



“By the Hand of a Woman”

Judges 4:1-7

Rev. Dr. David C. Fisher

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Twenty-seventh Sunday after Pentecost

Few of us can imagine what it’s like to live in an occupied country. I only know what I’ve heard.

Shortly after the fall of Communism, Gloria and I visited the Czech Republic. The Czech people and the churches were emerging from more than half a century of occupation, first the Nazis, then the Russians. A wonderful Czech Christian leader was our host. It became clear quite quickly that Pavel still nursed deep hostility to everything German. Along the way he had to learn Russian during the Soviet era. He said he’d been forced to learn Russian in school and that he determined not to remember a word of it.

We noticed that people on the subway avoided eye contact. Even at home, far from prying eyes, people leaned in to talk softly when the subject turned to religion or politics. Our host and another leader in their church in Prague were harassed by the secret police and subjected to endless interrogations intended to let them know they were under scrutiny.

A pastor in Prague told us that while he didn’t want the bad old days to return he wondered if the country might need a strong and authoritative hand to lead people not used to freedom. At one point he said with voice choking, “We don’t know how to be free. Please help us.”

The Jewish people were living in occupied territories. At the time Israel was a loose confederation of tribes with no central government. They were easy prey for their stronger neighbors.

A powerful alliance of Canaanite kings occupied the land. Equipped with iron chariots, spears, swords, and armor, the Canaanites were a formidable force in those days. Israel’s wooden arrows and spears were little challenge to Canaan’s might.

For twenty years, the ancient story says, the Jewish people suffered under their cruel oppressors. Occupation by its very nature is cruel and oppressive. Occupation stirs up fear, anger, and loathing in the occupied people. Will we have food for winter? Will the Canaanites destroy our crops one more time? Will our sons and daughters be safe on the streets? Some have disappeared, and we wonder if they’re now slaves forced into sacred prostitution in Canaan. Who’s next? The rumble of chariot wheels and the sound of horses caused people to cower in fear behind locked doors, hoping....

Of course, the people were asking one another Where is God in all this?

Well, God was at work in those days but not in conventional, expected ways. Likely, some of the people expected a guerilla commando to form a rear guard action to harass the

Canaanites. Others, perhaps, longed for a strong man to rise up and stir up resistance to drive out the oppressors.

There were likely candidates for such action, according to the story. In those days people earned their names. One of the national leaders of the day was Barak. His name is a word that means “Lightning.” Lightning was a military man of some repute. You can imagine the headline, “General Lightning strikes a blow for freedom near Bethel.”

Another man in the story is Lippadoth, which means “Flash.” We don’t know how he earned that name but perhaps he was known for brilliant schemes and large plans. Perhaps Flash would blaze across the nation with the light of national salvation.

God was at work and national salvation was on the way but God had a different savior for the people. Her name was Deborah, and her name means “Honeybee.”

Deborah is one of the most remarkable women in human history. Joan of Arc cannot hold a candle to the Honeybee of the Book of Judges. Deborah’s impact on Jewish history is so significant and her fame so large, her story was handed down in two forms, one prose (Judges 4) and the other dramatic poetry (Judges 5). In fact, the Deborah poem is one of the earliest examples of Hebrew poetry.

Deborah was no ordinary woman – or person for that matter. The poetic version of her story calls her mother of Israel. Imagine that! A woman who earned the title, “Mother of her Nation.” In an extremely patriarchal world, one woman, a servant of God most high, stood up and stood out, and her story is still told 3,000 years later.

In those days before there were kings in Israel, the tribes of Israel were led by judges. The judges, recognized for their wisdom and leadership, dispensed justice to the people and, more often than not, were national saviors who led resistance movements against various occupying forces.

Deborah was appointed by God to be judge of Israel. Apparently her gifts matched her calling and the people accepted Deborah as their judge. She was so good at her work, a place was named after her, Tomar Deborah, which means “the palm tree of Deborah.” It was the place where she dispensed justice near Mount Tabor. People from all over the occupied territories made their way to Deborah to receive justice and wisdom.

Deborah was more than a judge. God called her to be a prophet. She dared speak for God to the people. Deborah is an early example of what became the great office of prophet in Israel and perhaps the highest office in the early church. God entrusted Deborah with the office of the Word – and the people trusted her word as God’s word.

God suggested to Deborah that twenty years of occupation was enough. The time for resistance and deliverance had come. She summoned General Lightning and ordered him to form an alliance of five or six tribes of Israel, raise an army of ten thousand, and prepare an ambush in the foothills of Mount Tabor.

“I will get the Canaanite forces and their general, Sisera, to come to the valley beside Mount Tabor,” Deborah told the General. “You will sweep down out of the hills and strike before their chariots can be deployed. I will give the enemy into your hands. You will be a hero in Israel.”

