

Have you ever tried to vacation with a large group of people—with no single leader—and attempted to get that group moving in the same direction at the same time?

My extended family just got back from Hilton Head. Every couple of years, family from all over—some from the Pacific Northwest—gathers for a beach week. All together, there were around 70 people connected in some way.

Now, on my grandmother's side, there were about 30 of us who tried to get a family picture. But it didn't happen this year. Why? Because getting a group that big—with different personalities, schedules, and no central leader—to agree on one time and place? Nearly impossible.

I've also led large youth trips—I think the largest ones as a group from several churches here in Statesville that went to Puerto Rico after the hurricane. There were about 60 of us, youth and adults, and while we broke into smaller groups with adult leaders, there was still one designated point person—me—making sure we all moved in the same direction. Without someone in that role, we would've had total chaos.

The bigger the group, the harder it is to coordinate. So over time, humans have created different systems to hold things together—organizations, towns, governments, institutions. But in the early stories of scripture—especially in the time of the judges—these formal systems didn't exist yet.

There was no king. No government. No Constitution. No centralized authority or national identity like we have today. The people of Israel were more like an extended family—12 tribes loosely related through ancestry and faith—but each one doing its own thing, scattered across the land, often isolated from the others.

And while that sounds peaceful on a good day, in times of crisis it became chaos. If 20 of you are trying to keep from being thrown off your property and displaced by a group of 1000, your only chance of survival is to join together with others. But there was no single voice that everyone listened to. No shared playbook. No national defense. And to make matters worse, they were surrounded by more powerful nations—better organized, better armed, and often eager to take advantage of their instability.

The Book of Judges tells the story of this in-between time—after the people entered the land of Canaan but before there was a king. It's a time full of uncertainty, conflict, and confusion. Everyone, it says, “did what was right in their own eyes.”

This is the world into which Deborah lives. In Israel's history, before there were kings, judges were the designated leaders. They weren't judges like we think of in a courtroom today. They were people who were often rose to the top in times of crisis—leaders who could help resolve disputes, offer wisdom, and guide the people when things were falling apart. And Deborah is one of them.

Deborah steps into the limelight not as a queen, not as a warrior at first, not as someone with a title or a throne—but as a woman under a palm tree. A prophet. A judge. A listener. Someone who shows up in the middle of the mess and says: Let's find our way forward.

Now—in our family, we've got some folks who try to step in and say, “Okay, here's the plan. We're all going to do X, Y, and Z.” And maybe you've got folks like that in your family too—people who love a plan, who love order.

But we've also got people who are like, "Um, yeah... that doesn't work for me. Y'all go ahead. I'm not doing that. And just don't show up for the family picture"

Anyone else have this dynamic in your family? Or been that person?

See—people don't follow a leader just because they have a title. That's not how leadership really works. You can have the job, the role, the clipboard, the name tag—but if people don't trust you, if they don't believe in your wisdom, your presence, your justice... they won't follow.

In fact, have you ever been in a group where someone tried to lead, and you were like, "Yeah, I'm not going where they're going"? I know I have. And maybe I've been that leader once or twice, too!

All of that brings us to Deborah.

Because here's what's remarkable: in a time of total chaos—when the people of Israel were fractured, leaderless, and surrounded by enemies—they actually listened to her. Not because she had a crown. Not because she had an army. But because of who she was.

The Bible says she was a prophet and a judge—which means she wasn't just smart, she was spiritually wise. She wasn't just managing disputes; she was speaking God's truth. And where did she do all of this? Not in a palace. Not on a stage. But under a palm tree.

People came to her there, week after week, not because they had to—but because they trusted her. Deborah had presence. She listened. She told the truth. She made space for justice. And when the time came for action—when the people were crying out under oppression—she didn't rush in swinging a sword. She discerned. She called. She led.

Deborah is the kind of leader people follow not because of her power, but because of her wisdom, clarity, and courage.

Now let's pause here for a moment—because we can't just breeze past how remarkable this is.

Deborah is a woman. In a patriarchal culture. In a violent, tribal time. And she's not just quietly influencing things behind the scenes—she's leading. Publicly. Spiritually. And eventually, militarily.

She is the only woman in the Bible who holds the official title of “judge,” and she does it without apology. No one questions her authority. No one tries to silence her voice. That alone is extraordinary.

But then comes the moment of crisis: the people of Israel are being oppressed by a foreign king named Jabin, and his military commander Sisera. They've got 900 iron chariots—state-of-the-art war technology for the time—and they've been brutal in their domination. The people cry out. And Deborah doesn't just offer comfort. She takes action.

She sends for a man named Barak, and tells him: “Has not the Lord commanded you to go? Gather your troops. God will deliver the enemy into your hands.”

