

Is There a Man Here?

In the name of the Son of God who for us became a *man*, dear friends in Christ: In last week's meditation on the Judges we considered the account of Ehud who, as we saw, was an unlikely deliverer for God's people. To be sure, this is a theme that permeates the whole book: that the Lord chooses to rescue his people from their enemies and afflictions with unlikely heroes in unexpected ways. Why is this? It's because all of these episodes foreshadow and ultimately point to the cross, where the Lord saves his people from their greatest enemy and afflictions, namely the devil, sin, and the curse of death, with the most unlikely person in the most unexpected way: his own Son, suffering and dying for our sin. It's with this in mind that we continue this evening with the account of two faithful women, Deborah and Jael, who are also unlikely candidates for the roles they have in the deliverance of God's people.

But before we begin, this needs to be said: in modern times, we often run into people who want to use this account as an Old Testament feminist manifesto. They put it forward as absolute proof that the Lord never assigned distinct and complimentary roles to humans based on gender. Specifically, that Deborah serves as a judge is cited as evidence that from the Lord's point of view, the role of leadership and authority is up for grabs and can and should be filled by any capable person regardless of whether they're male or female. To assert this idea, though, is to completely misread the account. It's important to understand that the Scriptures often record *what* happened without commenting on whether the actions taken by certain persons were pleasing to God or in accord with his design. For example, later in the book of Judges there is the story of Micah, who first stole a large quantity of silver from his mother and then fashioned a portion of it into an idol to be worshipped. The account never says that what he did was wrong. But we can't infer from the silence that what he did was right. The point is that it doesn't need to condemn what he did. The assumption is that the reader who understands the way things ought to be according to God's Word already knows that it's wrong. In a similar way, we can't read the book of Judges in light of the dictums and suppositions of the modern feminist movement. It has to be understood in its original *patriarchal* setting – the way the Israelites would have read it. And they understood that the Lord assigned the role of leadership and authority in the family, the clan, the tribe, and the nation to men. So when we read that Deborah, a woman, was serving as a judge in Israel, it ought to raise some red flags. Things aren't supposed to be this way. She's in a position of authority that ought to be filled by a man. But don't misunderstand me: I'm not saying that Deborah is wrong by filing the role she has or that she is in any way incapable of doing the job. Quite the contrary, she's a very faithful, wise, and capable woman through whom the Lord is at work. There's no question of that. The question that ought to come to mind, however, is "Why is she performing this role that would normally, in God's design, be done by a man?"

The answer is the key to understanding the story. Recall that the big problem that recurs time and again throughout the book of Judges is that God's people keep wandering away from the Lord. When it happens, the Lord sends enemies to afflict his people in order that they'll turn back to him for salvation. When they do, he sends a judge who delivers them. And after they're freed, the people stay more or less faithful to the Lord until that judge dies, whereupon they turn from the Lord quicker than spit and begin to worship the gods of the Canaanites with even more enthusiasm than they did before – sinking ever deeper into sin and depravity.

We have to ask, "Why do they keep doing this?" The answer, in part, as we learned in our Ash Wednesday meditation, is that the Israelites failed to complete the conquest. Contrary to the command of the Lord, they let large numbers of the pagan, idol worshipping Canaanites

remain in the land that was to be *their* inheritance. And over time the people of God mingle, mix with, and end up marrying these Canaanites who then lead the Lord's chosen into adopting their idolatrous ways. That's a big part of the problem; but there's more to it. We also read repeatedly that whenever you have one generation that knows the Lord and what he's done for his people (like you have under Joshua and during the life span of one of the judges who saves the people), the next generation invariably grows up neither knowing the Lord nor his mighty works of salvation. For some reason the true faith isn't passed on from one generation to the next as it should. They keep dropping the ball.

