**July 29, 2018**

**Judges 4 & 5**

Worship preparation involves research. I always read academic articles and others’ sermons on whatever passage we are focused. The academic stuff gives me specifics to understand that background (which may never actually be shared in a sermon), while other people’s sermons help me see what folks do with these stories in the pulpit. While scholars disagree about the fine points, preachers tend to find common ground. And within the sermons, there are always happy surprises and several stinkers.

As I researched these women characters over the past few weeks, I have been particularly frustrated by the lackluster sermons given by most preachers. Instead of pushing and pulling the text, celebrating the theology, or asking difficult questions, preachers treated these rarely-read stories with kid gloves. They finished with simplistic conclusions, saying, “So this is why women should be leaders in the church.” Or, “so this is why it is important to honor our mothers.” There is a marked difference in the quality of sermons written about the biblical women as opposed to sermons written on other biblical passages.

One of the challenges in preaching these passages is that in telling these women’s stories, we unintentionally reinforce patriarchal stereotypes about women. Simple statements may imply comparisons between the women’s male counterparts. For instance, in applauding Rahab’s willingness to hide the Israelite spies, we may unintentionally suggest that her courage was unusual for a *woman* to have – as if we expect women to be more meek and mild. Before a word is spoken, our presumptions and prejudices affect everything we’ve heard. So we have to work at seeing our own assumptions when we open the Bible. We have to think about who first taught us these stories, how they were told to us, and the various leaders and teachers who have shaped our understanding, questions, likes and dislikes. When we read Bible stories, it is important for us to listen to what is actually here more than we listen to whatever story we are telling ourselves *about* these stories. We must hear these stories as much for what they say as for what is left unsaid.

A young tribal activist from the Lakota Tribe in South Dakota spoke at a conference on indigenous people. When she took the stage, she said this: “[Too often] others rewrite history and erase our stories. But what my mind hasn’t been allowed to know, my body has always known. I am an undeniable, inconvenient body of knowledge. Read me.” She then stood before the crowd in silence for 15 minutes.[[1]](#footnote-1) All of these biblical women who we are reading this summer deserve that same focused attention. So listen again to the Word of the Lord, and the ways that God was at work with the women Deborah and Jael:

READ SCRIPTURE

The people of Israel had one leader for hundreds of years. They had 12 tribes, but only one leader: the first was Jacob, then Joseph, then Moses, then Joshua. But when Joshua died, no one person was appointed leader. Instead, God appointed tribal leaders, called Judges. They were not judicial judges like we have. They didn’t sit in court or make rulings of guilty/not guilty. These judges listened to God, listened to the people, and served as the primary communicator between the parties. Judges’ roles were similar to priests’.

It wouldn’t have been a pleasant role. This period in Israel’s history was not pretty. It was 200 years of anarchy – with constant civil war, mass murder, rape, pillaging. Israel was in a continual cycle of sinning, repenting, and reconciling with God. They “did what was evil in the sight of the Lord.” They made God mad, then God punished the people. (This usually happened by giving them to their enemies to be enslaved, beaten in battle, etc.) After the people had been punished for awhile, they became sorry for what they had done. They repented. They asked God’s forgiveness, and God relented. All was well. Until a generation passed, and the people forgot God’s covenant. They forgot God’s laws and the history with their ancestors, and they repeated the pattern. Israel sinned and made God mad. God punished the people. The people were sorry and repented. God relented. All was well. So the cycle went over and over and over again for hundreds of years.

Judges 4 opened with this familiar pattern. The people had done wrong, which led to their being oppressed. The “enemy” ruler of that Canaanite region was named Jabin. He, along with his army (led by the conqueror, Sisera), were God’s instrument in punishment. Jabin and Sisera made life hard for the Israelites. They restricted travel and trade. They limited the Israelites’ access to resources, forcing the Hebrew people into poverty.

Deborah was the Israelite leader in the land. She was a wife. She was a prophetess. And she was a judge. One day Deborah told the people that it was time to break free from the Canaanite oppression. She told Barak to raise up an army of soldiers and defeat Sisera’s army of charioteers. (A daunting battle in its planning. People on foot are at a distinct advantage against armored chariots pulled by strong horses.) Like a well-seasoned military commander, she used the landscape to her advantage— she told Barak to fight on the side of the mountain that favored people on foot, as opposed to chariots and horses. Barak said he would do this, but only if Deborah came into battle with them. He wanted God’s spokeswoman to be there — a symbol and reminder of the Lord’s presence and promised victory.

