

Stepping Out in Faith Sermon Series
Deborah - Judges 4:1-10
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When someone visited Crestwood for the first time, we used to send them a letter thanking them for worshipping with us. The letter included a response card, which asked them what they liked and didn't like about their experience. People who returned the cards were usually very complimentary, saying things like, "The congregation was very friendly," "the choir did a great job with the anthem," or "I appreciate catching up on my sleep during the sermon." In fact, of all the cards we received, we only had one person tell us something they didn't like.

In the section that asked, "What did you least enjoy about your visit to Crestwood?" he wrote (and I'm pretty sure it was a he), "Your blatant disregard for the biblical teaching about women and authority." Now, maybe I should ask Trish, one of our ministers, why he would say something like that? He even quoted a scripture, 1 Timothy 2:11-12, which says, "Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or have authority over a man; she is to keep silent." Well, there you go! The Bible says it, so it must apply universally to all times and places, including Crestwood. I hope that gentleman worships with us the next time Trish preaches, because he's got a few things to learn from her.

I don't mean to belittle our guest's theological view. In reality, there are a lot of churches that claim a biblical understanding of the role of women in the church, and they often cite this passage from 1 Timothy for justification. And if you take a certain kind of approach to this passage, you can arrive at the conclusion that women really aren't equipped or called to be leaders. But I'm curious what those churches do with passages like the one from Judges, where the main character is not only a woman, but a woman who is a judge, a prophet, and a military leader. Let's see someone tell HER to be quiet! Deborah is a great example of a person who stepped out in faith to do what God called her to do.

To get to our story today, let's recap where we've been. We don't talk about the book of Judges much, but it's important to understand the role of the judges in Israel's history. With Judges, we are seven books into the Bible, and a lot has happened in God's relationship with humanity. In Genesis, God creates the world and then gives a specific promise to Abraham, a promise of land and blessing that is passed down through Isaac and Jacob and Joseph, who leads the Israelites into Egypt to survive a famine. The Egyptians enslave the Israelites, so in the second book, Exodus, Moses leads them out of Egypt, through the Red Sea, and into the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land. Exodus also includes the giving of God's law to the people, which is continued in the books of Leviticus and Numbers. While it makes for snooze-worthy reading, the law is important for understanding how God and humanity related to each other. In the fifth book, Deuteronomy, Moses preaches his last sermon, reminding the Israelites of all God has done for them as they prepare to finally move into the land God promised them.

The sixth book, Joshua, tells about the Israelites' transition into this territory, led by Moses' successor, Joshua. The Israelites have several run-ins with the natives of the region, but God leads them to victory, and the Israelites begin to settle the area. And then the trouble starts. Actually, the trouble continues, because the Israelites have been fighting against God ever since Adam and Eve decided on a forbidden snack way back in Genesis.

What happens in the book of Joshua and the beginning of the next book, Judges, is that the Israelites settle into the land and start to get comfortable, which means they also start to get complacent in their faith. You see, up until this point, they've either been wandering nomads or in conflict with others, and both situations forced them to rely on God's presence and provision. But now they're settled. Ahh. The first few weeks I was in my new apartment, I made my bed every day and cleaned up after every meal. Now? Well, let's just say I have to position my computer camera just right so no one sees my messy room when I'm on my Zoom calls. Like the Israelites, I have grown more comfortable and less diligent.

For the Israelites, that means they stop coming to worship, they begin flirting with the foreign gods of the surrounding nations, and they generally ignore the law God has given them. So a pattern develops that gets played out over and over again in Judges. First, the Israelites ignore God, so God sends a foreign nation to attack them. The people panic and cry out to God for help, so God sends them a judge to deliver them from their enemy and restore order. Things settle down, the people get complacent, and the whole thing starts over again.