Ah, but whose fault is that? Whose job was it to defeat the Canaanites and drive them out of the land? Whose job was it to teach the children the faith – to lead them to know one true God and worship him? We could also ask this: whose job was it to contract marriages and decide who would be allowed to marry whom? Who let the sons and daughters of God's people marry the pagan Canaanites in violation of the Lord's command? Now, in general we could answer that the Israelites did. They all dropped the ball. They all messed up. But that misses the main point. And the main point is this: The Lord put the *men* of Israel in charge. They were the warriors who were supposed to defeat the Canaanites and either destroy or drive them out completely. That task was not given to women. The Lord never commanded them to carry arms or fight the battles. It's a man's job. The men were also to serve as the priests of their families. They were supposed to bring the ones entrusted to their care to the Lord, teach them his ways, and lead their families in worship. They were also the heads of their families who alone could contract marriages for their children. So if an Israelite married a Canaanite, you have to put the blame squarely on the shoulders of the father who contracted the marriage and allowed it to happen. The problem in Israel was not just unfaithfulness in general; it was a leadership failure. And that means *the men* of Israel failed. They weren't acting like men of God. They weren't doing what the Lord required of them. And since they weren't doing the job the Lord gave them, the Lord raised up Deborah, a woman, to do at least part of their job for them. He did this for two reasons. First because he cared enough about his people to see that something was being done right and that sound decisions were being made by someone who was faithful to the Lord and his Word. But it was also to humiliate the men. It's like the Lord saying, "Fine, you guys won't grow up and act like men? You want to behave like little boys? Okay, I'll give you a mommy to take care of you. How do you like that?"

To their shame it seems they didn't have too much of a problem with it. They were more than happy to pass the mantle of authority that was theirs because they were too lazy or too apathetic to wear it. It's sad; but true. What they had more trouble with, however, was the severe oppression the Lord brought on them by the hand of the Canaanites – by Jabin, the king of Hazor, and his military commander Sisera, who, we are told, had at his disposal 900 chariots of iron. They were the most feared and technologically advanced weapon system of the day – sort of like our own Abrams tank. The Israelites had nothing like them and therefore couldn't hope to win a battle against Sisera. Anyway, after twenty years of servitude, disgrace, and hard times, the Israelites finally called out to the Lord to deliver them. And so he did.

The Lord directed Deborah, who also had a prophetic gift, to summon Barak the son of Abinoam. It seems that he was known as a warrior. She was to convey to him a message from God that he was to gather an army of 10,000 men from the northern tribes of Israel. He was to lead them to Mount Tabor, whereupon the Lord would use the assembled army to lure out Sisera and his forces. They would come to put down the Israelite rebellion. And Barak was told not to fear. The Lord promised to deliver the enemy into his hands.

But Barak was afraid. He had no confidence in himself or his leadership abilities. More importantly, he had no confidence in the Lord and his promise to give him victory. So he flatly refused to go unless Deborah came with him. And that's pretty pathetic. Again, you have to

read this in the patriarchal setting of the culture. A general who won't lead his troops into combat unless he can hold mommy's hand is a disgrace. And Deborah tells him so. "Fine, I'll go with you to war (even though it's no place for a woman – and a real man ought to know that). But because you're going about it this way, the honor of the victory will not be yours. The enemy commander will be killed by a woman."

Well, we heard the story. Accompanied by Deborah, Barak did indeed gather the army and march them to the slopes of Mount Tabor. And it's at this point that we're introduced a man named Heber the Kenite. The thing to understand about him is that though he is an Israelite, he works for the enemy. He's good friends with and on the payroll of Jabin, the oppressor of God's people. He's a traitor; and in this sense he represents all the men of Israel: by forsaking their calling to lead their families – especially in spiritual matters – they've betrayed their own. And this is not a neutral thing; no, if a man is not leading his family to know and worship the one true God, he's actually working for the enemy – the evil one, the real oppressor of God's people. Anyway, it's Heber and his people who report to Jabin that the Israelites have assembled an army hoping to free themselves from the domination of the Canaanites.

So Jabin summons his general and orders him to take the army and destroy this Israelite uprising. And what Sisera finds couldn't please him more. The Israelites have encamped on Mount Tabor – a hill shaped like a truncated cone that pretty much stands on its own. It's surrounded by open plains on all sides. That means it's easy for Sisera to confine the rebel army. They're stuck on the hill. The Iron chariots he has work best on the flat, open field. So all he's got to do is wait on the plain below for the Israelites either to come down and fight him on the level ground, where he has all the advantages, or until they run out of supplies, give up, disband their army, and go home. Either way, the Canaanites win and their subjugation of Israel continues. What he doesn't have to do is attack them. It would be foolish to do so; first because attacking uphill isn't easy; and second because in such a battle his iron chariots would lose their mobility advantage. No, to win, all he has to do is sit tight and wait.

