

THE STORY OF THE PROPHETESS DEBORAH

(or, “Would the World Be a Better Place
If Women Were in Charge?”)

Judges 4:1-7 (plus 8 – 24 for the whole story)

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Oakland Avenue PCUSA – Rock Hill, SC

James T. Richardson

[NOTE: The reading of the passage of Scripture is within the sermon.]

Over the past few months during our Sunday Morning Worship Services we have been following the stories of how God used **Moses** to free the Children of Israel from slavery. And we have watched as Moses molded the rag-tag bunch of slaves into a nation of twelve tribes which could compete in trade and warfare with the other nations of that part of the world. Then, in the Providence of God, Moses, the Servant of the Lord, died....as all of us must die.

The new leader whom God chooses to guide the Israelites is **Joshua** who leads the Children of Israel into the promised land of Canaan. Then, in the Providence of God, Joshua, the Servant of the Lord, died....as all of us must die. [**Thank God for Bob Moss leading us in the recent “Can’t Wait to Get to Heaven” adventure giving us information about planning our own earthly departure!]**

For a period of about 200 years, from (a guess of) 1220 until 1020 BC, **10 to 12 centuries before Jesus**, the Children of Israel settle in the land of Canaan, each of the Twelve Tribes are occupying a certain part of Canaan. During this 200 year period, the people of Israel turn away from their worship of God, and their apostasy (“abandonment, defection”) brings them terrible trouble, usually in the form of warfare with some Canaanite king. When the Israelites cry out to God, God raises up a charismatic person to lead the people in confronting their enemy. These charismatic leaders are referred to as **JUDGES**.

One such JUDGE was the prophetess **Deborah**. And it is her story that we have before us in our passage from the Common Lectionary for today.

However, before I read today’s passage I really need to read an earlier passage from the Book of Judges. It helps us to understand what the situation of the day was. Listen:

Then the Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and worshiped the Baals; and they abandoned the Lord, the God of their ancestors, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt; they followed other gods, from among the gods of the peoples who were all around them, and they bowed down to them; and they provoked the Lord to anger. They abandoned the Lord and worshiped Baal and the Astartes. So the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel and the Lord gave them over to plunderers who plundered them, and he sold them into the power of their enemies all around, so that they could no longer withstand their enemies. Whenever they

marched out, the hand of the Lord was against them to bring misfortune, as the Lord had warned them and sworn to them; and they were in great distress.

Then the Lord raised up judges, who delivered them out of the power of those who plundered them. Yet they did not listen even to their judges; for they lusted after other gods and bowed down to them. They soon turned aside from the way in which their ancestors had walked, who had obeyed the commandments of the Lord; they did not follow their example. When the Lord raised up judges for them, the Lord was with the judge, and the Lord delivered them from the hand of their enemies all the days of that judge; for the Lord would be moved to pity by their groaning because of those who persecuted and oppressed them. But whenever the judge died, the Israelites would relapse and behave worse than their ancestors, following other gods, worshiping them and bowing down to them. (Judges 2:11-19a; NRSV)

Now, understanding that background, we come to the story of the prophetess

DEBORAH. Listen as I read today's passage, Judges 4:1-7 (NRSV).

- 1 *The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord after Ehud [an earlier charismatic leader] died.*
- 2 *So, the Lord sold them into the hand of King Jabin of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor; the commander of King Jabin's army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth-ha-goim.*
- 3 *Then, the Israelites cried out to the Lord for help; for King Jabin had nine hundred chariots of iron, and had oppressed the Israelites cruelly for twenty years.*
- 4 *At that time, Deborah, a prophetess, wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel.*
- 5 *She use to sit under the palm tree of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim; and the Israelites came up to her for judgment.*
- 6 *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.*
- 7 *I will draw out Sisera, the general of King Jabin's army, to meet you by the Wadi Kishon with his chariots and his troops; and I will give him into your hand.'"*

Do you wonder why the Lectionary Committee chose this particular story as an example of one of the charismatic leaders during this particular 200 years of Israelite history?

