

## Strong Women

Judges 4

October 9, 2022 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, UCC

Rev. Dr. Cathryn Turrentine

In the last few weeks, I have shared some pretty grim stories with you. Today is different. I have a story of dramatic victory, though it has a grim scene toward the end. This story stars strong women. It is a war story, and a melodrama, like the old movies, where the audience cheered the hero and booed the villain whenever they appeared on the screen. We will have similar sound effects this morning.

This story takes place after the People of Israel arrive in the Promised Land, and before God raises up kings to rule over them. During this period, the people are ruled locally, in their historical tribes, by judges, who settle local disputes and are often military leaders as well.

There are four characters in this story.

- Deborah [*tambourine*] is a prophet and a judge. Deborah is the heroine of the story.
- Barak [*applause*] is a military commander for the People of Israel. Barak is a good guy.
- Sisera [*boo! hiss!*] is the evil commander of the Canaanite army. He is the villain of the piece.
- Jael is a woman who is neither Israelite nor Canaanite, but her people are allies of the Canaanites. We don't know whose side she is actually on until nearly the end of the story.

Deborah [*tambourine*] and Barak [*applause*], the good guys. Sisera [*boo! hiss!*], the villain. Jael is a mystery to us.

Listen now for the word of God from the fourth chapter of Judges, using a modern language version, The Message:

The People of Israel kept right on doing evil in God's sight. So, GOD sold them off to the king of Canaan. Sisera [*boo! hiss!*] was the commander of Canaan's army. The People of Israel cried out to GOD because Sisera had cruelly oppressed them with his nine hundred iron chariots for twenty years.

Now, Deborah [*tambourine*] was a prophet. She was judge over Israel at that time. She held court under Deborah's Palm Tree in the hills of the tribe of Ephraim. The People of Israel went to her in matters of justice.

Deborah [*tambourine*] sent for Barak [*applause*], the commander from the tribe of Naphtali. She said to him, "The God of Israel commands you: Go to Mount Tabor and prepare for battle. Take ten companies of soldiers from the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun. [God says] I'll take care of getting Sisera and his army to the Kishon River with all his chariots and troops. And I'll make sure you win the battle."

Barak said to Deborah, "If you go with me, I'll go. But if you don't go with me, I won't go." She said, "Of course I'll go with you. But understand that with an attitude like that, there'll be no glory in it for you. GOD will use a woman's hand to take care of Sisera [*boo! hiss!*]."

So, Barak called the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali together. Ten companies of men followed him to Mount Tabor, and Deborah was with him.

Now, someone told Sisera [*boo! hiss!*], "Barak, the commander of the Israelites, has gone up to Mount Tabor." Sisera immediately called up all his chariots to the Kishon River—nine hundred iron chariots!—along with all his troops who were with him.

Deborah said to Barak, "Charge! This very day GOD has given you victory over Sisera!" Barak charged down the slopes of Mount Tabor, his ten companies following him. [*whistles! applause!*]

GOD routed Sisera—all those chariots, all those troops!—before Barak and his soldiers.

Sisera jumped out of his chariot and ran away. [*boo! hiss!*] He headed for the tent of Jael, a Kenite. Kenites were allies of the Canaanites, so this seemed like a safe place for him to hide.

Jael stepped out of the tent to meet Sisera and said, "Come in, sir. Stay here with me. Don't be afraid." So, he went with her into her tent, and she covered him with a blanket. He said, "Stand at the tent flap. If anyone comes by and asks you, 'Is there anyone here?' tell him, 'No, not a soul.'"

[Would Jael do it? Would she help Sisera hide? Or would she help the Israelite army?]

Sisera fell fast asleep from exhaustion, wrapped in the blanket. And Jael took a tent peg and hammer. She tiptoed toward him, and drove the tent peg through his skull, killing him instantly [*wild applause!*].

I guess that tent wasn't such a safe hiding place for the cowardly Sisera after all!

On that day God subdued the king of Canaan before the People of Israel, and it was a woman's hand that took care of Sisera, as Deborah prophesied.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God

~~~

There are so few stories where the People of Israel win the battle over their oppressors. This is one of those, and it is the only one I can think of where women were responsible for the victory and got credit for it.

~~~

What can we learn from this story for our own lives? I don't imagine that God takes a side in armed battles very often, though people on both sides pray to God for victory. But the Bible is full of stories that show us God's commitment to help the oppressed, and sometimes that struggle is complicated and dangerous, not so different from a battle.

In the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, for example, Christians who were both White and Black went to the South to work for the liberation of Black people from an oppressive system of Jim Crow laws and lynchings and the Ku Klux Klan. That struggle was not safe, and some of those who stood up for liberation lost their lives. Being on God's side is not always safe for us, and we shouldn't imagine otherwise.

God's purposes get worked out in God's own time, which is not our time. But sometimes we get to be present for the great moment, and sometimes we are called to participate in it. And we are all, women and men, called to do this work, to stand for those who are weak, to speak up for those who are silenced, to help those who need our help.

May God grant us the vision of Deborah and the courage of Jael, to meet the moment when God's time comes.

Amen