

## **“Judge Deborah”**

### **Sermon – November 19, 2023 Stone Presbyterian Church**

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DONNA: When I was scheduling a guest pastor for November, I was fortunate to find George Whitton available—but only for November 12<sup>th</sup>. I asked Scott if it was OK to have him switch from his normal third Sunday off to the second Sunday. And without \*thinking\* he said, “Sure.”

Then a couple of weeks ago he realized that he and Helen were going to be in California this Sunday visiting their daughter’s family. So that I wouldn’t panic, he said he would develop the service—including the sermon. He would have put it on YouTube for us to watch, but given we are technology challenged without him, I will have to read it for you instead. So, as I read it imagine it is the voice of a familiar, taller, white-haired grandfather. And remember—these are all his words, not mine! Here we go with Scott’s sermon!

SCOTT: I’m glad I still have my day job; I still get some empathy when I screw up my schedule because I’m so “busy.” Eventually, though, you are going to start to attribute this kind of thing to old age.

Before I realized my presence would be lacking on November 19, I had already decided to preach on the Old Testament lesson about Deborah from Judges chapter 4. And in the vein of today’s syndicated courtroom TV shows, I titled the sermon “Judge Deborah.” And being like a bull dog (“more like bull-headed” I hear you muttering) I decided to stick with this difficult topic that I have never preached on even though it meant poor Donna having to read it. Though since it involves a strong woman figure, perhaps it is apropos. And don’t worry—the sermon won’t be any shorter than normal.

At our monthly Clinton Area Ministerium meeting this past Wednesday with my fellow local clergy, I relayed all this and they remarked they have never preached on the book of Judges. In fact, today’s passage is the

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only one from Judges in our three-year lectionary cycle. And for good reason.

Judges is arguably the most violent book in the Bible and it’s hard to reconcile it with our understanding of what it means to be God’s people and even the nature of God. It can also be used a justification for war, particularly in the name of God.

But it is also important that we occasionally engage with these more difficult parts of the Bible lest we whitewash our faith in self-righteousness.

The Book of Judges are part of the Deuteronomistic (DOO-ter-oh-nom-ist-ic) history part of the Old Testament. The essence of Deuteronomistic theology is that Israel has entered into a covenant with God Yahweh under which they agree to accept Yahweh as their God and Yahweh promises them a land in which they can live in peace and prosperity.

Scholars consider many of the stories in Judges to be the oldest in the bible, though with major redactions later.

The Book of Judges takes place after Joshua and up to the monarchy in 1 Samuel, so a period between about 1200 and 1050 BCE.

After the death of Moses Joshua leads the Israelites to invade the land of Canaan where they divide the land up to the twelve tribes of Israel. But after Joshua died things fell apart.

The book of Judges has the tale of 12 judges. Their stories are framed by the repeated cycles of sin, punishment, repentance, and then deliverance.

That is, the Israelites do “what is evil in the eyes of the Lord”, a foreign king is allowed to oppress them, then the people “cry out”, then God raises up a judge to overthrow the oppressor. There is peace for a while until the judge dies then the cycle repeats itself. In the midst of all this God is at work.

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Today we hear about Judge Deborah—the only female judge recounted in the book.

In Hebrew, the word “judge” can refer either to a judicial arbitrator or a military leader. Deborah is uniquely both.

Deborah, unlike the other judges, is first a prophetess and arbitrator before she becomes a military leader.

As a prophetess, Deborah spoke on behalf of God.

As a community leader, she mediated and settled disputes.

As a military commander, she provided divinely guided confidence and leadership.

Chapter 5 verse 7 calls her a “mother in Israel” suggesting that her governance ensured care for the poor of the community.

Finally, while other judges had their failures as well as successes (Gideon tended toward idolatry and Samson was a womanizer), the biblical judgment on Deborah is uniformly positive.

That does not make her story arc any less gritty. Her fast-paced, grisly tale of underdog heroism, worthy of a Marvel movie, must have been popular in the imaginations of ancient Israel because our ancestors in faith preserved the whole story arc twice in a row. It appears first in narrative form in chapter 4, and then again as a poem or song in chapter 5, which is actually the older version of the story.

While all English translations call her “wife of Lappidoth [LAP-id-oth],” that Hebrew phrase could also be translated “woman of fire”, which definitely fits her.

We start with today’s lectionary passage from verses one and two:

“The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, after Ehud [EE-hood] died. So the Lord sold them into the hand of King Jabin

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[JAY-bin] of Canaan, Deborah summons a military leader named Barak [BEH-rak] from the tribe of Naphtali [NAFF-tal-lee].” **[pause]**

Deborah, as a prophet, summons general Barak and conveys a divine command with a divine promise. Specifically, Barak is to gather his troops against general Sisera [SISS-uh-rah] and his Canaanite army. And even with Sisera’s superior technology of iron chariots, she promises “I will give him into your hand.”

Our lectionary passage ends there, but it is important to know the rest of the story. In the very next verse Barak says to Deborah, “If you will go with me, I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go.”

Apparently, Barak does not share the same confidence of Deborah’s promise whether from lack of faith in her or God or maybe both.

With perhaps a bit of testiness Deborah agrees to go but says, “the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the LORD will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman.”

They go and battle and prevail, such that Sisera runs in retreat and ends up in the tent of Jael [jehl]. Her husband and his people, non-Israelites, had been at peace with Jabin, the king of Canaan, though more neutral than allies.

**[In a soothing voice]** Alone in the tent Jael comforts Sisera, gives him a warm glass of milk, and has him lay down to rest. And after he falls asleep **[pause, then with conviction]** she drives a tent peg through his temple and kills him! Apparently, either she wasn’t thrilled how the Canaanites had oppressed them at one point or decided to switch to the winning side or both. Either way, she fulfilled Deborah’s promise that a woman would deliver Sisera. And there was now 40 years of peace under Judge Deborah.

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So what should we take away from this story?

One thing is Deborah herself. She is among the most prestigious female leaders in the Old Testament and shows women should be and should have been more honored than they have been. Deborah’s exemplary leadership provides encouragement to lay and ordained female leaders in the church today, which it could not exist without them. Look around if you don’t believe me.

The other thing, though, sadly to note, is that the human condition across history is often marked by violence and war. The Bible does not ignore or shrink from that tragic truth even as we struggle to deal with it.

The God of Scripture enters into even these messy and tragic conflicts and battles. As God fought for the Israelite slaves in Egypt, so God fights here on the side of the oppressed and less powerful who cry out to God.

But note, God fights against those who trust in and worship above all else their own idols of military might and humanly created technology. It is when we turn away from being God-led in our hearts to people-led with their own self-interest agendas that we lose.

This repeated willingness we see in the Book of Judges of Yahweh repeatedly responding to the cries of his sinful people exemplifies God's gracious character.

But we should note that in the Books of Kings, the repeated sins of the people finally lead to the destruction of the Northern and Southern kingdoms, a lesson perhaps for us today. God's grace is not to be taken for granted. As God has been gracious to us, so let us be gracious to others.

In the name of the God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

Amen.