Deborah responded faithfully and truthfully. She said, “I will go with you, but this road will not lead to your glory. God will deliver your enemy into the hand of a woman.” She cut right to the heart of Barak’s implications. Having God there would not guarantee Barak the victory, but would be done in God’s way, bringing glory to someone else (and an unexpected someone else!). Things went as Deborah foretold: she traveled with the army and Barak finished in a supporting role to the conquering hero.

The battle went in favor of the Israelites. Sisera abandoned his troops and escaped on foot to a purportedly friendly camp. Jael saw him coming and invited him into her tent. “Come in, come in,” she said. “Sit down, sit down… Drink. Rest.” Then once he was asleep, without any prompting, Jael brutally murdered Sisera. Boldly and unashamedly. A *femme fatale* without question. So it wasn’t the men who won this day for Israel, but the women Jael and Deborah who were God’s commanders in the battle. Deborah’s wisdom and Jael’s courage destroyed the Canaanite army, killed their general, and ended Canaan’s political and military dominance.

Deborah’s and Jael’s story didn’t end as people would expect. They weren’t bashful about living their fullest lives. They didn’t hide their strengths or abilities. God used them to gain glory and fulfill God’s promise to Israel. These women were part of the plan to claim this land for their holy people. And yet their stories are often told as comparisons to their male counterparts, or in relation to our expectations for women: can you believe that Jael – a *woman* killed that army general? remember that Deborah – a *woman* – was one of the early Judges?

Former U.N. *Secretary General* Ban Ki-Moon once said that “Women hold up more than half the sky and represent much of the world’s unrealized potential. They are the educators. They are natural leaders and increasingly the drivers of economies. We need their full engagement in government, business and civil society*.*”

Ki-Moon said this knowing women’s struggles around the world for the same rights and privileges given to men. He said “unrealized potential” because most countries and cultures do not fully value women’s place and gift. Women have more to contribute to the world than just that within their homes. Government, business, and civil society, healthcare and military and arts. Yet there continues to be a huge wage gap between women and men. There continue to be unjust hiring and promotional practices. Even within the Presbyterian Church, which has ordained women for 60 years, a recent study found high numbers of gender discrimination amongst both clergy and women volunteers.

If we read the biblical women’s stories for what they are (and not just what we assume them to be), we see how God used women in the fullness of life. Some of the women were “the least of these,” while others grew to be the greatest. Some women were stay-at-home moms, while others were victorious military leaders. Some women were caring, some were vicious, some were savvy, some were simple. All were loved by God and called by God and used by God. Not because the men couldn’t do it. Not as a show of the miracles God can do with even a woman. God uses women just as God uses men, because we are all made in the image of God, with everything to offer creation.

In her book, We Are Our Mother’s Daughters, Cokie Roberts challenged readers not to give up, not to accept patriarchy and violence and oppression, and not to accept anything less than justice for all. She wrote, “We have the scars to show that we knocked down barriers rather than jumped over them, making it easier for the women who followed us.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Deborah knocked down barriers so that Barak could lead the Israelites through. Rahab knocked down barriers so that Joshua could lead the people through. This is sacrificial living. This is holy community.

Unfortunately, we continue to see discrimination against women. We continue to be held back by others, and even hold ourselves back. Enough. Listen to these stories of holy women who unabashedly served God with all that they had, all that they did, and all that they were. We should be so bold! Imagine what enemies we could destroy! Let us continue to knock down barriers for the people of God – for all the people of God. Let us make it easier for those who walk beside us and those who follow us. Let us read people as they are, not as we wish them to be. Let us listen to the stories they tell, not the stories others tell about them. And let us celebrate the faithful women who continue to follow God faithfully, and respond to God boldly. Amen.

1. Review of Quiet Until the Thaw by Alexandra Fuller; review by Emily Eakin – NYT Book Review, July 23, 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Cokie Roberts, We Are Our Mother’s Daughters, p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)