One of the reasons may have been to tell us that God chooses both men and women as leaders of the people of God.

There are some Christians today [some Baptists, Roman Catholics, the Presbyterian Church in America, and others] who do not believe in the ordination of women, and I wonder how they deal with passages such as this one. You will recall, of course, that it was not until the late 1950s that we Presbyterians began ordaining women, so we do not have a lot of room to talk.

(Please allow me to remind OAPC that a daughter of this congregation, Marty Brooks Simmons, is presently studying at Union Theological Seminary in Charlotte in preparation to become a Minister of the Word and Sacrament, a “preacher.” She is under the care of both the OAPC Session and Providence Presbytery.)

The name “**Deborah**” comes from a word which means “honey bee,” and we are told in today’s passage three distinct things about Deborah.

1. First, **Deborah was a prophetess**. A prophet or a prophetess was a religious person who sought to give the mind and will of God on some specific issue.

Not long ago I had a Holiness preacher tell me that his Holiness denomination would allow a woman to be a prophetess but not a pastor with oversight control of men.

2. Second, **Deborah was a married woman**. She should be the *patron saint* of women such as my wife, Sally, who is a wife, a mother, and worked outside the home as a school teacher. Deborah was one who had full life experiences.
3. Third, **Deborah was a judge**. She exercised some of the functions of a judge in our modern society. People went to her for adjudication and advice. And the term “judge” (as in The Book of Judges) also referred to her as being a very charismatic leader whom the people would follow, as they did in today’s story.

Evidently, Deborah was at least a **three talent person**. And that makes me raise the question about my own **talents** (as did John O’Kain at our last 2nd Sunday Worship Service). Do you ever think much about the talents that God has given you? The Bible says that “**God loves a cheerful giver**,” and while this saying is usually used in terms of our money, it also refers to our talents, our skills, our abilities.

This morning I did not read you all of the story. I hope that you will leave this place and read the remainder of the chapter. It tells how General Barak refuses to lead the Israelite army unless Deborah comes with them, and when Deborah accompanies the army, they are able to defeat King Jabin’s army. However, the enemy-General, **Sisera**, escapes and goes to hide in the tent of a woman, only to have the woman kill him while he sleeps. *[Do you think that the world would be a better place if women were in charge? Surely women are not as cruel as are men? Do you think that the United States tortures prisoners to get them to talk?]*

There are at least two things that I want to say about this story, two things that I want you to think about during this coming week.

(1) VERSE #23 tells why the story was remembered:

“That day God gave the Israelites victory
over Jabin, the Canaanite King.”

That's it. The writer of Judges wanted to tell us that God took care of the Israelites. You remember, of course, that the whole Bible is a "*prejudiced*" book. It is prejudiced in its telling the stories about God and the people of God. It is "PRO-GOD." And this story today says that God took care of the Israelites, and **God used a woman to do it!**

(2) THE SECOND THING ABOUT TODAY'S STORY is that it has SIN all around it, just as you and I have sin all around us! The story is bordered or surrounded by Verse #1 in chapter 4 and verse #1 in chapter 6, both of which say the same thing:

"The people of Israel sinned against the Lord."

LISTEN TO THIS REFORMED OR PRESBYTERIAN WORD ABOUT SIN:

Sin separates you and me from God.
 There is no way that you and I can overcome this separation.
 God takes the initiative and sends Jesus Christ into the world
 in order to overcome the separation between God and us.
 If you ever have the opportunity in faith to grab hold of Jesus,
 you had better do so, because without Jesus you and I don't stand a chance!

THE NEW TESTAMENT SAYS THIS:

"If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make God a liar and God's word is not in us."

My little children, I am writing this to you so that you may not sin; but if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the expiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world."
 (I John 1:8 – 2:2; RSV)

Now, my friends
 if you came here this morning
 hoping that you would hear some
 "good news,"
 you just did!