

“Faces of Our Faith: Deborah”

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Judges 4: 1-10

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So far in our “Faces of our Faith” series this month, we’ve heard from some familiar biblical faces: Adam and Eve to start, and then last week’s Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego facing down the fiery furnace. This week we turn to the book of Judges, a book we don’t visit often, to meet **Deborah**, the one and only woman to serve as a Judge in Israel as far as we know. So let’s get to know her.

The author of our text today first describes Deborah as “prophetess.” This tells us that she is among the ranks of many prophets who came before and after her who brought messages from God to God’s people, not only in word but in action.

2nd: “the wife of Lappidoth.” The Hebrew here is a little unclear. Lappidoth could very well be her husband, but Lappidoth is also a place. It’s also a word that means “torch” or “firey” So it’s possible the author is trying to introduce us to Deborah, prophetess, fiery woman, who is,

3rd: Judging Israel. Before Israel had kings, the highest authority to be found were the judges. These leaders were selected by God, often in times of crisis, to serve as military and judicial leaders. Deborah appears in both roles, sitting under a tree where the Israelites meet her for mediation and judgement, as well as military strategizing and leading her people in battle.

Prophetess, wife or “fiery woman,” and judge are her roles-but our text tells us more about her than just these titles. Deborah sits, practicing stillness in the ways she attends to God’s voice and God’s people. Deborah sends and summons people, commanding trusted authority. Deborah speaks God’s word with confidence, assured of any victory that God has promised. Deborah gets up from her seat under a palm tree when called upon to attend to God’s business. Deborah goes with her people, as she walks with them every step of the way-God’s way.

Take a moment to look at Artist Lauren Wright Pitman’s portrait of Deborah.



This face of our faith seems to be peering right into our eyes, inviting us into the frame, where God’s work is ongoing. Of this image Pitman writes, “Deborah shows us that, in stillness, practicing attending to God with fierce trust, we can sift through the chaos of this world and align ourselves with the movement of God.” God calls Deborah to this alignment-and God calls us.

The book of Judges is a scary place to learn about God’s call. Perhaps the most violent book in our holy text, this is the Game of Thrones of scripture. There’s fighting over land, apostasy, and divine punishment. It’s bloody, messy, and doesn’t resolve nicely at the end. In fact, as this book goes on, it gets increasingly worse. And this is still early in the history of the Israelites after they have left Egypt and arrived in the promised land, where they have failed to conquer all of the land from those who already resided there, so they are co-existing with them. Judges begins with the death of Joshua, Moses’ successor and then walks through a repeated cycle featuring 12 named judges where the following happens again and again:

Book of Judges Repeated Cycle[[1]](#footnote-1)

1. The Israelites do evil and abandon God.
2. God delivers them into the hand of foreign leaders who oppress them.
3. The Israelites cry out to God, who hears their cry and raises up a judge to deliver them.
4. The judge is successful, and the Israelites enjoy peace, but when the judge dies the people forget about following God, and the cycle begins again.

Over and over, “the Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord” and the cycle begins again, just as our reading began today. History repeats itself with greater and greater failure, the final chapters describing complete moral chaos and civil war.

We know this cycle ourselves. It is why we confess our sin together in worship each week. It is why we need this community, over and over we do what is evil in the sight of God, and find ourselves crying out for help. Over and over, God delivers us.

Some of these cycles feel small, almost not worth mentioning: the recycle bin filled up before pick-up day and I couldn’t be bothered to save what didn’t fit, so I put it right in the trash can. The more often I do this, the more often I’m likely to do it again.

Some of these cycles are bigger. This pandemic has showed us how our own cycles of self-centered behavior can literally kill other people. Cases start to go down. People start to ease up on mask wearing or not gathering in large groups, yearning for a return to “what was.” And the cases climb again.

Some of these cycles are much more difficult to wrap our heads around. We are stuck. As three counts of “guilty” were uttered for the charges in George Floyd’s death, sighs of relief came out of the bodies of many. But while accountability has been determined this week, true change to prevent such unnecessary death again feels light-years away.

Perhaps it isn’t possible for us to break the cycle. Before Deborah’s death there are 40 years of rest in the land. But then it begins again in chapter 6: “The Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord gave them into the hand of Midian seven years.” Then God calls Gideon, the next judge to try again. It’s exhausting. It’s not the work one person can maintain. And while Deborah was not the one to get it perfect so that her people can live in peace forever, we can learn from the wisdom that brought peace for a time: Deborah doesn’t do all the work herself.

