

Judges chapter 4 After Ehud's death the people of Israel again sinned against the Lord, ²⁻³ so the Lord let them be conquered by King Jabin of Hazor, in Canaan. The commander-in-chief of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth-hagoiim. He had nine hundred iron chariots and made life unbearable for the Israelis for twenty years. But finally they begged the Lord for help.

⁴ Israel's leader at that time, the one who was responsible for bringing the people back to God, was Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth. ⁵ She held court at a place now called "Deborah's Palm Tree," between Ramah ad Bethel, in the hill country of Ephraim; and the Israelites came to her to decide their disputes.^[a]

⁶ One day she summoned Barak (son of Abinoam), who lived in Kedesh, in the land of Naphtali, and said to him, "The Lord God of Israel has commanded you to mobilize ten thousand men from the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun. Lead them to Mount Tabor ⁷ to fight King Jabin's mighty army with all his chariots, under General Sisera's command. The Lord says, 'I will draw them to the Kishon River, and you will defeat them there.'"

⁸ "I'll go, but only if you go with me!" Barak told her.

⁹ "All right," she replied, "I'll go with you; but I'm warning you now that the honor of conquering Sisera will go to a woman instead of to you!" So she went with him to Kedesh.

¹⁰ When Barak summoned the men of Zebulun and Naphtali to mobilize at Kedesh, ten thousand men volunteered. And Deborah marched with them. ¹¹ (Heber, the Kenite—the Kenites were the descendants of Moses' father-in-law Hobab—had moved away from the rest of his clan, and had been living in various places as far away as the Oak of Zaananim, near Kedesh.) ¹² When General Sisera was told that Barak and his army were camped at Mount Tabor, ¹³ he mobilized his entire army, including the nine hundred iron chariots, and marched from Harosheth-hagoiim to the Kishon River.

¹⁴ Then Deborah said to Barak, "Now is the time for action! The Lord leads on! He has already delivered Sisera into your hand!"

So Barak led his ten thousand men down the slopes of Mount Tabor into battle.

¹⁵ Then the Lord threw the enemy into a panic, both the soldiers and the charioteers, and Sisera leaped from his chariot and escaped on foot. ¹⁶ Barak and his men chased the enemy and the chariots as far as Harosheth-hagoiim, until all of Sisera's army was destroyed; not one man was left alive. ¹⁷ Meanwhile, Sisera had escaped to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, for there was a mutual-assistance agreement between King Jabin of Hazor and the clan of Heber.

¹⁸ Jael went out to meet Sisera and said to him, "Come into my tent, sir. You will be safe here in our protection.

Don't be afraid." So he went into her tent, and she covered him with a blanket.

¹⁹ "Please give me some water," he said, "for I am very thirsty." So she gave him some milk and covered him again.

²⁰ "Stand in the door of the tent," he told her, "and if anyone comes by, looking for me, tell them that no one is here."

²¹ Then Jael took a sharp tent peg and a hammer and, quietly creeping up to him as he slept, she drove the peg through his temples and into the ground; and so he died, for he was fast asleep from weariness.

²² When Barak came by looking for Sisera, Jael went out to meet him and said, "Come, and I will show you the man you are looking for."

So he followed her into the tent and found Sisera lying there dead, with the tent peg through his temples. ²³ So that day the Lord used Israel to subdue King Jabin of Canaan. ²⁴ And from that time on Israel became stronger and stronger against King Jabin, until he and all his people were destroyed

Luke 1. 46-55 Mary responded, "Oh, how I praise the Lord. ⁴⁷ How I rejoice in God my Saviour! ⁴⁸ For he took notice of his lowly servant girl, and now generation after generation forever shall call me blest of God. ⁴⁹ For he, the mighty Holy One, has done great things to me. ⁵⁰ His

mercy goes on from generation to generation, to all who reverence him.