Deborah is one of the 12 judges God sends to the people, and she is the only woman. But notice, as we begin this section, the Bible doesn't say, "Look everybody! Here's a woman judge! Isn't that progressive and cool and dripping with equality?" It simply says, in verse 4, "Now Deborah, a prophet, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at the time." No disclaimers or qualifications, just a simple statement of fact that could lead us to conclude that women in leadership wasn't nearly as controversial or universally forbidden as our guest in worship might lead us to believe. Recently deceased Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg said, "'Women belong in all places where decisions are being made. It shouldn't be that women are the exception.'" The church ignores that at its own peril and I'm thankful to serve a church with such strong, competent leaders of both genders.

I also think the Bible doesn't make a big deal about Deborah because this isn't a story about what a woman can do. It's a story about what God can do and we are called to do in response to God. Verse 1 tells us "Again the Israelites did evil in the sight of the Lord," so God sells them into the hands of a foreign king and his army commander Sisera. After 20 years of oppression, the Israelites learn their lesson and cry out to God for help, who sends them Deborah to deliver them.

But Deborah is not a military commander like other judges. Instead she calls on a man named Barak to gather 10,000 men and lead them into battle against Sisera, promising that God will deliver the foreign army into Barak's hands. It sounds like the story is sliding back into stereotypes, doesn't it? Man goes off to fight the battle while woman cheers from the sidelines. In fact, in later parts of the Bible, when lists of deliverers of Israel are named, it will be Barak, not Deborah, who will make those lists.

But you can already see the masculine revisionist history at work, because when you read the actual story, it doesn't tell about Barak the Deliverer. It tells of Barak the Scaredy-Cat. He says to Deborah, "If you go with me, I will go; but if you won't go with me, I won't go." Sounds like a kid about go into a haunted house. "You're coming too, right Mom?" So Deborah responds to this army commander, "I will surely go with you."

So what do we make of this female-dominated story in the midst of a very patriarchal book? It's interesting to note that Deborah's style of leadership differs significantly from some of the other male judges. Rather than bludgeon her way through her duties, she relies on wisdom, collaboration, and compromise. That kind of leadership is refreshing in a book where might usually makes right.

I'm guessing many of you have not heard Deborah's story. That's OK, because it's easy to miss, tucked way back in Judges, a seldom-read book in the seldom-read Old Testament. She doesn't have a flashy story like Gideon or Samson. She doesn't really do anything of note, other than what God called her to do. Except...that's exactly why we should take notice of her. While the Bible has a number of memorable characters and stories, it has hundreds of other characters like Deborah and Barak and Jael, people we would never know if we didn't take the time to know them. And yet, it's often in the stories like these where God is most present for us. Here we have God calling on people whom the world would consider less than ideal – a female judge, a skittish army general, a foreign woman. Sometimes God calls on elderly people, like Abraham and Sarah. Sometimes God calls on morally compromised people, like Jacob and David. Sometimes God calls on a woman, like Mary and Deborah. Sometimes God calls on people who are only noteworthy for how ordinary they are – like you and me.

And when God calls on us, we are called to step out in faith and do what we can do. Deborah did what she was called to do, leading Barak in the defeat of Sisera. We do what we can do. As a prophet, we can prophesy. As a doctor, we can diagnose and heal. As a student, we can study hard. As a parent, we can raise our children. As believers, we can follow the teachings and example of Christ. We do what we can do, and trust God will do what God can do. When we listen to God, when we respond to God, we become God's partners in this world, and everyone, regardless of gender or color or another defining characteristic, is worthy of being God's partner.

When we step out in faith and do what God calls us to do, we are no longer defined by our gender or our bank account or our relationships. Deborah was not known as Mrs. Lappidoth; in truth, her husband was probably known as Mr. Deborah! When we strive to serve God, we are no longer just the wife of someone or the husband of someone or the son or daughter of someone. We are no longer defined by our past mistakes, our broken relationships, our wrong turns in life. We aren't even defined by what others believe about us, like we're not good enough or we're not faithful enough or we're not the right gender. What should we remember about Deborah? We should remember how she faithfully answered the call to serve. May we be remembered in the same way, not for who we are, not for what we do, but for what God does through us.