particular time, when it was not uncommon to have male or female tribal leaders among other peoples. But because of the patriarchal nature of the biblical witness, it is refreshing to discover strong women who are recognized leaders.

Also surprising, when Barack shows his reluctance to lead the army against Sisera and refuses to lead unless Deborah comes with him, God chooses to give the honor of vanquishing Sisera to a woman, who we assume will be Deborah. Strange, as she is not skilled in fighting. But the final twist, is when we think Sisera has succeeded in escaping his fate, a non-Israelite woman performs the gruesome task of his murder after welcoming him into her tent. In the end, the foreign king is defeated and Israel is once again safe.

In studying this story, I read several commentaries that pointed out this very theme – that God often uses unlikely people to carry out God's work in the world. But something about this story kept nagging at me. And it wasn't until I stumbled across a sermon written back in the late 90's by a Methodist pastor named Alex Joyner, that I could name it. The message was called "A Monster Story" and it told the story of Deborah, Barack, Sisera, and Jael it in the form of a campfire story told to a group of kids. But he named for me the so-called 'elephant in the room,' the thing that kept nagging at me this week while thinking about this story. (http://day1.org/873-a_monster_story) That even though the story had a happy ending – if you can call it that – it was a story about violence. Violence is the monster that has yet to be vanquished.

And that was my problem. I couldn't ignore the violence. And I know I'm not the only one who feels this way. Have you ever heard anyone preach a sermon on this story? Ever? My guess is, probably not. You have to dig pretty deep into this story to find any type of good news. It's violent, as many stories of Israel's history are violent. And God is jammed right there in the middle of it.

Now we could slough it off and rationalize – the story is from 1200 B.C.E. It was a violent time period and people were barbaric. Power was measured by who you had conquered and what you had plundered. And realistically, if the Israelites hadn't fought, they never would

have survived, and we wouldn't be sitting here today. It was a different time. So, we have to look past the violence to find the message of the gospel.

We like to think that we are better than our iron age ancestors. We're more civilized, more sophisticated. But really, we just have more sophisticated ways of killing people.

So, I couldn't ignore the violence. And it caused me to ask the question, how many mass shootings will we have this week? Where will they occur? School, church, movie theatre, concert, night club, mall. Is any place safe anymore? And will anything change after the next one? Will regular citizens still have access to purchasing military style weapons?

And I wonder, do we even get shocked anymore when we hear the news of the latest mass shooting? Do you? I still remember Columbine High School. I remember feeling numb and in shock as I watched hours of news coverage. Do you remember? I don't feel that shock so much anymore. Do you?

I have been home from Colombia now for less than three weeks. The Colombian people look like you and me. They have families and jobs. They have dreams and joys. But they live in a nation that has been plagued by violence that has ruined lives and ripped apart families. They long for peace and safety. The pastors and churches we met with are committed to the peace process, and are willing to stand against the violence, even when it may put them in danger as well.

But in Colombia, there are still people who live by the sword, people who only want to conquer and plunder others for their own benefit.

We heard a story of a current situation with one of the church members who is being pressured to surrender his land. He has been threatened with violence. Does he take the risk of standing for what is right? Does he have the right to believe that things are changing, and he will be supported? He asked the pastor, who is in favor of peaceful resistance, "what should I do?" Peacekeepers are still being murdered in Colombia. What would you tell this man? The question we ask is this – where is God amidst the violence?

God always stands with the oppressed and the downtrodden. Even in the story from Judges, God hear the cries of the Israelite people who had been oppressed for 20 years by the cruel king Jabin of the Canaanites. And God raised up Deborah to judge, Barack to lead, and Jael to slay the oppressor.

It's not a pretty story. There are no easy answers. There never are when violence is at the heart of the question. I wish I could say to you that everything will always be okay and that you will never suffer at the hand of violence. I wish that God could magically make it all go away. But that's not how God works. God works through people. If we want to see an end to

violence in our world, we have to allow God to work through us to make it happen. We aren't completely helpless. We can take a stand against violence. We can promote peace. And we can care for those who suffer the effects of violence.