

Into the Hands of A Woman

Text: Judges 4:4-10, 5:31

In the early morning of Oct. 14, 1942, 27-year-old Royal Canadian Navy officer Sub Lieutenant Margaret Brooke was aboard the SS Caribou, a ferry travelling between Nova Scotia and Newfoundland when the vessel was hit by a torpedo from a German submarine in the Cabot Strait off Newfoundland. A native of Ardath, Saskatchewan, Margaret Brooke, a Nursing Sister Dietician and fellow nursing sister Sub-Lieutenant Agnes Wilkie were thrown from their bunks when the torpedo hit. Both were thrown into the icy water as the ship sank beneath them.

The story says that Brooke and Wilkie managed to cling to the side of a capsized lifeboat, holding on to ropes still attached to the boat. After a few hours, Wilkie no longer had the strength to hold on but Brooke pulled her back onto the side of the lifeboat a number of times, while holding on to the ropes with the other hand. Around daybreak, a large wave crashed over the lifeboat and Wilkie was swept away from Brooke's grip and died in the frigid waters. For trying to save Wilkie in this selfless act, Brooke was named a Member of the Order of the British Empire. She ultimately attained the rank of Lieutenant-Commander on April 1, 1957, while serving in the Royal Canadian Navy from 1942 to 1962. Brooke passed away at the ripe age of 100 in 2016.

Elsie MacGill was the first woman to receive an electrical engineering degree in Canada in 1927 and the first female aircraft designer in the world in 1938. The 35-year-old aeronautical engineer supervised the production of Hawker Hurricane fighter planes at the Canadian Car and Foundry Company, which employed 200 women and produced more than 1,450 aircraft during the war. MacGill became a symbol of Canada's miraculous economic wartime transformation. She was even the subject of a comic book called "Queen of the Hurricanes" that was devoted to her achievements.

Margaret Brooke and Elsie McGill –two of the 50,000 Canadian women in the military who contributed during wartime. Women in the military during the first and second world war have contributed immensely as nursing sisters, clerks, parachute riggers, laboratory, electrical and mechanical assistants. They were code breakers and spies, wireless operators and helped produce ammunitions. At the home front, the demands of a war economy and the labour shortage that resulted from men serving in the war meant that women were encouraged to 'do their part' and

enter the work force. Hundreds of thousands stepped into jobs in wartime industry in jobs typically held by men – farmers, drivers, factory workers, mechanics, bakers, grocers. As years progress, a number of women in the military moved up to high ranks and others served as military chaplains, doctors, pilots and engineers.

In today's Bible story, we meet the fiery Deborah. Deborah, wife of Lappidoth, but that could also be translated "woman of Lappidoth," noting who she is, not who she is married to. Lappidoth means torch and has the connotation of fiery, so perhaps "wife of Lappidoth" means she is a woman of fire. I like that translation. Her name, Deborah, means "bee," and it is easy to imagine her as the queen bee of the Israelite people. Deborah was a leader in Israel, from the tribe of Ephraim, during a very chaotic and bloody period of its history. She is the fourth judge listed in the Book of Judges, and the only woman to serve as a judge. Judges were more than legal arbitrators in ancient Israel. In a time before Israel had ruling monarchs, Judges often served as military generals, and they were seen as rulers over the loosely connected twelve tribes. But their primary role was to remind the people of their covenant with God - that they were the people of God and should act like one. People come to her for judgment. They come to her for a word from God. She leads and directs and guides, and no one seems to object based on her gender. That is awesome especially in a patriarchal society as that of Ancient Israel!

Deborah gives us the first glimpse of what a dedicated leader can accomplish, when she sets her mind in fulfilling her duty to protect her people. As a judge, Deborah made fair decisions, resolving legal disputes under the Palm of Deborah – a tree named for her charismatic leadership! Not only was Deborah a judge and a tribal leader, she was also a prophetess, whose wisdom is sought in times of danger and calamities. Deborah kept her eye on the broader picture – she saw the threat of Canaanite King Jabin and his military general Sisera who had been oppressing and persecuting Israel for 20 long years. The story says that Deborah summoned Barak, her military commander, and instructs him, on the word of Yahweh, to gather and raise 10,000 warriors from the neighbouring tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun in order to fight the Canaanite army of Jabin & Sisera. But Barak hesitates, and asks Deborah to go with him into battle. "If you will go with me, I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go." Some interpreters take Barak's response

as cowardice or lack of confidence but I think Barak needs a partner, someone he can fully trust and depend on. Someone who knows how to strategize at the same time give him the courage in a very difficult time. Who will face the wrath of the Canaanites when they have 900 iron chariots and the Israelites have none? Deborah certainly compliments Barak's leadership. And Barak recognizes the wealth of wisdom from a female leader like Deborah and willingly listens to her. They were partners and shared power. Deborah and Barak worked together in planning to defeat the Canaanites in the battlefield.