First, she sends for and summons Barak, to lead the military might of the Israelite army. We heard about that in our story today. Barak agrees, but out of respect, caution or fear he demands of Deborah, “If you go with me, I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go.” Without hesitation Deborah says she will go with him, but promises that “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.” If we stopped where we ended our reading today, you would assume that woman is Deborah, who comes along with Barak and the Israelites into a successful battle. But what you didn’t hear is the big plot twist that comes next.

Sisera, the general of Jabin’s army calls all 900 of his iron chariots to meet Barak, Deborah, and their army. With a command from Deborah, “Up! For this is the day in which the Lord has given Sisera into your hand. The Lord is indeed going out before you,” Barak and his warriors attack. The Lord throws Sisera’s army into a panic and Barak’s army gains the upper hand, destroying them. Seeing his loss, Sisera flees on foot, arriving at the tent of Jael, wife of Herber the Kenite, who Sisera assumed to be an ally. She invites him in, calms him down, gives him milk to drink and covers him with a blanket, tucking him in. He asks her to stand guard and falls asleep. And while he sleeps (cover your ears kids), Jael kills him, violently with a hammer and a tent peg. Check out the entirety of chapter 4 for all the gory details. Barak arrives in pursuit to discover that Jael had delivered his victory.

Deborah is prophet, wife, woman, judge, listening, speaking, commanding and going with God’s people. But she never expects to do it alone. With the military leadership of Barak and the swift action of Jael, the victory God showed her before it even happened came true, just as she said it would. **These three seemingly disconnected people** share the responsibility of the work of God’s deliverance, guided as individuals and community to align with God’s movement in a chaotic world. **Deborah** by God’s voice, **Barak**, by Deborah’s instruction and presence, and **Jael** by an opportunity she could not let pass. All because Deborah sat under a palm tree and listened, tuned into God’s people and God’s ways.

Perhaps some of you are like Deborah. You know where to go and how to listen, tuning into God’s ways, seeing the way forward. Maybe. Or maybe you are more of a Barak, trusting the Deborah’s around you for instruction and accompaniment. Perhaps you are like Jael, unaware that something big is about to stumble into your tent. What all three of these faces of faith have in common is a vision that Deborah models well: a fierce trust in the future God promises.

Turn back to Deborah’s face and look closely once more. See the chariots and spears in the background? Artist Pitman writes, “the chariots of war loom in the distance, but the chariots are empty because, in the midst of impending war, this prophetess can see God’s victory before it even takes place.” The wisdom of Deborah calls us to align with God’s movement now, because God has promised victory.

In this Easter season, we have already seen God’s promised victory in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Being Easter people means believing that the cycle IS broken. Not because *we* finally got it right, but because God sent God’s only son not to judge and condemn, but to save. To love. But will we live like it?

As some prepare to leave our cars parked outside in a few weeks and take a seat in the comfort of our sanctuary it might be tempting to see those pews as God’s victory. “We are finally going back in!” You have probably noticed that your pastors have been trying to be very careful with our language. This is not a return to what was, but a movement forward. Our bottoms in those pews is not the victory God is asking us to see. In fact, if we aren’t careful, both physically and spiritually, being inside with one another could literally send us into a cycle of destruction - through the spread of a virus but also through the lull of “what was.”

God’s movement may bring us back into the sanctuary, but God won’t stop there. As our own Deb LoPresti read in Judges chapter 5, Deborah’s victory song, one of the oldest texts in our entire Bible, we hear the call: “Awake, awake, Deborah! Awake, awake, utter a song!” As God called Deborah, God calls us to listen, speak, go and be with God’s people. And we know that all God’s people aren’t right here in this parking lot or watching the recorded online service.

We must resist the cycle of destruction found in the book of Judges and learn from the wisdom of Deborah, envisioning the life God calls us to:

A life where our sense of community care overcomes our desires for individual comfort.

A life where we listen to the Judges who speak truth in our world.

A life where we seize opportunity to jump in on God’s plan when it runs up to our front door.

A life where we live out today’s Affirmation of Faith, a creed written in the years following the Civil Rights movement, a creed that is part of a faith that we will return to again and again until we can live the truth of it.

A creed that I invite you now to read aloud:

***Friends, what do we believe?***

The life, death, resurrection, and promised coming of Jesus Christ has set

the pattern for the church’s mission, involves the church in the common

life of all people, and commits the church to work for every form of human

well-being. So to live and serve is to confess Christ as Lord.

1. https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-33/commentary-on-judges-41-7-5 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)