

Oregon City United Methodist Church
18955 S. South End Road
Oregon City, OR 97045

Rev. Michael Benischek
503-522-9807
March 1, 2015

Series: Judges

Sermon: Arrogance v Prophetess/Lobotomist

Portions of Judges 4:1-9

The People of Israel kept right on doing evil in God's sight. With Ehud dead, God sold them off to Jabin king of Canaan who ruled from Hazor. Sisera . . . was the commander of his army. The People of Israel cried out to God because he had cruelly oppressed them with his nine hundred iron chariots for twenty years.

Deborah . . . was judge over Israel at that time. She held court under Deborah's Palm between Ramah and Bethel in the hills of Ephraim. The People of Israel went to her in matters of justice.

She sent for Barak . . . and said to him, "It has become clear that God, the God of Israel, commands you: Go to Mount Tabor and prepare for battle. Take ten companies of soldiers from Naphtali and Zebulun. I'll take care of getting Sisera, the leader of Jabin's army, to the Kishon River with all his chariots and troops. And I'll make sure you win the battle."

Barak said, "If you go with me, I'll go. But if you don't go with me, I won't go."

She said, "Of course I'll go with you. But understand that with an attitude like that, there'll be no glory in it for you. God will use a woman's hand to take care of Sisera."

Sermon:

I remember seeing bible books at the dentist or doctors office when I was a kid. You don't see them much anymore, but I got this one out of the Children's library in room 5-6, and remembered this series. This one was published in 1954. Made for kids, it has some watered-down version of all the Bible stories: it has some cute pictures—all the people look very Anglo-Saxon. It's sort of a sweet and innocent little thing. Surprisingly, this story that we heard in Judges is not in here. At least not all of it. Most of the gruesome stories of Judges won't be in these books. In fact, I'm pretty certain I've never heard this particular story in church before.

It's a strange and weird story. It's one of those things that we might tend to write off as one of those bizarre Old Testament-y stories that have no relation to us now. It's complicated by the fact that it's full of place names that we can't pronounce and characters that we too easily lose track of and forget their relationship to each other. And we only read the first portion of the passage today. There's more to it that I'll get to later.

This story fits the basic pattern of all the stories in the book of Judges: Israel does something wrong; God lets a foreign king dominate them by way of punishment; they cry out to the Lord for deliverance; God raises up a judge—a charismatic leadership figure—who by cunning or military skill, delivers the people of Israel from their oppression; and then we are told that the land will have peace. It's what happened with last week's character of Ehud, and it's happening again with Deborah. This story fits the basic pattern and sure enough, at the beginning of our story the Israelites are under the thumb of King Jabin of the Canaanites.

Now, the part that we don't appreciate has to do with Jabin's "chariots of iron". Everyone was still in the bronze age. Iron was very new, and very advanced. It gave Jabin a decisive military edge. If you had chariots of

iron they could last a lot longer in battle, with an already powerful weapon of war—fast and ruthless. And we are told King Jabin had 900 of such chariots. The Israelites cry out and we are told there is a prophetess named Deborah, who is judging Israel. The word “judging” though that is its literal meaning, is probably better translated “ruling” or “leading.” Deborah is the judge of Israel, the leader. She tells Barak what he has to do—to engage the Canaanite general Sisera. And he tells her “I’ll go if you will.” It’s almost like he thinks of Deborah as his good luck charm, as though he’s afraid to go into battle without her. Deborah says that she’ll go, but warns Barak that he is not going to achieve his own glory, for “God is going to deliver your enemy into the hand of a woman.”

At this point in the story, there is no reason for anyone to think that she is talking about anyone but herself. That would certainly be the pattern—the judge is the military hero of the story. The judge leads the troops into battle. But here is the rest of the story, and you can gain an appreciation of why I didn’t let Maddie read it this morning. The Canaanite army is routed. Deborah and Barak win. But Sisera escapes, and runs and runs and runs. He makes it to a tent of an ally. But he is out, and only his wife is there, her name is Jael. She welcomes him in, offers him hospitality - the rule of the day. Feeds him, gives him drink, and he is able to fall asleep after his horrible bad day. And this is the part that is bad, Let me read it straight out of the Bible: “But Jael, picked up a tent peg and hammer and went quietly to him while he lay fast asleep. She drove the peg through his temple into the ground, and he died.. Go figure. Between you and me, that’s the part where the hospitality thing begins to break down. She goes out, finds the Israelite army and says, “I’ve got him!” Deborah was right. It would be a woman to bring him down.

