

Faith Mennonite Church
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Stories of God's People
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Deborah: A Leader in Troubled Times
Judges 4 and 5

Old Testament stories are as fascinating as they are puzzling and sometimes embarrassing. Some of the best-known characters—like Deborah and Samson in the book of Judges—are lodged in complex narratives that would probably get an R rating if they were handled by Hollywood. That's what makes the Bible so amazing: that our Holy Book, containing "stories of *God's* people," would be *so* mucky, so often violent, so honest about all the times that the people of God turned away from their deity.

As people of peace, we choose carefully the stories we relate to our children, or the emphases we will give them. But we mustn't too quickly turn away from that which troubles us because the message(s) of ancient stories are not always immediately visible to us. Many things get lost in translation. Single episodes removed from the larger story can be distorted. It is often very hard for us to let the story speak out of its own context, without imposing our modern meaning on what we read, or to evaluate the past by a modern standard. Our task is to seek to understand and to be challenged. What can these ancient stories tell us?

Now we did our pre-editing this morning, in choosing how much of Judges 4 and the story of Deborah we would read. The story of Deborah is actually related in two forms: chapter four gives a prose version and chapter five gives a poetic version. Each holds some unique information that informs the other. The poem in chapter five is considered to be perhaps some of, if not *the*, oldest writing in the Bible.

The book of Judges has an over-arching concern about leadership. Joshua, the book that precedes it is all about conquest, arriving and settling in the land of Canaan. Both of these books, Joshua and Judges are filled with violent scenes: clashes between the settled peoples of the land and the new-comers, the Hebrew sojourners in search of their Promised Land. The historians who penned and edited these books in a later period were concerned about Israel's identity, her loyalty to Yahweh, whom they believed to be One God, who had chosen a slave people in Egypt and had liberated and led them to Canaan.

The hope was that Israel would remain true to her God and not be tempted by the gods of her new neighbors. Intermarriage with the settled inhabitants of the new land was forbidden, yet time and again that prohibition was violated and intermarriage usually meant interreligious practice as well. And when the people of Israel turned to other gods, trouble was usually not too far behind.

The leadership pattern that develops in the book of Judges, after Joshua, the successor to Moses, dies, is that of judges. These judges usually emerged when there was conflict and some

kind of military skirmish; indeed, the judge was usually recognized because of his military leadership. As the book of Judges unfolds the integrity of the judges spirals downward. By the time we reach Samson, at the end of the book of Judges, we find a pure renegade who is simply an over-charged, womanizing marauder, without any concern for the larger body politic or the religious life of his community. And this sets the stage for the next leadership chapter in Israel's history, the emergence of a monarchy. Israel, in the time of the judges, was somewhat like modern day Somalia, with no central government, and rival tribes fighting one another.

Deborah, whose story appears in the early part of the book, is an exception in this pattern, for she emerges as a prophet and judge *before* she is engaged in any military activity. Her character, however, actually functions in this book as a judgment against the leadership structure. Barak, the military leader whom she calls to arms, would be the expected judge in this case. The subtext seems to be an indictment that Barak is not the leader he should be. He takes orders from a woman and won't actually go into battle unless she goes along, which she agrees to do. But she promises him, that he will not take the grand prize: the enemy leader will fall to a woman.

From our reading this morning, we may have surmised that that woman would be Deborah herself. But there's more to this story! There's another woman and her name is Jael. Jael's story doesn't get told in Sunday School or Bible School because it's not a particularly pretty story. But the story we may be tempted to sweep under the rug is actually praised in this most ancient of writings. In the poem of chapter 5 Deborah is lauded as a "mother of Israel" and Jael is called "most blessed of women" for she brought down the enemy commander. (You may want to go back and read these two chapters to get the full story; but if you have children, wait till you've put them to bed!)

But the true hero of the story is not a human leader, not a man or a woman, but God. It is God who gives Deborah the directions she relays to Barak. And it is God who routs the enemy troops, who far out-weigh the Israelites in fire power. The Israelites are limited to foot soldiers and swords. Sisera's troops have chariots of iron. They have the technological advantage. They have the "shock and awe"!

But the poet in Judges 5 sings:

²⁰*The stars fought from heaven,
from their courses they fought against Sisera.*

²¹*The torrent Kishon swept them away,
the onrushing torrent, the torrent Kishon.*

It rained! The valley turned to mud! Sisera's chariots got stuck and he and his soldiers scrambled away on foot!

Then Deborah and Barak son of Abinoam sang on that day, saying:

²*Bless the Lord!* ³*Hear, O kings; give ear, O princes;
to the Lord I will sing,*

I will make melody to the Lord, the God of Israel.

⁴*Lord, when you marched from the region of Edom,
the earth trembled, and the heavens poured,*

the clouds indeed poured water.

This story has survived for over 3,000 years. In some ways it's depressing to think that much of humanity is still mired in brutal conflict over land and cultural and religious differences. Yet it's encouraging to find a story that, in the midst of chaos, upholds several women as leaders, for we know all too well that women are often victimized in war. And although Barak may have been considered a weak character at the time; today we can see a strength in his willingness to collaborate with and take orders from a woman. And Deborah, who was *not* a warrior, nonetheless didn't shy away from entering the fray of danger that she sent others into. I think these are qualities of leadership that we can commend today: the willingness to collaborate and to personally take on the cost and consequences of a decision.

This story also reminds us that the best leadership is creative. It doesn't put all of its trust in the status quo—be that technology or conventional thinking. Neither does it fear the purported strength of a confident opponent. Sisera's 900 chariots – the finest of the times – did not win the day. The shock and awe of the US military campaign against Iraq in 2003 did not win the day ... that war drags on.

We do not expect God to work through the weather today to solve international conflict, but this past year, as I was a member of the Unity Task Group in Central Plains Conference, I witnessed the quiet and amazing power of a circle process, where in a single weekend persons quite different from each other, not entirely trusting of each other, saw walls begin to come down as we shared personal stories together and ventured to speak of some of the pain we have known. Strong leaders will explore unconventional ways and trust in people.

And finally, effective leaders will sing – or at least celebrate! Although we like to sing in our worship, Mennonites aren't necessarily known for our ability to celebrate our successes. Perhaps it's our fear of pride. But Deborah and Barak didn't sing about *their* success; they sang about God's success among them. And yes, there's some danger there as well. Nations like to celebrate that God is on their side, especially when they're on their way to war.

But celebration enlivens us; it energizes us; it says "thank you" to God and to one another for things that have gone well. A leader who helps people celebrate acknowledges that any success is the result of the work of the group. This church is all of us—men, women, children, retired folks, single persons, families, abled, disabled, gay and straight, new comers and old timers, all of us variably gifted.

Let us continue to work collaboratively. Let us continue to be creative and dream. And may we never stop singing!