And here again—this is incredible—Deborah is not shrinking back. She's not deferring to male leadership. She is calling the shot. And when Barak hesitates—says, “I'll only go if you go”—she doesn't shame him. She says, “Fine. I'll go. But just know, the glory won't go to you. God will use a woman to finish this story.”

So she leads her people into battle. A prophet. A judge. A woman. And now, a military leader. In a time when women were not even counted in most official records, God raises up Deborah to deliver a nation.

When I first came to this story, mainly what drew me in was Deborah. And a female leader in ancient Israel when the world is filled with people who say women can't lead. I was captivated by this bold, wise, grounded woman who rose up in a time of chaos and led with presence and power.

But the more I thought about this passage in scripture and thought about where it is located within the larger story of judges and the Old Testament I remembered that this story is part of repeated cycle that runs through the entire Book of Judges.

And what we see, over and over again, is this cycle:

- The people turn away from God.
- They're oppressed by surrounding nations.
- They cry out in pain—not necessarily in repentance, just desperation.
- God raises up a judge—a deliverer—to lead them.
- There's peace for a while.
- And then... the judge dies, and the people fall back into the same patterns.

But here's something we can't skip over: **this cycle includes war.**

When the people stray, the consequences aren't just spiritual or emotional—the text tells us that God allows them to be invaded, conquered, even terrorized by foreign armies.

And when God raises up a judge, that judge doesn't just offer wise counsel or spiritual insight.

More often than not, **they lead the people into battle.**

In this framework, war becomes a central part of how the story moves forward.

War is seen as both **punishment** and **deliverance**:

- A consequence of unfaithfulness.
- A tool God uses to correct or restore.
- A means through which enemies are defeated and peace is restored—at least for a while.

And this theology—that suffering comes when we disobey, and that God uses violence to fix things—**isn't just an ancient narrative detail.**

It's a whole theological system.

Scholars even have a name for it: **Deuteronomistic theology.**

I know—that's a big word. Don't worry, you don't have to remember it.

What's important is that this worldview, shaped largely by the book of Deuteronomy, says this:

If you obey, God will bless you. If you disobey, God will curse you.

And honestly? **I think that's a terrible theology.**

Because it makes every tragedy feel like a punishment, and every act of violence feel like a divine correction.

Now to be fair, this isn't the theology of the entire Bible.

But it *is* the theology that was operating in the hearts and minds of the writers of Judges.

They were trying to make sense of war, displacement, trauma, and suffering. And one way they did that was by saying, "This must be happening because we failed. God must be punishing us."

That's how they understood the world.

But if we're not careful, that theology doesn't just stay in the ancient world.

It shows up in **modern Christianity**, too—especially in the voices that try to use scripture to bless violence, to explain war, to justify nationalism.

So I had to ask myself this week:

How do I talk about Deborah as a hero of faith—when she also leads people into battle?

How do I honor her leadership—without repeating the logic that says war is always God's will?

Especially in a moment like this one—when we have people bombing Iran being celebrated as heroes by white Christian nationalists, using this same kind of "divine war" language to justify violence.

And here's the thing—this isn't just abstract theology. It's not just something buried in ancient texts or limited to old interpretations.

This kind of thinking is alive and well today. But not in the same form.

It's shaping how some of the most powerful people in our country talk about war, power, and even God.

I want to share something with you—two quotes that are circulating right now in public spaces.

I'm sure you've probably seen/heard them. I'm not lifting them up to comment on foreign policy

and partisan politics, not to stir up partisan politics, but to show how this kind of theology shows up in real time. Because when theology becomes dangerous, it's usually not in theory—it's in practice. It's in policy. It's in war.

Former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee—now the U.S. Ambassador to Israel—sent a message to Donald Trump. This message was then posted publicly by Trump on social media, as he was reportedly considering whether the U.S. should join Israel in military action against Iran. Trump posts Huckabee's text on his truth social page as Trump is considering whether the U.S. will join Israel in attacking Iran.

Mr. President,

God spared you in Butler, PA to be the most consequential President in a century—maybe ever.

The decisions on your shoulders I would not want to be made by anyone else.

You have many voices speaking to you Sir, but there is only ONE voice that matters. HIS voice.

I am your appointed servant in this land and am available for you but I do not try to get in your presence often because I trust your instincts.

No President in my lifetime has been in a position like yours. Not since Truman in 1945. I don't reach out to persuade you. Only to encourage you.

I believe you will hear from heaven and that voice is far more important than mine or ANYONE else's.

You sent me to Israel to be your eyes, ears and voice and to make sure our flag flies above our embassy. My job is to be the last one to leave.