General Barak, known as Lightning, was still afflicted with an occupation mentality. Fear of a larger enemy turned him passive. The thought of nine hundred iron chariots armed with spears and swords wielded by armed men made his heart grow faint - to say nothing of a very real fear of death! Occupation rendered a good man passive. Perhaps if we leave well enough alone, the cruel Canaanites will go away.

The general replied, "I'll go to battle but only if you go with me Deborah." Maybe he thought God's judge and spokeswoman would be a sort of lucky charm. Maybe with her on hand, defeat was not so certain. Or, if defeat came, perhaps he'd escape death.

"I'll go with you Barak," Deborah replied, then added with words dripping with irony, "but know this, there will be no glory for you. All the world will know national deliverance came *by the hand of a woman.*"

The details of the battle in the story are fuzzy, but it appears that Deborah did lure Sisera into an exposed position in the valley. She and Barak swept down out of the hills and attacked. About that time a downpour turned the ground into a morass of mud. The fearsome iron chariots mired in the mud and were useless. The Canaanite army fled without a fight. The Jewish people were free again.

Liberation came "by the hand of a woman." That woman, Deborah, became a legend among her people and a story still celebrated in synagogue and church.

So what are we to make of this ancient, somewhat strange, story? How is the story of Deborah good news for us? What do you suppose this story wants to say here and now? And, what do you think the Deborah story wants to do among us this day?

For one thing, it's obvious this story was and is rather subversive. Long before any modern women's movement, this story was doing its subversive work to any who would listen – though few apparently did listen. God places no limitations, gender or otherwise, on those who serve God's cause in the world and among God's people. Neither should we. Nor should we rest easy on the victories of the last decades. There is more work to be done. Ask any woman in this room. It's a matter of simple justice.

But there's more to the story of Deborah. I suspect what this story wants both to say and to do is point to a larger theme in the biblical narrative. Deborah was an unlikely hero. I don't imagine anyone expected his or her national savior to be a woman. It seems God's standards and choices are rather different from ours.

Lightning and Flash – who, by the way was Deborah's husband – had adequate resumes for the job of deliverer. But Deborah? What qualifications did she bring except her own gifts and calling – and that was quite enough. At least God seemed to think so. And apparently the people caught on.

Later in the story of Judges, Samson comes on the scene like lightning and thunder. All bulging muscles, large feats and significant conquests, Samson ended up one of the biggest flops in the Bible.

Gideon, on the other hand, a quiet, reserved shepherd, without a single weapon, routed an entire army by clever ruse – and delivered the people from oppression. Who would have thought?

The next big celebration in the Christian calendar is Advent and Christmas. I know you've heard me say it before but it bears repeating. The Christmas story is a story of dramatic contrasts. The Emperor of Rome sits on a gilded throne in the Imperial city. A baby is born in a stable in Bethlehem and laid in a manger. A young woman, a peasant girl named Mary, sings to her newborn son while nearby, King Herod blusters with power. Where does God go to work? In Bethlehem, in that young woman and supremely in the baby in the manger.

God, it seems, seldom visits the corridors of power when recruiting volunteers for large work. It's an uncomfortable fact that every major social change in American history is the result of a people's movement begun by a few brave and insignificant souls that finally forces the powers-that-be to act.

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A tired seamstress refused to move to the back of the bus and a movement was born – a movement that changed the world. In the early days of the civil rights movement, a young minister in Montgomery, Alabama – Martin Luther King, Jr. – emerged as a spokesman and leader. The clergy of Montgomery thought he was too young and too educated to lead a people’s movement. The black clergy of America agreed. The white establishment resisted. And you know the rest of the story.

Closer to home, a survey of our lives, mine at least, tells a story of our formation by very ordinary people. Teachers, friends, roommates, all form us in ways we discover after the fact.

Since my birth, presidents have come and gone, congresses have ebbed and waned, world leaders have entered and exited history. None had the effect on me that my mother had. Across the street from our house lived another Deborah. Ruth Smith was Mom’s best friend and a fellow congregant at our church. My brothers and I still talk about the effect Ruth had on us as boys. An elegant and hospitable southern woman, she loved us, accepted us, and taught us table manners and a bit of style.

I cannot help but remember a retired minister’s wife who attended the first congregation I served. Her husband was “the meekest man on the face of the earth.” He spent his life serving a little congregation in the mountains while working full time for the highway department. His wife Grace was a remarkable musician. She could make a piano do things I’ve never heard any other person do. No one knew about her back in the hills. But we knew. Grace was a wise and modest woman who earned our trust. We listened when Grace talked.

I recall several times she’d wag her finger in my face and say, “David, you look tired. Take some time off and take care of your family.” Young and ambitious, I didn’t know my limitations, and Grace was right. She changed my life.

Who are the Deborahs in your life?

Better yet, to whom are you a Deborah? What has God called you to do? Who has God brought into your life? The answer might just change the world; it will certainly change lives.

Amen.

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