

## 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, Year C

3 July 2016

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*Judges 4-5*

Deborah is the only judge who makes it into the lectionary, and even then, we get very little of her story. The only part that shows up is the first seven verses of chapter four—just enough to mention that Deborah, a woman, was both a judge and a prophet, respected for her wisdom and finding favor with God and the people she governed.

Which is all well and good, but there is so much more to this particular story in Judges. To begin with, this is a

story of three women, not just one.

First off, there's Deborah. She is the only judge, male or female, to also be given the title of prophet. Which meant that people respected not only her leadership and her ability to resolve disputes, but saw her as someone with a unique insight into the word of God.

But that's not what impresses me most about Deborah. In a period when Israel's history was defined by war, by one battle after another with surround-

ing tribes, when in the not too distant future Israel would demand a king who could lead them into battle, the first hero of this story is not a warrior or a commander. Rather, it is a woman who is courageous and determined enough to call a reluctant male leader, Barak, the commander of the Israelite army, to step up and do what needed to be done for the welfare of God's people.

I think about how often our own political leaders shy away from making hard choices because it is not politically expedient to do so, or because the potential downside may bring negative conse-

quences today in order to improve outcomes for our children and grandchildren in the future, and may therefore cost someone the next election. We may ponder whether or not Deborah's course of action truly coincided with God's will or not, but I find her bravery and commitment as a political leader enviable.

*Deborah is described as the "wife or woman of Lappidoth," but that, too, may be more a description of her courage and insight than of her marital status. Lappidoth is a Hebrew word that means 'lights' or 'flames'. Maybe she is married to a dude with a cool name, or maybe the bib-*

*lical writer intended to let us know that Deborah was, indeed, a “woman of light.”*

The second woman we meet is Jael. She was a member of the Kenite clan. So she was not an Israelite, nor was she a Canaanite like Sisera. But the Kenites and the Canaanites were on peaceful terms, whereas they had been at war with the Israelites not so long ago. So we would expect a member of the Kenite clan to side with Sisera before siding with the Israelites.

Yet it is Jael who is hailed as the unexpected hero in the story. She deceives Sisera, promising him safety in

her tent. Instead, she waits until he falls asleep and she drives a tent peg through his skull. That in itself is an unexpected twist in the story. We know that it will be a woman who kills Sisera, but up until now, we’ve been expecting it to be Deborah, the hero of the story.

But even more intriguing is the way Jael is described for her deadly deed. In 5:24, she is described as the “most blessed of women.” But that phrase is only used three times in scripture. First, here in Judges, for Jael for murdering Sisera. The second time is for a woman named Judith who becomes a hero

by beheading an enemy commander and freeing her city. And the third is...Mary. The mother of Jesus. That's an interesting trio of women—two who have taken a life, and a third who helped bear life for the world.

Then we meet the third woman in our story—Sisera's mother. I'm torn between compassion and disgust when it comes to her. The first image we get is her standing by the window, wondering why her son, Sisera, has not yet returned from battle. Why is he delayed? It's hard for me not to feel compassion for this person who waits, and waits, for a loved one to re-

turn, while knowing deep down in her gut that he never will.

But this same mournful woman consoles herself by celebrating her son's imagined victory, including not only the spoils of war, but in the original Hebrew, "a womb or two for every soldier." She is gloating over what would surely be someone else's grief. Yet we know what she does not—that the grief will soon be hers as she learns that it is her son who will never return.

This poem in Judges 5, the *Song of Deborah*, was probably written in the 12<sup>th</sup> century BC, and is believed to be one of the earliest

samples of Hebrew poetry. I find it a fascinating passage not merely because the main characters are all strong women honored in an overwhelmingly patriarchal culture, but even more so because they are presented as realistic, flawed, yet powerful, dedicated, and honored.

I celebrate Deborah's courage and determination. I weep with Sisera's mother, and all the mothers and fathers who watch by the window for children who will never return.

And Jael—she who is in a unique honorific trio with Judith and Mary the mother of Jesus. She was a married

woman who invited another a Canaanite general into her tent to drive a tent stake through his skull. Judith seduced an Assyrian general in order to decapitate him. And Mary found herself pregnant out of wedlock in order to turn the world upside down.

These are not perfect women, but neither are we perfect women and men. They all have something in their respective stories reminding us they were outside the moral norms of their culture. But they also show a bone-deep determination, a fierce hope to call on the power of God and act with courage.

There is no perfect role model, because there is no perfect person. But when we find ourselves lacking courage, or struggling to find hope, may our souls, like Mary's, magnify the Lord. And may they, in the much older song of Deborah and Jael, *March on, my soul, with might!*