

Sermon Series on Sidekicks of the Bible

Sidekicks of the Bible 2: Deborah and Jael, Charismatic Leadership

Judges:

20 July 2008

Our series on the Bible of the sidekicks continues with the period of Judges, and a fascinating history it is. As I already alluded to last week, Joshua paints an overly rosy picture of the conquest of Canaan as being rapid and absolute, but as we see in Judges, it was neither. I also talked last week about how Joshua is not a story of military conquest, nor is it a story about the birth of a nation. And as we see in Judges, Israel was little more than a loose confederation of tribes, tribes that fought with and married into the non-Israelite tribes of Canaan. The period of the Judges lasted about three hundred years, and here's the fascinating thing: they had no kings in all those centuries. Eventually they will want a king so they can be like other nations, but the Bible writers were not at all in agreement that kings were a good thing. In fact, as we'll see next week, kings are not seen very favorably in the Bible.

But let's recap our history once again. A group of slaves was called out of Egypt, led by Moses, so that they would become a new people and a new society based on God's torah. But that first generation with their "worldly" ways (including their experience of an abusive king) had to die off. Joshua led a new generation into the promise land, where they were charged to choose whom they would serve, the gods of Egypt, the gods of Canaan, or the God of Moses. They were charged with being strong and very courageous in serving that holy and jealous God.

So now they are in the promised land, but it is hardly a utopia. Rather, we discover in Judges just how difficult the people found it to uphold the choice they made at the end of Joshua.

Remember the band, where they were supposed to destroy all the locals? Well, the very first chapter of Judges goes through the list of the Israelite tribes and notes each time, "The tribe of so and so took the land of such and such, but they did not drive out the inhabitants, and the Canaanites dwelt among them." Chapter two reads:

The angel of the LORD...said, "I brought you up out of Egypt and led you into the land that I swore to give to your forefathers. I said, 'I will never break my covenant with you, and you shall not make a covenant with the people of this land, but you shall break down their altars.' Yet you have disobeyed me. Why have you done this? Now therefore I tell you that I will not drive them out before you; they will be thorns in your sides and their gods will be a snare to you."
(Judges 2:1-3)

Then is told a story cycle that will occur over and over again throughout the book of Joshua:

After that whole generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation grew up, who knew neither the LORD nor what he had done for Israel. Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD and served the Baals.... In his anger against Israel the LORD handed them over to raiders who plundered them. He sold them to their enemies all around, whom they were no longer able to resist. Whenever Israel went out to fight, the hand of the LORD was against them to defeat them, just as he had sworn to them. They were in great distress.

Then the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the hands of these raiders.... Whenever the LORD raised up a judge for them, he was with the judge and saved them out of the hands of their enemies as long as the judge lived; for the LORD had compassion on them as they groaned under those who oppressed and afflicted them. But when the judge died,

the people returned to ways even more corrupt than those of their fathers, following other gods and serving and worshipping them. They refused to give up their evil practices and stubborn ways. (Judges 2:10-19)

Their deliverers were known as judges. The name implies that they were well-versed in Torah, but they were not exactly prophets. They were charismatic leaders who would inspire the people to return to the covenant. They were part rabbi, part military commander, and part spokesperson for God.

There's a lot of violence in the book of Judges. It's not as wholesale as we encounter in Joshua, but it's still not what we modern people would associate with a people who are supposed to be chosen. It's a chaotic time, a time of anarchy, literally no government, a time when it seems that anything could happen. Anything, even a woman becoming a hero in battle. In fact, two women. And these are the women whose story we've heard today.

It's tempting to read a kind of feminism back into the text, but that's not really appropriate. The story of Deborah and Jael is not about gender equality. Rather the point is that when the courage of men fails, God will raise up a woman to get the job done. And a brutal and bloody job it is at that! Like the stories in Joshua, there is a lot to make us cringe.

As chapter four opens, we find that "the people of Israel did again what was evil in the sight of the Lord. And the Lord sold them into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan, and the commander of his army was Sisera." Remember those names, especially the name of Sisera.

Deborah is the wife of Lappidoth, whoever he was. The Bible says nothing about him. Most importantly, Deborah does not hold her position of judge due to her husband's influence or position. She is a judge in her own right, and her husband is merely mentioned in passing. But the phrase "wife of Lappidoth" could also mean "woman of fire," which describes her well. The name Deborah itself means bee, and she certainly had a sting. She summoned an Israelite commander, Barak, and told him to go to war against Sisera. (There's that name again!) But Barak hesitates. "If you go with me, I will go, but if you will not go with me, I won't go." He's got cold feet, and for this Deborah tells him that God will still give him victory, but the glory of defeating Sisera will go to a woman. Note the theme here, that when the courage of men fails, God will get a woman to do the job.

