

Deborah's Story – Judges 4 and 5

Recently we've had the privilege of baptizing quite a few people: babies, and others. And have you noticed...there's a little baby explosion around here lately – baby Dawson Craig Bagnall the most recent, just born last week, with Alexandria, Theo, Emma, and Meredith in the last couple of months.....and it's been so much fun to start the toddlers' services.....

I wonder about all those kids, I wonder what life will hold for them, and what the church will look like when they are old enough to make their own choices about it - I wonder what kind of people they'll be - what directions life will have taken them in - and what their baptism will mean to them?

We believe that one of the greatest gifts there can be for a child is this: the gift of being in Christ Jesus, and part of the family of faith - a community of seekers who, even as we seek, know that we have been found. It is here they will discover that they are worthwhile and loved unconditionally, just because of who they are. It is here they will discover that it is okay to ask questions and make mistakes because God's people are always doing that - it's called learning.

It's here they'll find people to share their experiences of God and faithful living and it's here that they'll learn that they are part of a huge family - not just the congregation - but Christians all over the world! And not only just now, but they have ancestors in the faith right back to the beginning - and they'll meet them all in the Bible.

One of their ancestors in the faith is Deborah, whose story we are hearing today. It's only in the last few years that her story has been included in the lectionary – the given readings...partly I think, because at one level it's a pretty gory tale – not every day you hear stories about tent pegs being driven through someone's head and end that reading with “this is the word of the Lord; thanks be to God” – sheesh! Still, though, it's part of our history; part of the tradition, and part of the heritage that, for better and for worse, we have received and pass on to our children. It's a fascinating glimpse into our family album as the people of God. Let's visit that story one more time right now:

This is the story of Deborah. She was a judge. She was a prophet. Her story takes place in the time of Judges – this in itself is a bit of history that is really good to know. The time of the judges. After Joshua had led the people across the Jordan and into the Promised Land. Joshua has now died, and no great leader has come to take his place. The people are struggling to build a new way of life – a new society for themselves and their children. The wilderness wandering - old ways of living - are gone. What would their new world look like? Only time would tell. How would they settle this new land? And what would leadership look like in this new world???

I had a conversation with someone last week about these narratives: the books of Joshua and Judges tell the story of how, once the people finally got to the promised land, they ...well...”settled” it is one way of saying it.... “conquered” “occupied” and “took over” would be others....it's not a comfortable story, and to read it without drawing parallels from our own history and without cringing with discomfort is not to read it at all. So many questions

arise...which is exactly why we need to read it and read it again. These stories function at multiple levels and one of those is to hold up a mirror to us and say – is this you? Is this how God calls you to be? Is this who you want to be?

The books of Joshua and Judges tell the story very differently from each other. It would be fun to do a comparison, but not today. (in short: the book of Joshua presents the occupation of the land as a miraculous and swift thing...remember the story of the battle of Jericho.....the walls came a'tumblin' down....whereas Judges shows a slow process of wars with other occupants of the land, also, though, deals made with local war lords and kings, negotiations and a slow assimilation process....)

The point is, this is at a transition time in history - the old ways were fading and no one knew for sure what the new world was going to bring. That's a familiar feeling isn't it? This is exactly the kind of time we're in right now. The people had no great leaders - Moses and Joshua were dead - they didn't have a king - this is the time when they were ruled by judges. These were people who, because of their gifts and personalities, ruled for short periods of time as the need arose.

Deborah was one of these.
She was a judge
She was a military leader
She was a prophet

Her story goes like this:

Israel was under the domination of the Canaanites, whose general Sisera had a superior army. Deborah called her general, Barak, to throw off the opposing army. She believed, and commanded Barak, that this was God's will.

