

## Going to Jael for Murder

<sup>NRS</sup> Jdg 4:1 The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, after Ehud died.<sup>2</sup> So the LORD sold them into the hand of King Jabin of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor; the commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth-ha-goiim.<sup>3</sup> Then the Israelites cried out to the LORD for help; for he had nine hundred chariots of iron, and had oppressed the Israelites cruelly twenty years.<sup>4</sup> At that time Deborah, a prophetess, wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel.<sup>5</sup> She used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim; and the Israelites came up to her for judgment.<sup>6</sup> She sent and summoned Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali, and said to him, "The LORD, the God of Israel, commands you, 'Go, take position at Mount Tabor, bringing ten thousand from the tribe of Naphtali and the tribe of Zebulun.'<sup>7</sup> I will draw out Sisera, the general of Jabin's army, to meet you by the Wadi Kishon with his chariots and his troops; and I will give him into your hand.'" <sup>8</sup> 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."<sup>9</sup> And she said, "I will surely go with you; nevertheless, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the LORD will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman." Then Deborah got up and went with Barak to Kedesh.<sup>10</sup> Barak summoned Zebulun and Naphtali to Kedesh; and ten thousand warriors went up behind him; and Deborah went up with him.<sup>11</sup> Now Heber the Kenite had separated from the other Kenites, that is, the descendants of Hobab the father-in-law of Moses, and had encamped as far away as Elon-bezaananim, which is near Kedesh.<sup>12</sup> When Sisera was told that Barak son of Abinoam had gone up to Mount Tabor,<sup>13</sup> Sisera called out all his chariots, nine hundred chariots of iron, and all the troops who were with him, from Harosheth-ha-goiim to the Wadi Kishon.<sup>14</sup> Then Deborah said to Barak, "Up! For this is the day on which the LORD has given Sisera into your hand. The LORD is indeed going out before you." So Barak went down from Mount Tabor with ten thousand warriors following him.<sup>15</sup> And the LORD threw Sisera and all his chariots and all his army into a panic before Barak; Sisera got down from his chariot and fled away on foot,<sup>16</sup> while Barak pursued the chariots and the army to Harosheth-ha-goiim. All the army of Sisera fell by the sword; no one was left.<sup>17</sup> Now Sisera had fled away on foot to the tent of Jael wife of Heber the Kenite; for there was peace between King Jabin of Hazor and the clan of Heber the Kenite.<sup>18</sup> Jael came out to meet Sisera, and said to him, "Turn aside, my lord, turn aside to me; have no fear." So he turned aside to her into the tent, and she covered him with a rug.<sup>19</sup> Then he said to her, "Please give me a little water to drink; for I am thirsty." So she opened a skin of milk and gave him a drink and covered him.<sup>20</sup> He said to her, "Stand at the entrance of the tent, and if anybody comes and asks you, 'Is anyone here?' say, 'No.'" <sup>21</sup> But Jael wife of Heber took a tent peg, and took a hammer in her hand, and went softly to him and drove the peg into his temple, until it went down into the ground-- he was lying fast asleep from weariness-- and he died.<sup>22</sup> Then, as Barak came in pursuit of Sisera, Jael went out to meet him, and said to him, "Come, and I will show you the man whom you are seeking." So he went into her tent; and there was Sisera lying dead, with the tent peg in his temple.

Home. When you think about going home, about being home- I wonder where home is for you, what you see, what you smell, who is there.

You know, sometimes you have to leave home to find it. When I was a high school senior I was so ready to leave home, and spread my wings and fly. It wasn't anything against my mom- we actually had a great year. No, it was just this sense of wanderlust- I wanted to see new things, meet new people, and just be on my own.

Of course you have to be careful for what you ask for- because then when I moved down to Austin and had all that freedom, I really didn't know what to do with it. So many times I would find myself in the evening shuffling around the streets around campus, up Speedway, and over to the LBJ fountain that shoots a 100 feet into the air, not really having a clue what to do with myself.

Oh, I was doing fine in school- I loved my classes, and my roommate was great. There was nothing wrong- I was just out of sorts. I had stepped out of everything I had known and everything I had been, and I didn't really know quite who or what I was any more.

Then, I went back to visit my mom- it was the last weekend in October. I had been away for nearly three months at that point. And it was one of the best weekends of my life. It was particularly special- we didn't do anything incredible. It just felt so good to be home. To be back in my room. To sit at our kitchen table with the windows open and the cool breeze blowing all through the house, the fresh smell of laundry. Like pretty much every male freshman I came home with this ENORMOUS bag of laundry. Later, when I tried to figure out why it was such a good weekend for me- what I realized

it wasn't anything special. It was just being home. It was being in a place and with people where I was known, where I belonged. Home.

Well home was one thing the Israelites were not feeling. Last week we talked about the Israelites wandering for 40 years before winding up in the promised land- a land strangely, frustratingly filled with people already. Well the book of Judges follows the book of Joshua, and in Judges we hear about the Israelites trying to settle in and make this land feel like home- and it wasn't going very well.

And like we saw in Joshua, the people who lived in the land, the Caananites- they continued their attacks trying to push the Israelites out. But now in Judges we see a new problem- a new threat. The Israelites get comfortable enough from time to time, that when they aren't fighting with outsiders- they start fighting amongst themselves.

And with no Moses, and now no Joshua, God has to come up with something creative. And so from time to time, whenever things were really bad- God raises up judges among the people. Now a judge, a *shophet* in Hebrew, this is kind of a weird term. When the people were fighting amongst themselves and arguing back and forth judges did settle disputes, like we think of judges. But, the Caanites threatened them, judges would become a kind of warrior king, who would rise up and save the people just when they were about to be crushed.

