

## Sermon August 25<sup>th</sup>, 2019

### Judges 5:1-15 – Deborah

Deborah is what I consider to be the original “bad-ass” woman of the Bible – especially in the Old Testament. She is a judge – which means she is a like the mayor, governor and commander-in-chief for the land. This is a position that is usually reserved for men, but Deborah defies all expectations and takes a man’s position and is respected. Even the military commander, Barak, looks to her for guidance and advice. Deborah’s position makes her like the “mother of Israel” at the time. Deborah defied all gender expectations and gender norms in Ancient Israel!

Deborah’s guidance of at least 10,000 warriors cause her to be remembered as a hero who had public success, rather than for being a wife and mother. Her advice was so important to Barak, that he asks her to accompany him into battle. Just goes to show you how well-respected she was and how her advice was heeded! A woman going into battle? It was not too long ago that the US military finally allowed women into front line combat situations – some thousands of years after Deborah.

Deborah is also a hero to me. She defied all gender norms and expectations in a patriarchal society and is known for being a warrior hero, rather than being a woman. She is also only one of three women named in Judges – she is called a judicial and military leader. She is also called a prophet; a role rarely given to women. In fact, much attention is paid to her roles and not to her gender. The only reason we know her gender is because she is identified as not only Deborah, but as someone’s wife.

The words from Judges that we heard are not just mere poetry, they are the words to a victory hymn. Most scholars date this hymn to sometime around the 12<sup>th</sup> century BCE, making it one of the oldest parts of the Bible! How awesome is it that one of the oldest parts of the Bible is a narrative victory hymn about a woman! The best part of this victory hymn is that it “shows the way in which this remarkable woman acted with bravery and energetic military leadership to accomplish a victory attributed to Yahweh.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce Birch et al, *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament* (Abingdon Press: Nashville, 2005), 209.

Coming to this text as a woman brings a whole new perspective to it. Traditional gender roles have been reversed and a woman has power in a patriarchal society. We know Deborah as a warrior judge and prophet, not as a woman performing traditional gender role acts. There is a maternal comfort in Deborah – she is the “mother of Israel” which does reduce her back down to her gender, but we can view her as the “Matriarch of Israel”. The term matriarch evokes power and wisdom – attributes of Deborah. But that is not just what she is known for historically.

Deborah should be considered the first “womanist”. She is powerful, mature, willful, discerning, courageous, serious, responsible, and loving. All of those words constitute the definition of “womanist”. She could even be called the first “feminist” in the Bible. We don’t have too much background on Deborah, but we know she is married. We don’t know how she became a Judge, but we know she was a Judge during what is known historically is “The Period of the Judges” which can be dated to around the 12<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Throughout the Old Testament, we encounter various women who have been oppressed, treated as property, victims of the patriarchal society. But when we arrive at

the story of Deborah, we are given some hope. She is not a woman oppressed or someone's property; she is a Judge whose military advice is sought after and she is respected for her position. She is a woman in power.

Deborah sets us up to learn more about powerful and gender defying women in the rest of the Bible. All throughout the New Testament, we encounter women who smash expectations. We have Mother Mary, Mary Magdalene, Phoebe, Junia to name a few. These women can look back at Deborah with respect because in a way, she paved the way for these women to defy gender norms.

Not only is Deborah a powerful woman, she is also a woman of faith. In Judges chapter 4, we learn that she is a prophet. When she speaks with Barak and gives him advice, she invokes the name of the Lord, Yahweh. She knows the Lord is guiding her and guiding the rest of the army against the Canaanites. Her advice comes from her faith in the Lord – she most likely prayed before she spoke.

So, what can a woman of faith such as Deborah teach us about leadership and faith in modern times? She is the most powerful example of leadership in the Bible. Women are often shown as being secondary in the Kingdom, but Deborah stands out as being a leader first, and a woman second. She is a Biblical figure that young women can look up to. She is a leader that should be emulated. She teaches us how we can “smash the patriarchy” and still be a person of faith.

There are denominations in Christianity that choose to believe that women are secondary. They believe women cannot have authority over men, women cannot be ordained for any leadership position in the church. Thankfully, I am part of a denomination (PCUSA) that allows women to be ordained. This church is part of an organization that believes the same.

I grew up in a world where I encountered so many women in leadership roles. My mother owned her own company. The federal agency that my dad worked for was led by a woman. I grew up with a fantastic pastor who demonstrated at every turn her faith and her leadership. She brought the church out of darkness and into the light of growth and change. She inspired

me to follow my calling into ministry and she encourages my calling. I saw many women in leadership through Girl Scouts. My schools had female principals and almost all of the departments in the school were headed by women. I work at a church where an incredible woman is leading worship. Ravensworth has its own Deborah – her name is Leah. After reading more deeply about Deborah, I saw so many of the same qualities in Rev. Leah. Blessed is the church who has a woman at the head for that church will be a force to be reckoned with.

Deborah can teach us a lot about leadership and faith. She is an icon for everyone, not just women. She is a feminist in a society where women are meant to be seen and not heard. She is a leader and prophet. She is first female we encounter in the Bible who is known for her abilities and faith and not just her gender. Deborah has a supportive spouse; we do not encounter anything in the text that tells us otherwise. God uses Deborah and her gifts in a surprising way – leading the charge of the military and presiding in a traditionally male role.

Deborah's leadership example provides encouragement to everyone who is in a leadership role in the church or who is seeking a leadership role in the church. She shows us that gender is irrelevant to God. What matters to God is our gifts and our talents and how they can be used to the glory of God. Deborah is an excellent example of how faith and leadership are not gender specific, but rather specific to the person and their gifts and talents.

I pray that you see Deborah with new eyes today and see that she is an example of God using people and their gifts. Gender is irrelevant to God and Deborah is the prime example of how important being a leader is in the church and out in the world. Deborah shows us that faith in God can be life-changing and transformative.

**Let us pray:**

Merciful God, you see past our exteriors and look into our hearts. You use us in ways that our gifts and talents allow us to be used. May we be more like Deborah in our faith – willing, courageous and discerning. We ask this in Your most holy name. Amen.