Barak said: verse 8 *“If you will go with me, I will go; but if you will not go with me I will not go.”*

Why do you think he said that? - he was afraid? - she was so charismatic a leader that the troops though outnumbered and out classed in weapons, would fight their best if she were there? - Or was he challenging her authority - trying her out to see if she'd cringe from battle? We don't know but it's a fascinating line: verse 8 and then verse 9

“If you will go with me, I will go, but if you will not go with me I will not go.” And she said “I will surely go with you; nevertheless, 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”.

Even though they were outnumbered, they won the battle - the opposing troops panicked and even though Sisera their general escaped on foot, he was killed later by another woman, named Jael. You can read that part for yourself in the last part of Chapter 4. Chapter 5 is a song celebrating the victory - it is, we're told, some of the most ancient writing in the Bible. It tells the story in a more poetic style, complete with poetic license. It takes all of Chapter 5 - read it when you get home today.

That's all we know of Deborah - the judge, the prophet, the military commander. That's her story.

Why read such a passage? First, I guess because it's in the lectionary. But what could possibly be God's word from this for today? I need to say first that personally I am quite uncomfortable with the theology that say God helps some people slaughter others and call that victory. I'm saying that up front. We've learned a lot about God's ways since then I hope. It's also not fair, though, for me to impose my 20th century mind and standards onto a culture 1200 before Christ. With that said, I believe there are two ways in which this speaks to us right now.

The first is this:

The time of Deborah was a time of great change in society and in the life of God's people. Old ways of living and worshipping were fading. New patterns and paradigms for living were just starting to emerge. She lived when everything was changing - very like today. God led the people then by calling leaders for specific situations who would rise up, lead the people, and then someone else would be called for the next crisis.

God provided leaders from among the people for each occasion that required one. That's exactly how God works today. We're learning, aren't we, to trust that leaders will be provided when we need them. Not parachuted in from someplace else but here - among us - we have the gifts and the leaders we need. Sometimes it will be you - sometimes you - depending on our need but God can and does give us the leadership we need. We need to have sharp eyes to see when that is happening.

We need to be ready to respond and help that leader lead, and we need to have hearts so attuned to God that we will be ready to answer when the call to leadership is directed at us. Is it our time to lead? When will this community need what we best can offer? Is it now? These are questions we need to keep asking ourselves and each other.

Who are the Deborahs among us? Who are the Deborahs in the world today? Can we clear the way in our own hearts and in our own communities to make room for God's call to a Deborah right here and now?

That brings us to point two:

One of the things we have to clear away from our hearts and our churches and our world so that new Deborahs can hear and respond to God's word. One of the things we have to get rid of is the sin of sexism. By that I mean partly the attitude that only men can do certain things and only women can do others. Some people believe that the Bible teaches that. They obviously don't know the story of Deborah (or Lydia or Jael or Priscilla or Anna or Naomi or Vashti or well you get my point.) I know that you may be thinking we've come a very long way since then, and most certainly we have. Thanks be to God for that. Have we eradicated sexism from our church and from our world?

Not by a long shot. Not by a LONG shot. I'd love a conversation with you some day about this – but truly all you have to do is watch the news, read about life in Afghanistan, check out the women's shelter right here in town...there's lots of work to do.

This is a strong woman whose story breaks every stereotype we have about who should do what. And I pray that our children will grow up in a world where they can become the person God is calling them to be and do what God is calling them to do - not with a limited range of options because they are a boy or girl - but free to be themselves fully. To deny that to them is sinful. It is not God's will or intention.

Who will our daughters grow up to be? A Deborah for us?...someone who will call us to cast off oppression some day, working bravely not over us but *with* us as Deborah did for her people? Maybe that's exactly who she'll be for the church or society.

And our sons – the baby boys among us - what will God call you to be and do? Perhaps some day you, like Deborah, will sing a song of how God calls and leads people to do amazing things they never thought they could do.

I pray that both of you grow to be the best you can be. To help you while you grow, we will be here to love you and help you learn - and we will keep learning too - asking God to make us the kind of place where you can listen for God's voice in your life as we do in ours, in fullness of the freedom God wills for you and all people. Amen.