

Surprising Deliverance

Judges 4:1-10

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First Presbyterian, Luling

Something a bit different for this morning. The Old Testament book of Judges only appears in the lectionary once, and it's today. If it were a movie, the book as a whole would be rated R, and this story, if we read the whole thing, gets at least a PG-13. Except for the story of Samson, I would bet that you didn't learn much about Judges when you were a little kid in Sunday School. The book shows the hand of several editors over the years, and in its final form, its aim is the same as the prophets: to call the Israelites to worship God alone and not follow after other gods. Judges has a very distinctive pattern in the way its narrated. There's a repeated phrase: "the people did what was evil in the sight of the Lord," they suffer some punishment or defeat at the hands of foreigners, and then God raises up a judge to both rule and save them from themselves, and the people follow God alone for a stretch of years, and then, the people do what was evil in the sight of the Lord again, and the whole cycle repeats.

The judges of the book of Judges are more than that. A present day analogy for us would be that our county judges in Texas aren't really judges, but something broader. It's an administrative role. The judges of ancient Israel settled disputes, as we might think of a judge, and fulfilled administrative work, such as directing military action and managing the tribes. Judges filled the time frame after the Israelites had entered the Promised Land and before they demanded a king. The book of Ruth also takes place during this time frame.

Chapters 4 and 5 tell the same story, once in prose and once in poetry or song. This double-story has happened in Exodus, after the Israelites cross the Red Sea, and they sing. Those two songs, in Exodus 15 and here in Judges 5, are likely some of the oldest pieces of Hebrew Scripture that survive. Songs are easier to remember than prose, and that's how those oldest stories were carried. Just this week, I thoroughly embarrassed my child by remembering every lyric to "Mamas, Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up to be Cowboys," which I learned from Alvin and the Chipmunks "Urban Chipmunk" album when I was probably 7 or 8. Songs stick in our memories. Those two chapters tell the story in just about the same way, though there are a few, small differences.

The story is this. Deborah is judging Israel. She's the judge, the one God raised to save them from their own worst behavior. There is no surprise expressed

in the story that a woman would be a judge, though she is the only one mentioned. It's surprisingly matter-of-fact, for a culture that was, as far as we know, male-dominated. Deborah functions both as a judge—people approach her for judgments in disputes—and as a leader slash prophet. She gives the military leaders directions as God gives them to her, so as a spokesperson for God, she functions as a prophet. The narrator calls her a prophetess in verse 4.

The opponent that was threatening Israel at the time was a Canaanite leader from Hazor, named King Jabin. His main military general was Sisera. He had iron chariots, which the Israelites did not, and he had been oppressing them for twenty years. The Israelites cry out for help, and the Lord calls Deborah. She, in turn, calls the Israelite military general Barak. She tells him that the Lord, the God of Israel, just so he can't be mistaken about who it is, that the Lord is sending him out to take on Sisera, the opposing general with all the iron chariots.

Now Barak gets a bit of a bad rap here, but I think he's smart. His forces, such as they are, are outmatched in number and in technology. The Lord, the God of Israel, may well be sending him out, but he, Barak, is not so sure it's a good idea. He wants Deborah to go with him. The text doesn't tell us why, but he's not going without her. Maybe it's a "put your money where your mouth is" sort of thing, and if she's so convinced that God is sending him out there, she should have to go, too. Or maybe he wants to be able to consult her as the battle is underway, since she knows God's direction. Who knows, there could be any number of reasons he wants her to be with him. He tells her if she isn't going to come with him, then he's not going either.

She agrees, but then there's a plot twist, that is apparently the consequence of him requiring her to go with him. Fine, she says. Sisera the opposing general will be defeated, but it will be at the hand of a woman. I don't think there's any way to construe this that isn't an insult to Barak. He'll win, but it's really a woman who deserves the credit, since he was such a scaredy cat.

The audience is left to assume that this astonishing thing will happen, and that Deborah herself will be the woman who defeats Sisera. This is where we stopped reading, but the story is far from over.

They go to the location where God had directed them. There's a battle. Here's where the prose story and the song diverge a bit—one says Sisera panicked and abandoned his chariots, the other says that there was a big rainstorm and all the heavy chariots got stuck in the mud, another commonality with the Exodus story. But in any case, the Canaanite army and their general Sisera are in the

process of being defeated by Barak and the Israelite army, and Sisera flees the battlefield.

He goes straight to the tent of someone who he believes to be a Canaanite ally. Jael is the wife of this person who is supposed to be Sisera's ally. She welcomes him into her tent. He asks her to stand at the entrance and if anyone asks if someone's in the tent, just say no. Unbeknownst to him, Jael is no longer a Canaanite ally, but an Israelite one. Again, this is something the story doesn't explain. Sisera falls asleep, and Jael hammers a tent peg through his temple into the ground. This is the PG-13 part, quite gruesome.

Deborah was right. Sisera the Canaanite general was defeated not at the hands of Barak the Israelite general, not at the hands of the Israelite army, not even at the hands of Deborah herself, but at the hands of Jael.

Barak is still chasing Sisera, and when he shows up, Jael shows him Sisera's body, lying in her tent.

God had delivered the Israelites from their enemies once more, this time by the hands of a surprising candidate. That's what God tends to do. God's tendency to choose the unlikely candidate happens over and over in Scripture. God chooses Moses, a man with a criminal past and a stutter, to deliver the people God has chosen, an enslaved people, out of Egypt. God chooses the women Jael and Deborah to deliver the Israelites in this battle. God chooses a baby born to a poor, young couple, to deliver the world.

Imagine what God might do with a surprising candidate like you or me. How might God be using us?