⁵¹ "How powerful is his mighty arm! How he scatters the proud and haughty ones! ⁵² He has torn princes from their thrones and exalted the lowly. ⁵³ He has satisfied the hungry hearts and sent the rich away with empty hands. ⁵⁴ And how he has helped his servant Israel! He has not forgotten his promise to be merciful. ⁵⁵ For he promised our fathers—Abraham and his children—to be merciful to them forever."

Opening prayer

Following lovely sermons on love from Audrey last week we are back on our journey through the bible. And we are up to Deborah and the book of Judges after Mary and John in our Deaf church series and Abraham/ Genesis, Moses/ Exodus and Joshua/ Deuteronomy.

These books of the bible are not easy to read although we know many characters and stories from them, they can appear to glorify violence and even condone genocide if we do not read them contextually.

The book of judges continues the story of the tribes of Israel within the Promised Land following the death of Joshua in about 1367BC. There appears to be no natural successor and in Judges 2 we learn that as Joshua's generation died out, so did the true worship and obedience

to Yahweh; as Israel calls God, but that God raises up Judges....more literally translated as saviours or gifted leaders, and there are twelve in all. The final Judge of the twelve is Samuel, who has two books of the bible dedicated to him. The Jewish Talmud has him or one of his disciples as the author in about 1060-1040BC. Since the books are written before Israel became a monarchy and they appear to be written by one author this may well be the case.

The events of the period of the judges took place in a time when Syro-Palestine formed a ground of contest between the expansionist empires of the Hittites to the north and the Egyptians to the south.

There is a pattern to the book of death of a leader then disobedience and falling away from true worship of Yahweh leading to disaster in battles then turning to Him again in repentance and fighting off invasions and enemies before falling again into a cycle of disobedience. In this book; like many other Old Testament books, the historical context is written and interpreted theologically as a result of sin.

Remember that at this period of Israel's history there is no theology of an afterlife therefore God's "reward or punishment" comes in this life; the sad thing is that so many people think that this is true now when we know that it isn't, it rains on good and bad alike- more of this later. Yet it is a very persistent untruth. We pray for God's

protection upon us and those we love but the persistence of evil in this world in these in-between times means that although eternal salvation is assured, material, emotional or physical safety in this life is not. If we think faith will shelter us from the storms of life, we will be disappointed; what faith will do is enable us to weather the storms of life, to see the rainbows through the rain and the growth that the rain enables and thus offer hope to others.

Also because we live after Christ unlike the time of the book of judges we know that being an Israelite or even being a Christian does not make us good, it makes us forgiven. Therefore our "goodness" cannot guarantee our prosperity as Israelites continually and mistakenly believed. In Christ all of us sinners are loved and forgiven and granted eternal life but not a pain free life. So we read the book of Judges with our lens of historic and theological context.

Othneil is the first judge, followed by Ehud (his story against a fat king is hilarious), then Shamgar; all three are warriors before we have this wonderful but surprising choice of a woman in an intensely patriarchal society with polygamy and women being distinctly second class. I will talk about Deborah in the second part of this talk. After Deborah we have Gideon (of the fleece), Tola and Jair, Jephthar (son of a prostitute who made a rash promise which caused his daughter to die) Ibzan Elon and Abdon and then the great story of Samson the Nasazirite and Delilah. Then we have the dreadful story of the rape and

dismembering of Tamar in Judges 19 and 20 which leads to revenge, genocide and mass kidnap of women from Shiloh; the final verse of the book of Judges states ²⁵ *(There was no king in Israel in those days, and every man did whatever he thought was right.)* and the author of the book spares us no detail on the moral, social, ethical degeneration that comes from an absence of spiritual authority. We can recall mass rape and genocide in Cambodia, Rwanda, and DRC, and in our own country, the knife crime and deaths represented by the majestic Knife Angel, the grooming of vulnerable children for mass rape. The horrors of Judges 19-21 are present today. How God must weep at revenge – especially that done in his name. And Jesus' teaching "no more an eye for an eye but now Turn the other cheek" is the lens we view Judges and our present day battles through. For without vision and compassion, evil can reign.

