

King of Glory Lutheran Church
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Summer Series – Deborah – Judges 4:1-10
Rev. Debra Abbott

Judges 4:1-10

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.

Barak summoned Zebulun and Naphtali to Kedesh; and ten thousand warriors went up behind him; and Deborah went up with him.

Today we turn to the story of Deborah as we conclude our time in the Old Testament this summer.

The story of Deborah begins with these words in the fourth chapter of the book of Judges, “The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord...”

Oh dear. That doesn’t sound good. Well, if you read the book of Judges from cover to cover you will find these words repeated often. Very often. “The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord...”

The time of the judges in the history of the Israelites comes after the death of Moses and Joshua. Moses led God’s people out of Egypt and they wandered in the desert for many years. When Moses died Joshua became the new leader of the Israelites.

After Joshua died the 12 tribes of Israel survived but they were not united. And over many years the people found leadership and wisdom in people God raised up as judges.

Now when you and I think of a judge we probably picture someone in a black robe who has been educated and experienced in the laws of the place they serve. But Deborah and the other judges described in the book of Judges are very different from the judges we know in our time today.

Deborah is described as a prophetess. She has received the spirit of the Lord and shares God’s messages with the people. As we heard in our story today, Deborah sits under a palm tree and listens to the people, settles disputes and pronounces judgement. But she is also a military and political leader.

In the book of Judges many different people are raised up as judges over time. But they don’t follow immediately one after another. Years passed by in some cases before the people would cry out and a new judge would arise. And this goes on for hundreds of years.

The time of the judges for the people of Israel was a time of uncertainty and instability. They lived in the land God promised to them but there was constant change in who ruled the land. Throughout the book of Judges we find a cycle of events. The Israelites forget the covenant with God and worship Canaanite gods and then remember God again.

Our story today begins by telling us that the Israelites have been conquered by King Jabin of Canaan. The Israelites have been oppressed for twenty years. And now they cry out to God for help. So our scene is set. Who will God send?

The answer is a woman named Deborah who serves as a messenger from God and will now lead an army into battle.

Deborah is the only woman named as a judge in the book of Judges. Chapter 4 tells her story that also includes two military leaders named Barak and Sisera and a woman who is not an Israelite named Jael. You just heard the first part of chapter 4 and I encourage you to read the rest of the story this week.

Chapter 5 tells Deborah's story again but this time in the form of a poem that was sung. I invite you to read that as well.

So what we know so far is that Deborah is a prophetess and judge that God has raised up for God's people. And we know that God's people have cried out to God after twenty years of oppression by King Jabin. Sisera was the commander of King Jabin's army and he had 900 chariots. How will the Israelites defeat this army?

God gives Deborah a message and she sends for Barak, a military leader, and says 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 hears these words but he isn't quite sure about this plan. Maybe he doesn't trust God or maybe he doesn't trust Deborah or maybe he thinks the odds of winning this battle are not good. So he asks Deborah to go with him. She agrees, although she tells him that he will not find glory in this battle because another woman will defeat Sisera. And then together they lead an army of 10,000 to fight Sisera.

Sisera finds out that Barak is planning to attack and he leads his army into a riverbed called the Wadi Kishon. Wadi is a term for a dry riverbed. And then Barak's army attacks and it doesn't go well for Sisera's army. Sisera abandons his army and chariot, runs away and hides in the tent of a woman named Jael, who is a Canaanite, not an Israelite. Jael takes him in and then kills him in his sleep.

The last verse of chapter 5 from the song of Deborah tells us, "And the land had rest for 40 years."

So what does this ancient story have to teach us today?

As in so many stories in the Bible about God's people, today we meet people who are living through uncertainty, injustice, and conflict. And these people are crying out for help. Sound familiar?

Today of course we too know uncertainty in our own lives and in our community in our world. We too long for justice and peace, stability and certainty.

Into this world today we heard the story of a woman, chosen by God, to listen to people and dispense wisdom, judgement and justice. She was also a leader who gave instructions to commanders and went into battle.

Deborah was given the wisdom to listen to God and listen to others. She created a space where all were heard and judgement and justice were given and respected. Creating this kind of space takes a tremendous amount of courage and patience and determination. Especially in times of uncertainty, fear and loss.

Today we can learn from Deborah. God called her to share God's message with God's people. And God calls us to learn from this woman of faith.

We too are invited to make space and time to listen to God and to one another.

We too are invited to be people of courage and determination.

We too are called to share God's message of justice and action when there is injustice and apathy.

God calls us this week to remember Deborah and to consider how we can find places and spaces to listen. Listen to God and to one another. And then be people of courage and determination.

In honor of Deborah's song we are going to sing a song of God's power to change the world through you and me called the Canticle of the Turning. Let's sing!