Now, hospitality is one of the most important things in the ancient world. In the ancient near east, hospitality was seen as an absolute requirement. Even Jesus said, If you enemy is hungry, feed him. If he is thirsty give him something to drink. So what are the lessons to be learned here? What do we do with this story? How do we change our lives on account of this story? Well, we might be a little wary of someone who invites us into their tent and has lots of extra tent pegs laying around, for one.

There’s a concept known as “sinning for the sake of heaven” and it’s fairly controversial. Remember the show 24? In it, the hero, a special government agent, has 24 hours to find the location of a nuclear weapon set to go off in downtown Los Angeles. In one episode he captures the terrorist and then shows him video of his wife and children in their home, surrounded by men in black masks. He tells the terrorist that he will give orders to begin murdering members of the terrorist’s family until he gives him the location of the bomb. In one shocking scene, it actually appears that the commandos have actually shot and killed the terrorist’s youngest son. It turns out that it was all camera tricks designed to fool the terrorist, they didn’t actually hurt anybody, but there is a point in the watching where you ask yourself, is it right to murder an innocent child to save the lives of 2 million people? Is there a sin that you would be willing to commit for the sake of heaven? What kinds of things are you willing to do to further the cause of protecting the lives of your people?

There is a tendency to say, ‘Ah those crazy Hebrews—this is the kind of thing that happened back then, but it doesn’t have any relevance for us today.’

But it does, doesn’t it? We’re often faced with choices not between right and wrong, but between ‘wrong’ and ‘not as wrong’. We’re often faced with choices in which we have to weigh the lesser of two evils. Will we sin for the sake of heaven? Is it OK for our country to torture? Would I lie to my spouse if it gets me out of a jam? Can I sneak in and go through my kid’s room, their personal space, to snoop around their stuff? That last one, by the way, is yes, you can.

These ideas challenge our understandings and preconceptions. Martin Luther King spoke about following the

rules and the law when he said, “We must not forget that everything the Nazis did was legal...” (The Nazis managed to get everything they did passed by their legislature, codified in German, law, and executed as part of administrative policy.) “...and everything that the Hungarian freedom fighters did was illegal.” There are times we need to break the rules, whether it’s a rule of hospitality, perhaps a rule of personal ethics.

I don’t know when those times are and I can’t give you a checklist that you can use to determine when you can override standard moral presumptions for the greater good. The world isn’t always black and white.

What this text does is that it challenges us to think about those things we deem necessary. Now the problem here is that the language of this text is brutal and violent and we should not take away as one of the lessons is that we should take the first opportunity we get to nail our antagonist’s head to the ground.

But there’s something else going on here, too. We get suckered in this story into thinking that Deborah is going to be the heroine of it all. And it winds up being Jael. What this really reminds us is that deliverance often comes from an unexpected quarter. Our salvation often comes from sources we would not have expected, we would not have looked for, and that surprise us when they happen. We are expecting Deborah the Judge or Barak the General to be the hero. And it turns out to be some unknown woman who shows up in the last 20% of the story. God’s salvation is like that sometimes. Actually, more often than not. God’s salvation comes to us in ways we don’t understand, we don’t often look for, and often in ways the world does not encourage us to look for. Israel’s deliverance came not through Barak’s armies, but through one woman’s actions. Our deliverance came not through a mighty king and military general, but through a carpenter who was willing to go to the cross.

What do we do with this story in the end? I’m not sure, but it’s a fair statement that we should probably read it more often than once every fifty years in church. We should become familiar with these texts and with these narratives and we should grapple with their meaning. They remind us on top of all of this is that our faith is a lot more complicated than sometimes we think it is. Our faith and the witness of our spiritual ancestors is a much more diversified, much more complex story than we often like to think. It reminds us that we can’t really reduce our theology down to bumper-sticker size.

If anything, these stories tell us that we need to think seriously about our faith and think seriously about the things that are required of us as Christians, so that we do not fall too easily into the trap of looking for salvation as the world would have it, but finding that salvation as God would give it to us. And the People of God said, AMEN.