Judges is a difficult book to read, in our bibles we have it followed by the lovely story of Ruth but to read it sequentially we need to turn on to 1 Samuel and in chapter 3 his role as a prophet of the nation is discerned alongside his role as priest. He is the final judge or leader before Saul, the first of Israel's Kings.

I want to talk about Deborah now- I am amazed that a woman becomes a judge; it's exceptional and she must have been exceptional to be accorded that authority in that time.

Deborah is the fourth judge in the line of judges. What is quite unique is that as well as leadership in battle; she summons Barak to fight Sisera, she is also a prophetess and an arbiter who holds court under a tree and settles disputes in the tradition of Moses. Deborah is valued and has authority and is not to be crossed. When Barak refuses to go into battle without her, she tells him straight that his honour as a warrior will be undermined because he will not be the one to kill the oppressor, a woman will do that; and she is right, we have the famous tent peg incident with Jael killing him outright.

Deborah is unique, and as a woman I am inspired by God's choice of a wise woman to lead men in a men's world. In the Old Testament the outstanding women are Miriam, Moses' sister, saviour (as a baby) and secondary leader- although punished when she challenges Moses (numbers 12). Queen Esther who rescued the Jews through her cunning "turning of the tables" on Haman and in so doing established the Jewish feast of Purim to celebrate the salvation of the Jews. We also have Ruth who saves her mother in law through her faithfulness and courtship of Boaz, and becomes King David's great grandmother, we have other mothers: Sarah and Hannah particularly noteworthy for their answer to prayers for children with the birth of Isaac and Samuel, but as you can see women as leaders in the Old Testament are few and far between

Deborah's story in Judges is very short; we have a chapter about her ministry and we have a chapter about her victory song- she joins Miriam, Hannah and Mary with songs of victory. But for me she is a true hero not only for her leadership but her wisdom. Her own Magnificat forms the whole of chapter 5 of Judges, here is an extract:

² "Praise the Lord!

Israel's leaders bravely led;

The people gladly followed!

Yes, bless the Lord!

³ Listen, O you kings and princes,

For I shall sing about the Lord,

The God of Israel.

.....

¹¹ The village musicians

Gather at the village well

To sing of the triumphs of the Lord.

Again and again they sing the ballad

Of how the Lord saved Israel

With an army of peasants!

The people of the Lord

Marched through the gates!

¹² Awake, O Deborah, and sing!

Arise, O Barak!

O son of Abinoam, lead away your captives!

¹³⁻¹⁴ Down from Mount Tabor marched the noble remnant.

The people of the Lord

Marched down against great odds.

They came from Ephraim and Benjamin,
From Machir and from Zebulun.

¹⁵ Down into the valley

Went the princes of Issachar

With Deborah and Barak.

At God's command they rushed into the valley.

(But the tribe of Reuben didn't go.

¹⁶ Why did you sit at home among the sheepfolds,

Playing your shepherd pipes?

Yes, the tribe of Reuben has an uneasy conscience.

¹⁷ Why did Gilead remain across the Jordan,

And why did Dan remain with his ships?

And why did Asher sit unmoved

Upon the seashore,

At ease beside his harbors?)

¹⁸ But the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali

Dared to die upon the fields of battle.

¹⁹ The kings of Canaan fought in Taanach

By Megiddo's springs,

But did not win the victory.

²⁰ The very stars of heaven

Fought Sisera.

.....²⁴ Blessed be Jael,

The wife of Heber the Kenite—

Yes, may she be blessed

Above all women who live in tents.

²⁵ He asked for water

And she gave him milk in a beautiful cup!

²⁶ Then she took a tent pin and a workman's hammer

And pierced Sisera's temples,
Crushing his head.
She pounded the tent pin through his head.
²⁷ He sank, he fell, he lay dead at her feet.
.....³¹ O Lord, may all your enemies
Perish as Sisera did,
But may those who love the Lord
Shine as the sun!"

The story of Deborah finishes with the statement "*there was peace in the land for forty years.*" Let us pray for strong and wise women who lead well, judge fairly, listen to God and establish justice and peace. Amen