

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
High School Senior Sunday
June 28, 2020
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Judges 4:4-10, 14-22; Matthew 10:1-4

Last week we learned about the call. This week I want to show us we are not called to something alone. We are working on a team and that team makes us better.

There are many places in the Bible where God gives someone a team to work with on the mission. Moses is given Aaron. Our new testament reading today shows the disciples being bound together as a team. These are all fine examples, but I want to focus on a time when women were on the team too.

Our women's Bible study has been looking at women in the old testament and it did not take us long to notice two trends about women in scripture. First, they are usually only talked about in relation to their husbands or their sons. Women of the Bible are not particularly useful or worth noticing until they are pregnant or with an important man. We cannot blame scripture too much for this. It was written in a particular time when that was the worth of a woman.

But even though women did not make headlines until they were married or pregnant, scripture does have some gems of imagination where the worth of a woman is highlighted apart from these two life milestones. Mary and Martha, Priscilla, and Miriam.

However even in these cases the second trend of biblical women is still evident, women do not get a lot of page space. No matter if you are the mother of Jesus our savior, or a slave, women simply do not get a ton of room for their experiences to be told. This is probably because male writers simply did not relate to the experiences of women.

Thankfully the Spirit is able to work against this bias and was able to inspire some writers to keep female characters and their stories in scripture. We have to do a little more work to find them and keep them in the conversation in our yearly meditations.

With that goal, I want to introduce you, some of you possible for the first time, to Deborah and Jael. The women on God's team who helped fulfill the covenant of the promised land. Last week we heard God promise Moses the land of the Canaanites from a burning bush. In the verses today from Judges, we hear about the final battle against Canaanite rule. After this battle Israel finally lives into her full promise unchallenged.

God has been faithful, but to whom? The original promise is made to Moses but he is long gone. Leadership has changed a lot. The short answer is God is faithful to the team: to the people of God.

One thing that defines a people is how they are governed. With God's people we start with Moses calling the shots. He has advisors, but mostly God is talking to Moses about what the rules should be and Moses is implementing them and seeing they are kept.

After Moses' death, the priests conserve the old laws and traditions. After some time though it is clear the old laws aren't going to cut it. The world is changing. Israel's leaders realize they need to have some wiggle room, and someone to decide on new rules for new problems they are having. For this, a council of elders form. They normally sit at the gate and people can bring problems to them to discern. When a consistent problem arises, a census forms from decisions and the elders advocate for a new law.

You can imagine this gets pretty complicated quickly with priests arguing to stay the same and elders arguing for reform. This gets so complicated that the people start praying for God to send them a king to sort out the messiest parts of governing. God does not want this for Israel. God wants them to work as a team, to be different than the other nations that have kings. God wants Israel to keep listening to one another and figuring it out together, not giving their power to one person or even a committee. God sends prophets with this message: no king is coming. The prophets do, however, take on a role of God's mouthpiece, often weighing in on elder versus priest arguments. But the people still want a king. God eventually compromises and says they can have Judges.

That is the world in which we meet Deborah. She is described as both a prophet and a judge, which means people recognize her special connection to God and her authority to make final judgements on community issues. Both roles are remarkable for a woman to have. What we know about Deborah is based on two chapters, and the second chapter is a poetic retelling of the first, so really very little is said about Deborah. We do have some other Jewish writers of the time who reference her and her legacy, and the words in scripture are dripping with meaning.

Her name, Deborah, is the Hebrew word for bee. If we think about how we stereotype strong authoritative women today, the buzzing bee is par for the course of history. But it does give us an idea of her personality. She was a prophet linked to God and given a voice from God that she must have been persistent in using, hence her buzzing.

The other name associated with her is "wife of Lappidoth." A couple things throw this name into question. Lappidoth is a Hebrew word with a female root, which means it's a feminine name. While not 100% unheard of, naming a boy this name would have been very unlikely. Think of naming a boy today Emily or Sophia. It might happen but most parents would not do this. So, we wonder why her husband has such a feminine name. What some biblical scholars think is that Deborah was actually unmarried but to make her more palatable for scripture the writer of Judges named her "wife of Lappidoth," another typical attack on female authority.

But I give the author grace because buried in the name is his real meaning. When we look at what Lappidoth means we find out more about Deborah and her role on God's team. The original transcripts point to a meaning like "the torch" or "fiery woman." This hidden double meaning under the name becomes a little more convincing to me when you see that Barak, the general who works with Deborah to win this important battle, has a name that means lightning. So, he is the lightning and she is the torch.

So, we have the fiery, buzzing bee of a woman who had earned her place in the community as a prophet and a judge. The general of the army respects her connection to God and her mind of discernment so much that when she calls him and says it is time to fight, he listens. Here is where God's team starts to form.

Barak cannot end this on his own. He knows military strategy. but he understands there is a spiritual aspect of this with which he is not skilled. Deborah cannot win this on her own. She has the spiritual connection, but no army to fight for her. They need to work together as a team. They come to this partnership fairly easily because their community has taught them how to work as a team. They are both used to living in a community that understands if my neighbor has a problem, soon I will have a problem.

If people argue they know they go to the elders and ask for an outside opinion and judgment. This is not a community of me against the world. They work together constantly. It is their strength, which is why God does not want to put a king in their midst. Kings put a huge wrench in community problem solving. People with kings no longer work together, they go straight to the king for a final answer. They do not debate or listen, they call the king and say "Fix this!"

