

DEBORAH

Judges 4: 1-22

Dean Feldmeyer 7/10/11

Before I begin, let me first express my thanks to our Lay Leader, Randy Riley who stepped in for me last Sunday so I could be present for the birth of our grandson, Caleb Michael Feldmeyer, on July 1. And let me also say a word of thanks to all of you for your prayers and good wishes. Caleb is healthy and happy as is the whole family.

Last week Randy introduced the book of Judges to you with the story of the shibboleth and, I am told, he did a wonderful job, as I knew he would.

This morning we're going to back up a few steps and spend a few minutes talking about the book of Judges and its provenance. Then we're going to examine the story of Deborah, what scholars call one of the "ascending" stories because it comes early in the book and is a story of success and the rise of Israel as a power in the land of Canaan.

Next week we'll study the story of "Jephtha's Daughter," one of the descending stories, taken from the second half of the book, when Israel had practiced apostasy and fallen out of favor with God. And then we will conclude our study of the book of Judges with a discussion of "Samson," the final and saddest story from the book of Judges, a story that symbolized Israel at its lowest point.

But, first, some background.

THE AGE OF THE JUDGES: 1120-1020 B.C.E.

The age of the Judges lasted for about 100 years from 1120 – 1020 B.C.E.

Joshua, you will recall, brought the children of Israel into the Promised Land and led them in conquering it and dividing it among the twelve tribes. Then, in the final chapters of the book of Joshua we are told of his death and funeral.

The book of Judges opens in the first three chapters with a retelling of some of the key events in the last chapters of Joshua but with some important editorial changes or corrections. (e.g. In Joshua it is Caleb who captures Hebron; in Judges it is Judah.) These events show the ascendancy of Israel as a power. They attack, conquer, grow, get stronger, are faithful to their one true God, and are rewarded with power and might.

Success leads to arrogance and complacency, however, and the Israelites begin to drift away from YHWH. They flirt with gods from other Canaanite tribes -- among them Baal and Astarte.

After a brief transition time their flirtations with other Gods and their outright apostasy lead to the disintegration of their culture and the decline of their prominence and power. The tribes begin to fight and make war on each other as well as outsiders.

At the same time the Philistines, having concluded an unsuccessful attempt to attack and subdue Egypt, have settled on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea, have perfected the art and science of smelting iron, and have turned their attention on the Israelites. The twelve tribes are so weak from warring with each other that they cannot repel the Philistines and their iron chariots.

The 100 year experiment of Israel as a loose confederation of independent tribes governed by tribal leaders has ended in failure. If they are ever to throw off their oppressors, the Philistines, they will need a strong, charismatic leader who can unite them into a single nation – a king. His name will be Saul.

Chapter 4-16 of Judges tells the stories of individual judges or tribal leaders: Seven major judges and five minor ones. We will concern ourselves only with the major judges whose careers mirror the ascendancy and decline of Israel: Three judges (Othniel, Ehud, and Deborah) ruled during the ascendancy, two judges are considered transitional (Gideon and, his son, Abimilech) and two (Jephtha and Samson) ruled during the decline and fall of the Israelites.

(An interesting footnote: In telling these stories the author will include the stories of nineteen women characters, more than any other book of the Bible. But, alas, these female characters fare no better or worse than the males. Some are faithful and righteous, some are selfish and sinful. They reflect, as characters in stories often do, the spin of the world around them.)

Last week Randy shared with you one of the Jephtha stories. This week we step back to look at a Deborah story. Next week we will welcome "His Handmaidens" to our sanctuary to lead us in worship, a single service at 10:45AM, and we'll return to Jephtha for what is surely one of the saddest stories in the Bible. (Bring two hankies!) And then, on July 24 we conclude our trip through Judges with the story of Samson.

So, to Deborah –

DEBORAH, THE PROPHETESS

As the story opens we are told that after the judge, Ehud, died, the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord. We can speculate as to what that evil was, but evil in those days came in two basic flavors – our relationship with YHWH and our relationship with our fellow human beings.

Evil was roughly defined as any act which separated people from God or each other. Idolatry was a favorite. But bad treatment of the poor, inhospitality, selfishness, oppression, injustice, cruelty or meanness of most types also qualified.

In this case they had apparently done something to separate themselves from God and God allowed them to suffer the separation they sought.

God allowed them to suffer oppression at the hand of a guy named Jabin, a king of a city state called Hazor, one of the many little Canaanite kingdoms that dotted the country. This is interesting and troublesome for Biblical scholars because in the 11th chapter of Joshua, Joshua was said to have killed King Jabin of Hazor. So what's he doing in this story after Joshua's death?

Is this a different king Jabin? Perhaps the son of the previous king? Or has the author of Judges borrowed a story and a character from the book of Joshua and fixed it up for his own telling? Or did this author just get a little confused about details like the names of kings at certain times and places? Who knows?

At any rate, this King Jabin of Hazor was particularly successful at subjugating the peasants around him because he had an army with 900 iron chariots and a ruthless general, his commander in chief, named Sisera.

