

June 4, 2017

Lesson 1: Judges 4: 1-10

Deborah and Barak

Context:

This summer we are looking at the importance of call and how God has called all sorts of people to step up and lead God's people. The scripture lesson today starts in the Old Testament and begins with the story of Deborah, a mighty warrior prophetess who was one of the judges in ancient Israel.

The setting of Judges is a time when Israel faces great turmoil. As the Israelites enter the "Promised Land," they are still dealing with the Canaanites who still remain there. After Joshua dies, there is a string of "judges" to lead Israel. The book of Judges tells of these leaders and how they step up to lead God's people. Like the U.S. judges we see today in our judicial system, the ancient judges were those who settled disputes between the people. They were sought out for their wisdom and their abilities to discern what was truth and merciful in any given situation.

The judges had quite the task before them. Most of the time that the judges rose to power were when the Israelites were misbehaving and veering from the path that they had been given by God. Scholars believe that the judges were what led to the eventual evolution of divine kingship in which God selected someone to be the king and lead God's people. Out of all the judges, the most famous is Deborah. Most of her notoriety is due to the fact that she is a woman and is seen in a leadership role. What's even more fascinating is that she marches into battle along with an army. She is a warrior woman called by God to lead God's people. She even predicts that it will be a woman who will bring the death of the Israelites' enemy, Sisera, the commander of King Jabin's Canaanite army. Sure enough, Deborah's prophecy becomes true. A woman named Jael uses her feminine charm to lure Sisera to his downfall. If you aren't familiar with that story, look up Jael following later on in this chapter. It's a scene straight out of the hit TV/book series Game of Thrones.

The passage today focuses on Deborah calling Barak, a prominent figure in Israel, to step up to God's command and do what he is called to do. Even though Barak is afraid, Deborah does not care. When he insists that she go with him, she agrees. However, Deborah warns Barak that the path he is taking is not honorable. However, she goes with him and steps beyond her call of duty to help Barak fulfill what he had been called to do. Later on, we will hear Deborah's song and the power she places in God. She is an amazing figure and proves that God calls all sorts of people to do amazing and big things.

Application:

There are several things that stick out to me in reading this passage of scripture. One theme is how humans respond to God's call and the other is what defines a leader. The story of Deborah is one that teaches us that God can use all sorts of people to do God's will. While people may fight and push up against that call, God has a persistent way of getting what God wants a person to do.

When it comes to God's call, we see two different ways in this story in how

people respond to God's call. The first is Deborah's response to God's call. She does what she has been called to do by sitting under a palm tree and using her gifts to help God's people. She is known as a leader and is not afraid to push people when necessary. She sees that Barak has not responded to God's call and she knows what needs to happen. She nudges him and offers to do her own part. Even when someone else shies away, Deborah steps up and says she'll go with him. She wants to honor God by using her gifts and helping others respond as well.

When I picture Deborah, I always picture an older woman for some reason. She is wise, maternal, and is not afraid to speak her mind in a loving way. In our churches, she is the one who will love a pastor, and always be their biggest cheerleader. She will push them, but also tell the truth when no else will do so. She takes care of everyone, not in an aggressive manner, but a way in which she helps people see gifts they didn't know she possessed. From my own experience, I think of Lay Leaders, Sunday school teachers, matriarchs, college and divinity school faculty and staff, and female clergywomen who I see as my pastors. At my current church I serve, the "Deborahs" are the ones who I ask for counsel and who also help me mobilize the church in times of crisis and in times of celebration. In past and current covenant groups, female clergy are the ones who hold me accountable in my spiritual disciplines, edit my papers, and discuss with me issues of the heart and ministry. All of these women from these different sectors of my life encourage me to study God's word, to love God's people, and to take care of myself. As I look back on my own call story, I have a lot of "Deborahs," who helped me to run towards my call to ministry and not away. They see their call as something that transcends their own interests and helps others follow their own.

We also have Barak in this case. Barak runs from God's call. He allows fear to hold him back. For some reason, he can only think of all the detriments in going forward. How many times are we like Barak? We make excuse after excuse for not serving on this or that committee, for helping in our community, or even responding to ministry because it "isn't convenient." Thank God for the "Deborahs" who get us back on track!

The second theme we see is leadership and the perception of who is a leader. When I was in college, I was a part of the Leadership Studies program at Birmingham-Southern College. We took classes dealing with different theoretical theories when it came to leadership. One of the things that I loved was looking at different leaders from different time periods. Women leaders were always fascinating to our class because so many of them had to break glass ceilings to get where they needed to be. Unfortunately, our world has at times relegated to patriarchy where men are given leadership positions simply because they are males. There are many times I wonder how many women have not been able to use their gifts and talents because of the prejudices and myths surrounding women in leadership. In this case, we see that Barak is the one with the army. Yet, it is the spirit and decisiveness of Deborah that saves the day. It brings to question how we judge who will be good leaders. Many times I have heard someone say: "They'll be a good leader." When asked why, it may deal with looks or how they appear on paper. But shouldn't we look to other things? Leaders are those who are resilient, wise, and have a passion for what they do. They are lifelong learners who ask the right questions and know when to speak and when to listen. So many of the things that we may get in our heads may focus on superficial things that don't play a role at all in how people lead. One thing I have learned in ordering the life of the church is that gender, degrees,

and appearances do not matter as much in discerning who will be leaders within the congregation. Instead, I look for things like commitment, passion, wisdom, and a love for God's people. Those who serve should be ones who help our churches become all they can be for the Kingdom of God and not just receive positions because of their age, their gender, their looks, or their family name. What people do you see as leaders and what distinguishes them in how they lead? If you're like me, you'll find that they come in all types of colors, shapes, and ages.

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