



MOTHER'S DAY SUNDAY

*Woman of  
the Word*

JUDGES 4:1-10

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# *WOMAN OF THE WORD*

JUDGES 4:1-10

You know how, when you're doing the dishes or something, and you fill the kitchen sink up most of the way, when you eventually pull the plug and it starts to drain: the water swirls around, and if your plumbing is in good shape, you get a kind of whirlpool and that slurping sound as the water drains out.

The best way I can think to describe what happens with God's people in the Book of Judges is that it's like watching a sink drain. It is God's people in a downward spiral, with the occasional high point around the edge of the sink as they spiral, but the overall direction is down the drain.

Our reading from Judges today begins with the all-important phrase: the Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. It is repeated seven times in just this one book of the Bible. It kind of explains the whole downward spiral in a nutshell. The book of Judges records some of the early history of God's people, falling after Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, after Joseph and his dream coat, after Moses and the desert wanderings; but before the line of kings, like Saul and David, begins. The people are settled in the Promised Land, wanderers no more, with homes and communities and crops. From among them, God calls up leaders, the judges, who are recognized and trusted by the people for their faithfulness to God, and for their wisdom and decision-making capabilities.

Whether these stories of the twelve judges happened one right after the other, or if there was some overlap in time but each judge had their own region or set of communities that they were in charge of, if there were more judges whose stories aren't included, we just don't know. These stories are so, so old, and we only know them at all because they had been remembered and told by Israel's story-tellers for hundreds of years. What anthropologists call an "oral tradition;" individuals within a society, before reading and writing were common skills, who were trained and taught to recite the stories and histories of their people. The stories of the judges were written down centuries after the events they describe, and we know that because the phrase "at this time there was no king in Israel" also gets repeated, and you wouldn't write that unless you lived in a time when there was a king in Israel.

In this after-Moses but before-Jesus world, God's people lived in a relationship with God that was underpinned by faithfulness to a set of covenant promises. Those promises are built on the law, like the ten commandments and all the rules for holy living that we can find in the first part of the Bible. Those laws and rules that the people were supposed to obey were meant to help them live morally just and good lives, to worship and trust God, and to experience that kind of abundant flourishing that God still intends for us today.

But instead of growing and flourishing together in their relationship with God, the people repeatedly "did what was evil" - broke the promises they'd made, and disobeyed God. They'd get into trouble, cry out to God for help, and God would call a leader, a judge, to deliver them. And then things would be good for awhile - riding the high side of the whirlpool - and then the people would "do what was evil" in God's sight again, and down we go.

But for now, in today's story, we find a good leader, called by God, on the cusp of being God's agent for freeing and rescuing his people; we find Deborah.

Deborah's task is to free God's people from the oppressive grip of a Canaanite king, who has been making life painful for twenty years. She rounds up Barak, who can lead a tribal army, and shares God's plan with him for liberating their people. Barak...is not enthusiastic about this plan, but obeys in the end.

It may well seem odd to us that obeying God - who we know to be loving, just, and generous - would involve going into battle. But a well-respected Old Testament scholar observed that violence in Scripture must always be examined closely, since very often it is not meant to glamourize war or encourage conflict or justify further violence. Instead, it often has an element of seeking to act restoratively, to counter the violence that exists already. And while that isn't always the case and it's not a desirable solution, that does seem to be what's happening here: obeying God means fighting for their liberation from an oppressive, cruel power. And so, by hearing God's word and obeying it and making sure it is acted upon, Deborah is able to slow the downward spiral of God's people for a time.

With a story that is so very old, about a world far removed from our own, what can we find in it to connect with today? Well, understanding conflict as something that can act to counter the violence and cruelty of a more powerful oppressor, we can see that perspective being played out very painfully in the news. Downward spirals are not unfamiliar to us, either, at the scale of societies, as we see in the book of Judges.

More personally, the cycle of falling in and out of a close, life-giving, faith-sustaining relationship with God, that may well be something we can connect with, too. We do things Jesus' way for a bit, going to church, praying regularly, studying the Scriptures, loving our neighbour and serving generously; but when that gets dull or hard, or more often, we start forgetting to do our following Jesus things, and other activities really just can't be re-scheduled...and we drift away.

And then something happens; we get into trouble or feel ourselves vulnerable in the world, and we cry out for help in desperation - wondering, no doubt, where God went - and God answers us, and helps us in the way we need most. And then we do things Jesus' way for a bit, until it gets dull or hard or difficult to fit into our schedules again, and the whole cycle repeats. Unless something changes.

And it's the something that changes that is probably the deepest point of connection in this passage for us: in Judges, things only change when they obey the word of God. So it's worth considering what we mean when we talk about obeying God.

The idea of obeying...what kinds of actions or feelings does that bring to your mind? Having to follow a set of rules, maybe? Being restricted in what we do or say, being prevented or stopped or limited in our freedom, perhaps? A dictionary-definition idea of obedience would certainly encourage that: laws and social rules that must be obeyed, that stop us from acting or speaking in certain ways, even if we want to, and consequences for us when we don't. Historically and in some places, even today, the Christian church has taught obedience as just that: rules and laws that must be followed, hemming people in and stopping them from doing what they want. Women of faith have often borne an even heavier burden, with more rules and restrictions heaped upon them than the gospel requires.