After about 20 years of oppression by Jabin and Sisera, a relatively short period of time by biblical reckoning, the Israelites cried out to God to deliver them. And God agrees.

We expect, as in the judge stories up to now, to be introduced to a military figure, a war lord or general who will be chosen by God to lead the Israelites in conquering their oppressors. But, instead, we are told that, at this time, there was a woman named Debora (wife of Lappidoth) who was also a prophet who used to sit at such and such a place under a tree that was named after her and there she would speak for God, telling the people what God's will was.

People, we are told, would also come to her to settle disputes and she would settle them fairly and equitably.

One day Deborah gets a vision from God so she sends a messenger to find a war lord named Barak, son of Abinoam, a member of the Hebrew tribe of Nephtali. They find him and bring him to Deborah and she says that she has had one of her visions from God and the vision said that he, Barak, was supposed to raise an army of 10 thousand fighting men, five thousand each from the tribes of Nephtali and Zebulun – ten thousand total. Then they are to go to the wadi or oasis called Kishon and there they will meet Jabin's general, Sisera, and his troops and God will deliver them, iron chariots and all, to Barak in victory.

For some reason that isn't made clear, Barak says, "Okay, but I want you to go with me. If you don't go, I don't go." Some scholars think he is a coward and wants the reassurance of having her there with him to bless his battle plans and make sure that God is in the battle.

Other scholars think he is offering to share the glory with God's authentic prophetess.

We don't know. All we know is that Deborah agrees to go with him.

As they are leaving, however, she says that the glory of killing Sisera will not fall to Barak. Rather, it will be given to a woman. Is this punishment for Barak not trusting in God's orders? Or is it just a matter-of-fact pronouncement from Deborah (Oh, by the way, some woman is going to kill Sisera. Not you.) Again, we don't know.

THE BATTLE OF WADI KISHON

Barak gathers his troops and marches to the Wadi Kishon. While he's on his way messengers come to Sisera, the Canaanite general with news that the Israelites are on the march. He gathers his men and his chariots – 900 of them, we are reminded, all made of iron – and heads to the wadi to meet his enemy in battle.

Barak and Deborah have led the Israelites up to Mount Tabor that overlooks the Wadi Kishon and when they see Sisera and his army arrive Deborah gives the battle cry: "Get up! For this is the day that the Lord has given Sisera into your hand." The Hebrews jump up and run down the mountain, screaming, and the Canaanites are thrown into a panic.

Why they panic we are not told. Is it the number of Canaanites that panics them? Ten thousand screaming warriors running down the mountain toward you might do that. Or is it the time of day? Maybe the sun was in their eyes and they could not see their enemy. They just heard the sound and that was enough. Or did they think they got there first and had the advantage only to discover that they had been ambushed?

Whatever the reason, the Canaanites are thrown into panic. Even Sisera leaps from his chariot and flees on foot. As he is running away his army is destroyed.

Earlier, while the two armies were on their way to the wadi the story has been interrupted with a paragraph that seems out of place. It says that a guy named Heber, a Kenite from a Canaanite tribe called the Kain, had broken away from the rest of his clan and made his home nearby in a place called Elon-bezaananim (ell-on / bez-an-an-im).

(Parenthetically, we know because we are students of the bible and its history, that the Kenites were widely known as iron smiths and this probably meant that this guy, Heber, was following Sisera's army to serve as a repairman in case any of those 900 iron chariots needed to be repaired.)

So Sisera leaps from his chariot in the heat of the battle and the panic and he takes off running while all his men are being killed by the Israelites. Exhausted and lost he happens upon the camp of this Heber the Kenite, guy. Heber isn't at home but his wife, Jael is and she calls out to him: "My Lord, run no further. Come into my husband's tent and I

will hide you.” And she could say this believably, we are told, because the Kenites and the Canaanites were on peaceable terms with each other.

Sisera takes her up on her hospitality. He goes into the tent and asks her for water. Instead, she brings him some goat’s milk which makes him sleepy. She tells him to lie down quietly and take a nap and she covers him with a carpet on the floor of the tent. He tells her to stand in the doorway and, if any should pass by and ask, “Is there a man in the tent,” she should tell them, “No.”

Commentators and scholars have, of course, had a hay day with this little scene. The big, scary general is turned into an infant being tucked into bed after being fed milk by a woman. He then disparages his own manhood. Most translations say that he tells her that if someone asks “Is anyone in the tent?” she should say no. But the questions can also be translated, “Is there a man in the tent?” Which would be the equivalent of our modern question, “Has a man run by here?” That sort of thing. His instructions to her are to say that, “Well, no! No MAN is in the tent.”

Then, while he’s asleep believing that he is safe, she takes a sharp tent stake and a hammer and drives the tent stake through his head, at the temple, nailing him to the floor and killing him in a scene that is so full of symbolism, some probably intended and some imagined by scholars that we don’t have enough time this entire week to unpack it all.