Or so he thinks. On the day of the Lord's choosing, Deborah orders Barak to attack the Canaanites. Militarily this is suicide. It means battling the Canaanites – who both outnumber the Israelites and who are far better equipped – on the terrain that favors them. For Sisera, it's like a dream come true. What he doesn't count on, however, is that the Lord is fighting for Israel. The chapter we read has a very brief account of the battle; but in the next chapter, which is the song of Deborah, she expands on things a bit. And what we learn is that the Canaanites have arrayed their battle line on what is the flood plain of the Kishon River – which is nothing more than a small brook most of the year. What happens, though, is that the Lord sends a flash flood down upon the Canaanites. The greater part of their army is swept away in a mighty torrent while their front few ranks, now in panic and disorder, face the attack of the Israelites. It's a total rout. And the funny thing about iron chariots is that they don't float so well. And I rather think that there's something very baptismal going on here with the Lord overthrowing the power of the enemy by means of water.

Only Sisera manages to escape the slaughter. At length he makes it to the tent of Heber the Kenite, the traitor, reasonably assuming that he'll be able to hide out there from his pursuers. Heber's not home; but his wife Jael is. And unlike her husband, she's faithful both to the Lord and her people. Hmm ... she's kind of like Deborah in that sense. When the men fail to do their duty, the Lord raises up faithful women to do it for them. This is highlighted by Sisera's words to Jael when he lays down in the tent exhausted. In Hebrew, what he actually tells her is this: "If someone comes along and asks, 'Is there a *man* here?' say 'no'." Again, this is the problem with all of Israel. There are no men – at least, none who are acting like men. And so it falls to a woman, in this case, Jael, to do the job that should have been done by men. With the only weapon at her disposal (one that speaks of hearth and home, no less), she drives a tent stake

through the head of the oppressor of God's people – which reminds us of Genesis 3, when the Lord promises that the Seed of the Woman will crush the serpent's head.

Okay, that's the story – along with some nice Christological connections; but what we really need to do is talk about how timely this story is for us in our day. It highlights what is one of the biggest problems facing our society at large and especially the Christian Church today. It's this: relatively speaking, there are no men. It's no secret that in the African American community, for example, there is a crisis of absent fathers – the direct result of which is that our prisons are filled with young black men who don't know how to be men, who never received a father's guidance, discipline, and direction – and who then perpetuate the problem when they produce but do not father children of their own. This is a growing problem that cuts across all cultures and races in our country.

But it's especially a crisis in the Church. I think we know intuitively that women, in general, are more attuned to spiritual matters than men. They are, on average, more regular in worship and Bible study and more consistent in practice – and if you analyzed the numbers in this or any other congregation, that truth would be borne out. It has led across Christendom to what has been called the feminization of the church. And don't get me wrong: feminine is good. We want the warmth, the nurturing, the personal connection that the feminine element brings. But we also need the masculine side: strength, precision, decisiveness, discipline. This is what we lose with the exodus of men from the church. And where these are lacking, the church tends to go soft on doctrine and practice – which is why we find the more feminized churches embracing such things as female clergy and gay marriage, and denying fundamental Christian truths like the atonement or the exclusivity of the Gospel. It happens whenever the men of the church don't act like men – whether they are present or not.

But let's bring this closer to home. There was a study that came out of Switzerland several years back which demonstrated that the single greatest factor in determining whether children, male or female, will become adults who regularly attend church is if their father did. And the results are startling. For example, if mom and dad both attended church regularly, then 33% of their children would be regular and another 41% would attend irregularly. About 25% would not attend at all. If mom alone was active and dad inactive, the children who become regular attenders drops from 33% to 2%. But get this: if dad was regular and mom inactive, the children who continue to be regular themselves rises to 38%. That's nineteen times higher. Now, there's a lot more to this study, and you have to understand that we're dealing with statistical averages; but what it shows is that children and adolescents are essentially hardwired to learn their own spiritual discipline and practice from their fathers. If dad thinks that the faith is important, if he leads his family to the Lord, then the chances are good that the ball will be successfully passed on to next generation. But if he fails, or if he doesn't think it's important, it's almost guaranteed that the ball will be dropped. Maybe the Lord knew what he was doing when he called upon men to assume the role of spiritual leadership in their families.

We praise God with humble hearts for Deborah and Jael and all the faithful women like them who have over the ages kept the flame of faith burning in the hearts of God's people, fulfilling not only their own assigned roles, but also stepping in to perform the roles of men who failed to do their duty and act as men of God. Thankfully, the Lord is faithful even when his people, especially his men, are not. But the question this account puts before us is this: Is there a man here? Repenting of our sins, our shortcomings, and our failures in this regard, and receiving again Christ's blood bought forgiveness, may God give us the courage and confidence to answer, "Yes", and by his grace answer his call to perform faithfully the roles he's assigned to each of us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!