They fight the battle, and Barak's army defeats Sisera's, but Sisera hops off his chariot and flees on foot to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite. Kenites were not Jews. Rather, they were the tribe that Moses married into when he lived in the desert before being called back to lead his people out of Egypt. The Kenites have hung out with the Israelites ever since, but they are technically a foreign tribe, free to form their own allegiances, and so it is with this Heber, Jael's husband. He is on good terms with Jabin, the Canaanite king who has been oppressing the Israelites. The phrase used is, "there was peace among them," implying that they may have even had a treaty.

So it makes sense for Sisera to seek refuge with Heber's wife Jael. He could expect her to honor the treaty her husband had with King Jabin. Furthermore, the ancient near east had a strong tradition of hospitality, one that continues to this very day, where by a visitor to your tent would be accorded safety and protection.

But Jael violates all these laws. She violates every sense of order and decency in ancient standards.

Jael greets Sisera with welcoming words, "Turn aside to me, my lord. Have no fear." She brings him into her tent, covers him with a blanket, gives him warm milk to soothe him to sleep. She's almost maternal to him – or perhaps something more randy if you choose to read it that way. What other comforts might she have offered him? Why, for that matter, did

Sisera go to her tent and not her husband's? At any rate, the weary Sisera falls asleep, and Jael cool as a cucumber, "took a tent peg and took a hammer in her hand, and went softly to him and drove the peg into his temple so he died."

It sounds like a horror story! It violates every sense of morality both ancient and modern. And yet Jael is praised for her actions. Furthermore, unlike the stories of Rahab and the Gibeonites, we are given no motive for Jael's actions. She says nothing about having heard of the God of the Israelites. Nowhere in the story does it indicate that she did this on the Israelites' behalf, which further illustrates the point that God will raise up whoever will get the job done, whether male or female, Jew or foreigner. God has a motive for picking Jael, but what is her motive for acting?

We can't know of course, but these gaps in the story invite us in, and the answer we supply says a lot about us. So let me attempt this foolhardy venture, using an idea I found in the Woman's Commentary on the Bible.

The next chapter is a song that Deborah and Barak sing to celebrate Jael's deed, and the song talks about Sisera's mother. It describes her as sitting at her window waiting for her son to return and speculating that he's late because he's picking over the spoils of war, including a girl or two for every man. It's a fact of warfare that continues today, from the rape camps of Bosnia to those of Darfur – and even, I hate to say, to sex crimes committed by coalition troops in Iraq. Women are treated as spoils of war. The song in Judges 5 reflects that reality from the perspective of three women: Sisera's mother, who speaks of it with approval; Deborah who sings the song in a spirit of vengeance, implying that while the Israelite women have been spared, no it is the Canaanite women who will suffer. And finally, Jael.

Why did Sisera go to her tent and not her husband's? Could Jael have been a victim of such a crime herself? Perhaps it wasn't the reputation of the God of the Israelites that motivated her so much as the reputation of Sisera and his king, these men who oppressed the Israelites so cruelly. These men who treated women as spoils of war. Perhaps Jael acted because she wanted her own vengeance.

This is just speculation of course, but it does fit within the larger theme of Judges. Because amidst all the violence, what we encounter here is a story about an oppressed people taking up arms against their oppressors, slaves rebelling against their masters, victims overcoming their abusers. Today we almost miss the significance of that message because it's so obvious to us today. It's included in our Declaration of Independence, that when government commits a long train of abuses and usurpations, designed to reduce the people under absolute Despotism, it is the people's right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government and provide new Guards for their future security. That argument is what won freedom for the Amistad Africans who killed those who would have enslaved them.

Of course, today we would be more hesitant to endorse liberation by a tent peg through the temple. Rather, today the oppressed have more nonviolent ways to secure their rights. But if those fail, we still recognize the justice of taking up arms against oppressors. The point, as it is depicted in the book of Judges, is that God hears the cries of the oppressed and will come to their aid. And furthermore, that God will raise up leaders regardless of status, gender, or religion. Indeed, any act of liberation is a praiseworthy act that furthers God's mission.