

Most of the women we encounter in our scripture stories are victims of the oppression of the times, of the perceived role of females in society, and their complete dependence on males for their very survival and, often, they are victims of violence. I am always amazed at the stories of strength and resilience we find when we delve into their stories, of the ingenuity and persistence they demonstrate to make their voices heard in a world that was designed to silence them. But today, I want to introduce a woman who seemed to have risen above all the norms of the time – Deborah.

We meet Deborah in the Book of Judges in the Hebrew Scriptures, that part of the Bible we often refer to as the Old Testament. This book was written at a time when Israel had no king. The country was led instead by judges. These judges had a role much bigger than what we would think of in modern terms. They did hear disputes and perform judicial duties, but they were also the leaders over the people, the ones who were tasked with keeping the people of Israel on track, responsible for bringing them back to God when they strayed. The chapter Alison read from this morning recounts a time when the wayward people of Israel had strayed from God, and so had been conquered by King Yabin of Canaan. He had a great army with a brutal commander-in-chief named Sisera. After twenty years of violence and hardship at the hands of Sisera, the people finally turned to God for help.

Deborah, we are told was the leader of Israel at this time. She is described in the scripture as both a Judge and a Prophetess. So, she was not only the ear for the problems of the people, as a prophet she was also God's mouthpiece, God's voice, to them.

It seems unusual to find a woman in a position of such power and esteem in those days, particularly in the Jewish culture. Although we do meet some Queens in the writings from this period, they tend to be rulers over some foreign power. Even on the death of a husband, a wife or daughter was not the one who took over leadership of the family. In the absence of sons, the widow was given to his brothers, as was all his property and the best scenario for her was to then have sons by her brother-in-law as these boys would carry her late husband's name and continue this line of his family. Without a husband or sons of her own, a widow was in a very precarious position. Most of the women we read about in the Bible were women we would never hear about if they hadn't been pushed to the brink by the culture or the politico-military situation they found themselves in. Most married women led quiet, private lives. Deborah, on the other hand, was a very public figure. Her everyday life was lived out in the public arena.

In this scripture, Deborah is said to be the wife of Lappidot. That seems odd to me... in that place and time, how is it that Deborah, and not her husband, is the one with the responsibility and the power of a Judge? I wonder how Lappidot would feel about that... I wonder if he would have any respect at all from the people in his community...

Well, there is some debate among scholars as to the existence of this husband. The words used in the original Hebrew, “eshet lapidot”, could be translated as “Deborah, wife of Lapidot”, but the word “Lapidot” means “Torches” and these words might also be translated as “Deborah, woman of torches” – perhaps an apt description of a fiery woman.

We can't be certain of which translation is correct... but I think we can understand why those who translated the Bible might have made the choice they did. It fits with the times and it fits with the patriarchal culture that has permeated our lives for centuries. We have come a long way. The story of a woman leader of a nation is something we are familiar with in our world – but it would not have seemed familiar at all to the people of those days. There is no other real mention of Deborah's family life – no descendants, no further indication of a husband. As a leader of the people, one wonders if she would have even had time for a family after all.

One more unusual thing about this leader, Deborah, is her place of work. As we heard last week, men generally gathered at the city gates. It was the place where the important business of the day could be done, the place where the elders gathered, where important connections could be made, the place to go if you needed to make a transaction that required witnesses. If you were looking for the power brokers in the community, the city gate was the place to find them. However, Deborah chose to sit under a palm tree. That certainly sets a different tone... very different from the bustling traffic at the city gates. Under a palm tree, you might be able to sit a while and discuss the things that were important to you, the things that worried or upset you... Not a city gate but a hillside between two cities, Ramah and Bethel. She wasn't at the gate, but everyone knew where to find her.

So... in this story, we picture Deborah, sitting under her palm tree, meeting with people who come to her for guidance or to settle disputes. The constant brutality of Sisera would be on their minds for certain and now, after twenty years of this treatment, the people are looking for intervention from God. Who better to express this to than their leader, Deborah, a prophetess, who would have the ear of God?

What happens next has all the elements of a block-buster movie. Deborah and God decide it is time for action. She summons Barak, the military commander in Israel, to her place under the palm tree and tells him to mobilize the troops – 10,000 men – and lead them to Mount Tabor. Once he does that, she assures him, God will draw Sisera and his army to the Kishon River and they will defeat them there.