A few minutes later Barak comes running by in hot pursuit of Sisera and Jael invites him into the tent and says, “I think this is the guy you’re looking for.” And sure enough, it is. Sisera, the mighty general, with his head nailed to the floor.

As an epilogue, the story teller adds a paragraph to the effect that Sisera’s entire army was slain and King Jabin’s power was so compromised on that day that it didn’t take long for the Israelites to destroy him and his kingdom.

REFLECTION

The stories in the Bible, especially the ones in the book of Judges, are not Aesop’s fables.

They do not come in neat little packages with neat little morals or object lessons attached at the end. They are roughhewn tales of realistic people, people with rough edges, pre-historic people who have been sketched in antiquity and colored in by storytellers down through the ages.

They paint, in broad strokes, the evolution of a people from tribal, nomadic herdsmen to a united, powerful nation and back to tribal herdsmen again. Some of the stories are heroic, some are tragic, some are didactic, some are just, well, stories.

With some stories the lesson to be learned is obvious. With others, we must infer a lesson, weave a lesson from threads that run in and through the story.

Such is the case with the story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael.

First, there is the fact that two of the three main characters who shape the direction of this story are women. The stories in the book of Judges are often driven by the female characters and it is no less so in this one. “Uppity women,” indeed.

Deborah walks beside Barak as he leads his soldiers into battle. In fact, he refuses to do so if she won’t go with him. And Jael, a woman, strikes the final, decisive blow in the battle, killing Sisera and sealing King Jabin’s fate.

God’s will, it would seem, can come to pass through the efforts of females no less than males. As Christians continue in the ridiculous debate about the ordination of women by the church they have led and carried for nearly two thousand years, we could do worse than remember the role of women in the story of Deborah and Jael.

Secondly, we might want to remember that Jael is a foreigner. She is not a Hebrew.

We don’t know why she killed Sisera. Was it for pragmatic reasons? Did she see how the battle went and want to make sure she was on the winning side? Or was she one of the “Righteous of the Nations of the Earth,” a gentile who risked her own life and that of her husband by helping the children of Israel?

We are not told the why of it, only the what. She is judged for what she did, not why she did it. And what she did was to reach out and help the People of God.

Again this week, we are shown that the true People of God are not so concerned with who is in and who is out as with who does the will of God. True People of God are not so concerned with the color of a person’s skin or the accent of their speech as with the content of their character and the righteousness of their deeds.

Dennis T. Olson, in his commentary on Judges, reminds us that, “As we reflect on various models or polities within our families, congregations, denominations, or other political entities, we may be assured that God is able to work through any variety of structures or systems.”¹

Thirdly, we are asked to ponder without evaluation the fact that Jael becomes a heroine in the story by violating one of the most honored and highly regarded traditions and tenets of ancient Middle Eastern life, the law of hospitality.

¹ Dennis T. Olson, *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. 2, p. 783.

She offers hospitality to an ally and then betrays and murders him after he has entrusted his life to her.

Is this truly a heroic act? How can it be? How must we now reevaluate our understanding of God's laws of hospitality? Does the fact that she is not a Hebrew mitigate the questionable nature of her actions?

These questions and others arise before us and demand that we contend with them even when answers to our questions are hard in coming. The text neither condemns nor praises her for her actions. What it does say is telling, however...

Fourthly, in the final paragraph, the epilogue of the story, we are told that "On that day God subdued Jabin, the Canaanite king, before the Israelites."

Not Deborah.

Not Jael.

Not Barak.

It was God who did the subduing. God may have used human instruments but it was God who did the heavy lifting, here. It may not have gone the way God had planned. God allows for human freedom and human decisions and choices, but ultimately, God's will was done.

King Jabin was undone – one way or the other – and he was undone, ultimately, by God.

God's will, the story tells us, will be done.

Sometimes the agent of the doing is an outsider, someone on the fringe of or not even part of the community of faith. And sometimes the agent of the doing is a prominent and faithful member of the community. Sometimes the agent is one, sometimes many. Sometimes female, sometimes male. Sometimes native, sometimes foreign.

God can and will use whatever is at hand to bring about God's victory the ultimate redemption of God's people.

AMEN

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Immediately following this story in the Bible comes the "Song of Deborah," a long, narrative poem which tells this same story. Why do you suppose the story is told twice?
2. How does the God of this story fit with our New Testament understanding of God? What do you suppose we are to do with a God who is described so differently in the two testaments?
3. Find a Bible with an Atlas or a Biblical Atlas and trace the story on the map. What did you learn?
4. The story teller leaves a lot of unanswered questions and loose threads: Why does Barak insist that Deborah come with him? Why does God take the glory of killing Sisera from Barak and give it to a foreign woman? Why did Jael's husband break with his tribe to camp near King Jabin's army?
5. And what about King Jabin? The book of Joshua says that he was killed by Joshua. The book of Judges says that he was killed after Joshua's death. Why the confusion? What do you make of it?