I will not abandon this post. Our flag will NOT come down! You did not seek this moment. This moment sought YOU!

It is my honor to serve you!

And a few days later, Trump ordered the bombing of Iranian nuclear sites.

In his public address, he ended with these words:

We love you, God. And we love our great military. God bless the Middle East. God bless Israel. God bless America.”

I want to just thank everybody, and in particular, God. I want to just say, we love you, God, and we love our great military. Protect them. God bless the Middle East. God bless Israel, and god bless America. Thank you very much. Thank you.”

I used to assume these were fringe beliefs—so extreme they couldn't possibly be taken seriously. But lately it's become clear: when people in power believe and act on these ideas, they are no longer fringe. They are shaping policy. They are shaping war. They are shaping lives.

The theology that believes in divinely sanctioned war—the idea that violence is blessed by God and necessary for God's purposes—is not just harmful. **It's heretical.**

And it's not even historic Christianity.

If you want to hear more about this particular theology that is prominent in evangelical spaces right now (and really isn't that old - it was a completely invented theology about 200 years ago). Diana Butler Bass wrote on it this week and the theological underpinnings of what is playing out with MAGA evangelicals around Iran, and Israel.

And while this type of theology—the kind that blesses violence and wraps nationalism in divine language—has always been something I’ve rejected, reading Deborah’s story this week connected to something deep in me that is really struggling with what is going on in the world.

Because the truth is: **these are the kinds of scriptures that dispensationalist theology loves.**

These are the stories used to say, *See? God uses war. God chooses sides. God is on the battlefield.*”

I know, with every fiber of my being, that the idea of divine blessing on war—the notion that God needs violence to accomplish God’s will—feels terrible. It feels wrong. It feels like a betrayal of the God I have come to know in Christ.

But then what do I do with this scripture... Do I have to throw out scripture altogether just to stay faithful to my conscience?

So this week, I pulled out my seminary notes from Old Testament. I opened up books written by people I trust. I sat with my discomfort.

And here’s what I remembered—what I needed to be reminded of:

Scripture is not flat.

It’s not a static rulebook or a one-dimensional blueprint.

Scripture is an unfolding story of humanity’s growing understanding of God.

That means not every text is prescriptive—telling us what we should do.

Many are descriptive—showing how people, in their time and place, understood God. Even when those understandings were partial. Even when they were shaped by fear or limited by the worldview of the time.

The Deuteronomistic theology we see in Judges—that belief that obedience brings blessing and disobedience brings disaster—**was never the whole story.**

It was one way ancient Israel made sense of their suffering and survival.

But it's not the final word. It's not the only theology in scripture.

And it's not the theology that Jesus teaches or embodies.

It's kind of like how people once believed the earth was flat or that the sun revolved around the earth. That wasn't stupidity—it was simply the limit of human understanding at the time. They were doing the best they could with what they knew.

And in many ways, scripture reflects that same human journey toward deeper wisdom.

The arc—the deep, Spirit-breathed movement through scripture—is always bending toward justice, compassion, and peace.

In ancient times, war was seen as divine.

Oppression was explained as punishment.

Even God was sometimes imagined as angry, tribal, or vengeful.

But over time—as the people listened more deeply, as prophets spoke, as Jesus came—we see a fuller picture emerge.

A God who doesn't need violence to make a point.

A God who breaks the cycle instead of reinforcing it.

A God who leads not with domination, but with love.

That's exactly what we see in the arc of scripture:

The prophets begin to dream of swords turned into plowshares.

Jesus shows up and teaches us to love our enemies, to bless peacemakers, to break the cycle.

And the early church learns to lay down power, to choose community over control.

So yes, we honor Deborah.

We honor her courage—but also her wisdom.

We honor her leadership—but also where she leads from.

She doesn't rule from a palace. She doesn't command from a war room.

She sits beneath a palm tree—in the open, on the edge, where people can find her.

She holds space for discernment. She listens for God. She listens to the people.

And somehow, in a time of chaos and crisis, people trust her—not because she demands it, but because her wisdom is unmistakable.

This image—Deborah under the palm tree—isn't just a historical detail.

It's a spiritual metaphor. It's a model.

It's a reminder that faithful leadership doesn't require titles or thrones.

It requires presence. Integrity. Discernment. Justice. Courage.

So what does this ask of us?

It asks us to lead differently.

Not from control, but from compassion.

Not from fear, but from wisdom.

Not from the center of power, but from wherever we are planted—in our homes, our workplaces, our congregations, our communities.

And maybe that's the invitation:

To find our palm tree.

To make it a place of presence.

To let it become a place where others can encounter God's justice, God's wisdom, and God's love.