Deborah agrees to join Barak as they face the enemy together but she warns Barak that his strategy will not put Sisera down. Instead the glory for the victory will be in the hands of a woman. So who is this woman in the story? No, it was not Deborah. The woman's name is Jael which we did not hear from today's reading but it's worth mentioning her story. So Sisera, the Canaanite commander hears of Barak's and Deborah's army gathering in Mt. Tabor. Sisera hastily went leading his chariots and men but he did not realize the mass of soldiers he will face. Barak's troops swarm down and traps the chariots where they cannot maneuver and Sisera's only option was to flee on foot. He flees to the tent of Jael, wife of Heber the blacksmith who helped build the chariots for the Canaanites. Sisera thought he can find asylum in Jael's tent but it was exactly the opposite. Story goes that Jael has more pressing matters to consider and she cannot continue to pledge allegiance to a defeated man. Jael treats Sisera with maternal care offering him milk rather than water and when Sisera falls asleep, she drives a tent peg through Sisera's temple and killed him. It is like watching a movie. Jael surely backstabbed Sisera, she backstabbed King Jabin and the whole of Canaan and found favour in the eyes of the winning team – Deborah & Barak and Israel. Jael wins not only her security but Israel's praise. And to make sure that Jael got all the credit that was coming to her, Deborah wrote a song to help spread the word around which can be read in Judges 5. The bottom line in this narrative is that Deborah's prophetic statement about a woman bringing victory to Israel is fulfilled. The story concludes with Deborah's song of rejoicing, giving glory to God for the victory and offering the people peace and security for 40 years.

So, what can we learn from Deborah's story as we remember those who sacrificed their lives in order for all of us to enjoy the gift of peace and freedom? This for sure is a story of teamwork. A wonderful partnership between men and women, collaborating, working together in order to attain the greater good. Not one person can take all the credit. I think the same is true in many situations in our lives. Whether we are at home, at school, at work, we need to learn to work with others. We can accomplish more together than we can alone. As a political, military and spiritual leader and the prophetic voice God's people needed, Deborah with the help of Barak rebuilt the nation and restored it to community. And her success? The nation was at peace for 40 years. Leading a nation to peace. That is a gift. Male or female, it doesn't matter. Just someone to lead us into forty years of peace. Someone to nurture us and take care of us and show us the true meaning of love, of justice, of compassion. In confronting humanity's ancient tendency toward violence and chaos, we can recommit ourselves to follow God's path to justice and peace. And in studying the stories of these extraordinary people, we can recognize and support the women and men of extraordinary courage and power who are working tirelessly to change our world in *this* time and place. Barak asks Deborah to accompany him into battle. We might decide that our best strength can be found not alone, but in community—joining forces with someone whose gifts complement our own. We might find that we can be strong together, stronger than we are on our own. These are things we can do when we are suffering.

Today is a time of many complex emotions. When we think of the “crosses row on row....” we mourn for the many, many young lives – both men and women cut short by war. Those fallen who never got the chance to grow old. They have given everything they had – their future, their life. If their death can awake in us an understanding of our need to break down barriers of hate and the call to all of humankind to discover in each other their common, God-given humanity, then we are remembering them as they should be remembered. And remembering what they gave for us. That we might build a better world. Today, we honour and notice intentionally their courage, their dignity, their vocation. Remembrance Day is not just about remembering – it is more about affirming gratitude. Whether or not we choose to support Canada's military or foreign policy, we need to support the ordinary people – those men and women who fought and are still out there fighting in wars. We need to earnestly say “thank you.” But our thanksgiving should

lead to action, not in idleness, both in support of the well-being of the veterans and survivors and their loved ones, especially those who have been injured or traumatized by war.

In the stories of Judges, the torches of hope always look like other people, whether they are the judges themselves or the strength found in assembling into a larger community—a tribe, an army. Maybe your torch of hope looks like a woman sitting under a tree. Maybe it looks like a man showing up on your front porch with an invitation to go for coffee. Maybe it sounds like a ringing telephone, the voice of a friend on the other end of the line saying, “Let’s have lunch.” Maybe it has the cadence of a song or a psalm, the timbre of many voices raised together. Maybe your torch of hope looks like a whole throng of people, milling around the dessert table at coffee hour, or surging forward to come to the communion table. Many of us have stories of hope to tell – stories of both joy and sorrow. Stories of loved ones lost and those who stood proud after the wars were over. This day is a day of solemn honour as we seek God's wisdom and the will to preserve the hard-earned peace offered by those who served in wars. We are here to remember human sacrifice and suffering with a commitment to support the veterans and their families. To say no to terror and violence and hatred that prevails in the world.

And when the sun sets and we face the darkness of the world, all we can do is pray that God will give *us* some relief from our moments of uncertainties, from our very own storms in life. Remember those who fought and are still fighting for true peace and freedom. Lest we forget. Amen.

Sources:

BCUC Lectionary Group

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