Deborah and Barak's experience in a community that works as a team makes the most important part of this exchange easy for them, but for us for looking at it now from our context it is quite remarkable to read about. When Deborah says it is time, Barak says he wants her to go with him. Some have said this is because he is a coward, but I don't think he made

it to the head of the army if he was a coward. I think Barak knows he needs the whole team to win. Deborah agrees to go, but reminds Barak that if she goes there is a chance the win will be given to a woman.

There is a lot of debate about if Deborah means herself or if she knew about Jael. If you remember what I believe about prophets, that they don't predict the future they just point out the obvious in the present, I think she is simply saying "If I go, I'm in this fight and I'm going to be looking for that win just as much as you. It could be me who makes the winning blow against Sisera. You'd better be ready to share the glory with a woman if you ask a woman to fight with you."

If we pause the scene at that point we might expect Barak to consider and weigh the outcomes, but he doesn't. He agrees. That's how the team works. We fight together and whoever gets the win, gets the glory. He is totally okay with it.

They go into battle, and they get the upper hand quickly. Sisera is soon running for safety, and meets our other female savior, Jael. Now Jael is from a very small traveling tent-based tribe called the Bedouins. They would often move their whole camp to a new place to live for a while. When they arrived, the women would set up the tents and the men would go off to hunt and make alliances with the locals. Because of this, they needed to be friends with every nation. They were too small to fight battles and they depended on the relationships with others to give them room to set up their tents when they needed. Some might see them as two-faced, as playing both sides, but that was necessary for survival. They were known for their hospitality; they were everyone's friend. If you were lost in the wilderness and came across the Bedouin people you knew you were saved. It is also good to note and a bit of foreshadowing that in the Bedouin tribe when they set down camp, the women set up the tents while the men hunted for food.

Back to our scene: Deborah uses her gifts to successfully predict the time to fight. Barak uses his leadership talent to faithfully lead the army to that fight. The enemy, Sisera, is on the run. As he runs, he finds Jael. He is saved. She's Bedouin and they have a good relationship with his kingdom. She welcomes him in, gives him some warm milk and a soft comfortable place to rest - the perfect picture of Bedouin hospitality. He is so comfortable, he falls asleep. Jael knows Sisera and she knows the conflict with the Israelites. She quickly figures out Sisera must have just lost a battle and if she is going to be seen as a friend, as part of the Israel team, she is going to have to do something big to prove her loyalty. She uses her gift of tent staking to make a grand gesture of friendship to the army that is following Sisera. She drives a stake through his head and kills the last oppressor standing in the way of Israel's promised land.

When Deborah and Barak show up, Jael is recognized as a team member. They are happy to share the glory and the win and give her a place in the songs the community sings later. They understand that in teamwork everyone has a part to play and a moment to shine. Deborah's part was to stay connected to God and know when it was time to initiate the battle. Barak's part was to organize the army and direct them through the battle. Jael's part was to be non-threatening so Sisera would feel safe to let his guard down. They played as a team and the victory was never in question.

We are all missing sports, so let's put a football lens on this issue. On a good football team when the offense is on the field the defense is hyping them up and cheering them on, and vice versa when the defense is on the field. Sure they may each want to play more time, but they understand that if the other part of the team doesn't do well when it is their time to be in the spotlight, it will make the job of the next line on the field much harder. Teams work to support whoever's turn it is, knowing that it will make their own work easier and cause them to have a better chance of success. When it comes to teamwork as a community, we constantly compete against each other for the spotlight.

Casting Crowns has a song that calls us out for this ridiculous behavior. The song is called "City on a Hill" and it tells the story of the kind of world God has asked to make as a team. At the beginning of the song highlights the conflict. "The poets thought the dancers were shallow, And the soldiers thought the poets were weak, And the elders saw the young ones as foolish, And the rich man never heard the poor man speak." Each group sees the other group as its own entity. They do not see themselves as being on the same team. The poets want the dancers to be more like them, to think deeply. The

elders want the young ones to grow up. Each group assumes their views are the most important all the time, and ignore the experiences of other groups.

As the song continues, this lack of teamwork causes everyone to leave the city. They leave frustrated with one another and thinking they are better off on their own. But while they are apart, they struggle to do the core work their group was doing before, and they realize the truth. “It was the rhythm of the dancers that gave the poets life. It was the spirit of the poets that gave the soldiers strength to fight. It was fire of the young ones, it was the wisdom of the old, it was the story of the poor man that needed to be told.”

They were on the same team. They needed one another to be able to do the thing they were good at. If the dancers became poets no one would know the rhythms that made the poetry work. The young ones did not need to wise up, they needed to stay fiery and a little naïve. The debates and sharing of different ideas and perspectives frustrated them, but it is what made them strong.

We live in a world where it is always us against them. That is not what God wants. God put us on a team of very different people with a wide range of experiences, talents, and ideas. There will be moments we are on the field, where our talents and ideas win the day. And there will be moments where our job is to support and cheer on others. Together we are called to change this world, thankfully we are not alone on this mission. When we can step out of our teammates' way and let them shine, we can be sure our moment will come and the songs they sing about us will be beautiful. And that city on the hill will finally be built.