This way of thinking about obedience, though, it creates an almost adversarial relationship: the rules for holy, moral living that God wants us to live by, doing things Jesus' way...it becomes something to struggle against or to try to work around, so we can hold on to our independence or live unconstrained by rules we didn't write ourselves.

But is that really what we see in Scripture, when someone obeys God's word? Deborah shows us a different answer to the question of what it means to obey God for anyone, but especially for women.

Deborah's story began under a palm tree, the palm of Deborah, where she offered counsel and wisdom to the people of God between Ramah and Bethel, north of Jerusalem. As Judge, she was also the go-to person to settle personal and legal disputes. People would travel to her for advice and direction. Deborah was also a prophet of Israel. Unlike other prophets, like Isaiah or Amos, she does not have her own book, but she is given voice here in Judges. A prophet's duty was to hear the word of the Lord and share it; Deborah goes further, and personally sees that the word of God is obeyed by Barak, the hesitant military man, not just by her.

The English translations of Judges say Deborah was the wife of Lappidoth. Two things to note: first, that Lappidoth means flames or torches, and second, that the Hebrew word for 'wife' and 'woman' are the same. Our English translation could easily say Deborah, the woman of flame or 'fiery woman.' I rather like that one, and it's proven out in the story. Everyone knows that mitigating disputes and leading justly is a fiery business.

As a prophet and judge of Israel, she was the Lord's agent for new direction, for guiding the lives of the people in her care toward that holy living God sought for them, for freeing God's people - people God had entrusted to her - from oppression. The word of the Lord came to Deborah, and she summoned Israel's military leader, Barak, to share God's command with him. And when the prophet of Israel says, "The Lord, the God of Israel, commands you," she is not offering you her opinion. This is how Deborah obeyed God.

I don't know about you, but I don't see any sign that Deborah feels constrained or limited because she is obeying God's word. In fact, Deborah seems strong and full of fire as she proclaims and follows that word.

Barak, though, seems a good deal less happy about the whole situation. He is being made to do something he doesn't want to, going so far as to refuse to go and fight at all, unless Deborah goes with him: "Barak said to her, "If you will go with me, I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go." And Deborah said, "I will surely go with you..."

I wonder if he was hoping that she'd refuse to go, which would let him off the hook, too...if so, it was a risky bluff and Deborah called him on it. Not only does she go, in v.14, she gives the command to charge, basically, and the people are indeed freed from their Canaanite oppressors.

For Barak, obeying God's word certainly curtailed his freedom to stay home and do nothing; he is grudging in his obedience, resistant and struggling against what God is telling him to do. He does it anyway, in the end; Barak was faithful, though not especially confident or willing. What a contrast with Deborah, who heard the same word, engaged in the same unfolding of events, but did it with conviction and courage and confidence, not in herself, but in God and God's word.

Two very different experiences of what it means to obey God...which experience, do you think, is closer to your own?

But more than leadership in war and conflict, however liberating in intent, what we see in Deborah is a woman who is strong and wise, counted on by the whole nation of Israel and chosen by God, a woman who walked confidently in fiery obedience to him.

I've always liked Deborah, because she is a woman who acts in what was a traditionally male role of judicial, religious and military leadership in a very male-dominated society. God called Deborah to occupy this extraordinary position, to take on these challenging leadership roles in a difficult time in her people's history. And filled with the word and the confidence of faith, she obeyed God. How much easier it might have been for Deborah to be like Barak and do her best to stay home. Deborah's circumstances were extraordinary, but I would caution against seeing her as an exception to the rule of who God calls to do what, and what obeying that word, that call, might look like.

There are many women in the Bible who are filled with God's word and embrace it. There are mothers, like Sarah and Hannah and Mary; grandmothers who pass on the faith, like Lois; daughters-in-law who support and nurture, like Ruth; political movers-and-shakers, like Esther; rebels and revolutionaries, like Rahab and Jael; businesswomen and church leaders, like Lydia and Phoebe; apostles with prison sentences, like Junia; preachers and proclaimers of Christ, like the Samaritan woman and Mary Magdalene. Whatever roles you find yourself in on this Mother's Day, as a woman of the word, you will most likely find your match, a sister of the faith, in the Scriptures...doing her best to faithfully obey God's word with confidence, passion, freedom and impact, whether in her family, her community, or at a larger scale.

Obedience is the corrective each time the people go astray; but obedience, lived out by the men and women of Scripture, can look very different from one person to another...and sometimes not at all like we might imagine being obedient might look like today.

Barak, with his head down, heel-dragging, only if you make me, following of God's word, is close to the image of obeying someone else's rules that many of us might have. But in Deborah, we see nothing like that; for her, being filled with God's word likewise fills her with a confident commitment to seeing that word, those promises of freedom, take shape.

God calls women, calls people, to all kinds of roles and work and special tasks in Scripture, in extraordinary and ordinary circumstances, just as he does today for women and men who follow his Son. And God imposes no limitations on what someone filled with his word can do for him. Thanks be to God. Amen.