



Women Prophets of Scripture II: Deborah, Faith and Leadership for Today
Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 8, 2024
Judges Chapters 4 and 5; Mark 7:24-37
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Sometimes it seems that things just go from bad to worse, and there is no turning them around. I have been in such situations, as I am sure you have. But I was thinking of a more dramatic example of this, which happened 12 years ago to a friend of mine who I will call James.

James was a gifted teacher, at the peak of his career at a prominent suburban high school. In a few years would be retiring at the top of the pay scale. James was beloved by students not only because he was lively and engaging, but because they knew he would always be their advocate. This sometimes put him on a collision course with the administration, but he continued to make a difference in many lives as one of the school's most popular teachers.

But the hip pain James had been enduring for years was growing worse. He didn't want to take time off for surgery, so he began taking prescription painkillers, which back then were easy to get. He became addicted, his behavior became erratic, and the district decided to put him on medical leave for six months in the hopes he would get straightened out.

Instead, things only got worse as James sat home and brooded about being shut off from the classroom and the profession he loved. His frustration finally boiled over in an angry email to his teacher's union representative in which he wrote that he was so upset that he felt as if he could "go postal."

James was a peaceful person. He owned no weapons and never would have hurt a flea. But his timing of this communication was poor, because there had just been a mass shooting at a local community college. The email was quickly forwarded to authorities. James was arrested that same day on the charge of "terrorist threatening." Bail was set at \$1 million.

His family was frantic. They could not imagine their beloved son, brother, and the father of his adored 20 year-old adopted son in jail under these circumstances when he had done nothing but send an ill-advised email. It took months, but James finally got out of prison – having lost his job, his house, his friends, his social standing, and the majority of what would have been his retirement income.

From bad to worse. That was what the people Israel were experiencing following the death of Joshua, about whom we spoke about a couple of weeks ago.

Joshua had been a wise and effective leader who finished the journey Moses began, but the people of Israel were far from being able claim their promised land. Instead, as the book of Judges begins, they find themselves facing furious resistance from the people of Canaan and giving into pressure to worship their local gods, or "Baals."

After Joshua died, the people raised up a succession of judges, or administrators, who were supposed to come up with strategies to overwhelm the Canaanites. But still the people continued in their evil ways. Judges 2 tells us that "Whenever a judge died, the people would

relapse and behave worse than their ancestors, worshipping other gods and bowing down to them." From bad to worse.

Judges 2 continues "So the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he gave them over to plunderers who plundered them, and he sold them into the power of their enemies all around." It has been called "Israel's most dangerous period."

Into this darkness steps Deborah in Judges 4.

Most translations announce her arrival something like this: ⁴At that time Deborah, a prophet, wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel."

But who was she? Does it make sense that a prophet would be described as an obscure person's wife? Let's do a little word archaeology. If we look more closely at Judges 4:4, we discover that the word most translations render as "wife" can also mean "woman." In fact, that is the first definition given by this reputable source.

OK, a woman of Lappidoth, then. But there was no known place by that name in Biblical times. So, a woman of...what? One plausible explanation is that Lappidoth is the plural of lappid, a word usually translated as "torches" or "lightning flashes."

This gives us an entirely different impression of Deborah. She is no demure figure sitting quietly under the so-called Palm of Deborah, as it's called in Judges 4:5. Rather, we imagine the woman of Lappidoth as a fierce, fiery and formidable individual – one through whom God was speaking.

And what did God convey through her that made such a difference in that dark time when the people of Israel had hit rock bottom?

She gave them what no other judge had been able to – a winning game plan. The Canaanites held a huge advantage in their "chariots of iron," as we hear in Judges 1, which made their vehicles virtually indestructible. Iron was known throughout ancient Near East, but at that time only the people of Canaan had perfected the process of carburization which turned iron into carbon steel. This gave them a massive military advantage.

But the people of Israel had God, and God's prophet Deborah. Her strategy was to recruit the warrior Barak, son of Abinoam, and order him in the name of the Lord to take ten thousand men to Mount Tabor. As the strategy played out through a series of bizarre plot twists worthy of "Only Murders in the Building," the Canaanite leader, Sisera, met a gruesome death and Israel took possession of the land. In Judges 5 Barak joins Deborah in her magnificent song of triumph. Under Deborah's leadership, the people went on to enjoy 40 years of peace.

Why did things turn around from the gloom and doom of the first three chapters of Judges? Because God was still speaking, and Deborah listened.

God is always speaking. In Mark 7 we heard God speaking through the Syrophenician woman. When she first dared to approach Jesus to ask that he heal her daughter, he gave her a stinging rebuke. But God continued to speak through her. Undaunted, she replied, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter," Jesus replies.

And what of our friend James? He could have lapsed into lifelong bitterness over his life being destroyed because of two words in an email. But God was still speaking through him even in prison – or rather, especially in prison.

His instincts as a teacher quickly kicked in as he began helping inmates with their writing. He earned him the nickname of “Teach” and became a popular personality. When James was finally released, he spent a brief moment homeless, then found a cheap apartment and began attending Narcotics Anonymous meetings. Soon he became a leader in his local chapter and, 12 years later, has never missed a meeting. James is now the best listener and most peaceful person I know.

And what kind of people are we? We are people of Lappidoth! God is still speaking through us as flaming torches, flashes of lightning, we who are being called in the words of Ignatius of Loyola to “go forth and set the world on fire.” Jesus is calling us to live as kingdom people, those who inhabit the Kingdom of God where love is the blazing torch that leads us forward. What good is it, as the apostle James demands to know in our second reading today, if you say you have faith but do nothing about it?

Through the example of Deborah, in the spirit of the Syrophenician woman in Mark, open your heart and let the living Christ move through you and out into the world. Then we can sing to God with Deborah, in the last line of her song in Judges 5, “May those who love you shine like the rising sun at its brightest!”

Amen.