Barak's answer seems strange to us. “Ok, but only if you come too. Unless you come with me, I won't be going.” He seems hesitant, and rightly so. Yabin's army is huge and Sisera is a vicious commander. He needs Deborah because she is a prophet. She will be the one who receives the messages from Yaweh about when to attack. Prophets were an important force in battle strategy throughout the Bible and, apparently, women were often used to both inspire the men and taunt the enemy. It really wasn't such a strange request for the time. And Deborah says, “Of course I will go. But just know that you won't be getting the glory of this battle; it will be a woman who delivers Sisera to you.”

Barak musters the troops and waits at the top of Mount Tabor. King Yabin and his commander-in-chief wonder what is happening and so Sisera takes his army to the river at the base of Mount Tabor to check it out – and when that happens, Deborah gives Barak the “go” signal. Sisera’s men get bogged down in the muddy river banks and are slaughtered by Barak’s charging troops! Not one man survives ... except for Sisera, who somehow escapes on foot.

Sisera runs for his life! He knows he will be pursued by Barak’s army and he will be no match for them on foot. He is in a state of panic! Luckily, he sees the tent of Heber the Kenite. What a relief! Heber is a Jew who moved out of Israel some years before and has a treaty with King Yabin that offers him safety in Canaanite territory. He may well have been a craftsman, perhaps a smith as many Kenites were. If so, he would have pitched his tent close to the battleground to make and repair the weapons. Sisera has surely found an ally! Heber is not at home, but his wife, Yael, beckons him from the tent door – “Come in here! You will be safe here!”

Sisera is exhausted and thirsty. He collapses and asks her for water. Yael takes care of him like a loving mother. She covers him with a blanket brings him kefir, a fermented milk, to drink. As he drifts off to sleep, he tells her to watch by the door and tell anyone who comes looking for him that no one is here at all. Yael goes to the door and Sisera falls into a deep sleep, safe at last... At the tent door, this sweet woman, Yael, picks up a sharp tent peg and a hammer. She goes back to the side of this sleeping man and drives the tent peg into his temple and through his skull till it sticks in the ground beneath him.

As Barak comes charging down the road, searching for his enemy, Yael says, “Come, I know where he is!” She opens the tent flap, “Is this the guy you’re looking for?”

Our action movie ends and the credits roll...

In all great movies, along with credits there is a song and often short clips of the movie’s star characters... The story of this battle ends with “Deborah’s Song”. It begins with a depiction of the battle and the parts that she and Barak played. She praises the tribes of Israel who took part and curses the ones who did not, a typical victory song – but then the tone and the topic change; she recounts the story of the warrior Yael. Her song calls on all women to praise her: “Blessed be Yael by women!” She is a heroine. Deborah’s song depicts Yael as a woman of strength and stealth. She didn’t have to seduce Sisera, as was often the only weapon women had – she was always honorable, a nurturing mother, a good woman - with the heart and skill of a warrior.

This song also offers us a peek into another aspect of the story that was not depicted at all in the action of the battle. We are offered a glimpse of Sisera’s mother, waiting at the window for her son’s return. She is clearly worried that he is taking so long to come home, but offers a sense of hope... He is gathering the spoils of war, she muses; he will bring home beautiful women – two for each soldier! – and jewels to place around his mother’s neck...

Deborah weaves three women into her victory song, this story of a fierce battle where a king and commanders, and soldiers take centre stage ... Deborah a mother to Israel, Yael who mothers the enemy to death, and Sisera's mother who depends completely on the success of her son for her own survival.

What do we learn from this story of Deborah?

Although she is depicted as a warrior, she is not a battle commander. Her "weapon" is the word. She uses it to inspire, to predict, and to celebrate in song. Her very name is very close to the Hebrew word "dibberah" which means "she spoke" and is a noun meaning "bee"... so maybe her words have some sting! She certainly was the Queen Bee in this story, gathering the workers and setting things in motion. She tells her victory story – but gives full credit to others who played important roles. She is aware of how the battle affects others, even the mother of the enemy. From this woman we learn the power of words and the power of faith. We also see a model of leadership from within – not in a place of power like the city gates, but in a less crowded and busy atmosphere - between two towns, more relaxed, under a palm tree, with a vantage point to really see what is happening in the lives of the people she leads.

Thank God for women – and leaders – like Deborah. Amen.