Do you ever watch Judge Judy? She's the closest thing I can think of today of a judge in this old school way of thinking. I mean she does the arbitration thing ok and all, but then she'll get so angry- half the time I expect to see her jump off the bench and just start smacking the litigants around. If she did, if she just rose up with this huge sword in

her hand and led Burt, her bailiff into battle- she would be an Old Testament judge. And really, just think of the ratings. Who wouldn't watch that? It would be like Jerry Springer and a court show all rolled into one. (You didn't think people from Princeton watched day time TV, did you? What do you think we did all day- go to classes?)

So before Deborah, our judge of the day, the Israelites had a series of judges, but only three who are named. The first there's Othniel- he's kind of the model judge, the Judge Wapner of the bunch, if you will. The Israelites were being attacked by the Caananites, and when they cry out, God raises up Othniel. And the text says that the spirit of the Lord falls upon Othniel, and he leads an army and defeats the Canaanites. And the people had rest for 40 years after this. Nothing fancy. Just good, solid, judge work.

Then, after this, things start to break down a little- the judges get a little stranger. The second judge is Ehud. Now, if you ever want to do a Bible with young boys- the story of Ehud is the one for you. It goes like this. The Israelites again, slip into bad habits, and a Moabite King, King Eglon, starts to take them over. And then, the Israelites cry out- and God raises up a judge. Only it's not like Othniel this time- it's not straightforward and clear what God is doing. No Ehud is kind of an odd ball.

First off, he's a lefty. Now this may not seem like a big deal to us. But many of you know it wasn't until quite recently that the good and holy left handed nation has been freed from the oppressive tyranny of the jealous right-handers, the people I just like to call "Righty". Yes, the left-handers have risen up against Righty, and though he still tries to keep us down (I mean have you ever tried to use left-handed scissors, Lefty

please!) we are at least allowed to use our hands today. And whereas in the past people called us sinister and gauche, all words for left-handed, some people at least think of us now as 'creative' and 'unique'. But in the bad old days we left handers were all but persecuted. And some believe the roots for this left handed behavior is even Jewish in origin. We don't see much in the Bible itself, but the Talmud, which is a revered collection of explanations and stories, we find out that the chief of all devils has a name- and it is Samael- which is also the word for 'left'. And not only was he left handed, but because of him, anyone who used their left hand was thought to be in league with him. And so left-handed became synonymous with deceit and foul play even in today's enlightened time.

All this is to say that Ehud was left handed, and it goes without saying that it would defied belief for God to have picked a left-handed person to do much of anything, much less become a judge, the leader of the people. But this wasn't all- it wasn't just that he's left-handed, but he doesn't even fight openly and honestly like Othniel does- no, he's sneaky. Ehud goes to visit the King who is described as being this enormous Jabba the Hut kind of figure. And Ehud tells the king that he has a secret message for him. So the king makes everyone leave the chamber. Then Ehud tells the king and I quote, "I bring a message from God." Now believe me- the only people you want to hear tell you they are on a mission from God are the blues brothers. Period. Everone else is just crazy. See, the next thing he does, Ehud takes his left hand and pulls out a sword hidden on his right leg and thrusts it into the king's belly, and the text says the fat closes around it and goes into even further detail, which is what the kids love. Ehud then

leaves, locking the doors behind him, and walks out untouched. And then after Ehud, this sneaky judge, the kingdom had peace for 80 years.

The next judge, the strangest judge of all then pops up- a judge named Shamgar. And the only thing we really know about him is that he killed 600 Philistines with...an oxgoad. It's like the Monty Python and the Holy Grail- you know that part where they're in the forest and they meet the knights who say "Ni!" After making Arthur find two shrubberies for them, they tell Arthur that they won't let him live unless he cuts down the largest tree in the forest with...a herring. Well Shamgar kills 600 Philistines with an oxgoad. What's an oxgoad? It's a cattle prod. A long wooden cattle prod. Definitely not something you normally think of as a weapon in the ancient world. Definitely one of the stranger moments in the Bible.

So as you can see, things get progressively more unusual with the judges over time- Othniel is our straightforward warrior, Ehud is our left-handed assassin, and then Shamgar is our...well Shamgar is just strange.

But then we get to the Deborah story- the strangest of all. First off you'll notice that Deborah is a woman. In case you were wondering, yes, a female leader, a female military leader- yes, this is unusual in the ancient world. But this is actually not what's strange- the problem isn't that Deborah is a woman, the problem is that Deborah isn't acting like you'd expect. See, King Jabin of the Caananites has started attacking the Israelites with his general Sisera- and it's an incredibly serious situation. We learn that the Caananites haven't just been sitting around doing nothing in their defeat- the text mentions that Sisera is commanding chariots and the chariots are made of iron. And in

the ancient world the switch to iron is a big deal. The soft bronze weapons the Israelites are using are no match. It's like the Polish soldiers on horseback attacking the German tanks in the first days of World War 2- it just isn't going to work. And so Jabin and Sisera have turned the tables on Israel and oppressed them for 20 years. Now what is Deborah doing during this time? Is she getting the troops fired up for battle? Is she sneaking into Jabin's headquarters pretending to be on a mission from God? Is she even considering getting busy with an oxgoad? No. She's sitting under the palms. She's sitting under the palms hearing cases in small claims court.

So, the surprise of Deborah is that judge though she may be- she really isn't rising up and delivering Israel. No, she's so busy in court, she decides to outsource the job.

And her pick- her pick is a really timely one. Now I know there are strong feelings about getting all political in church. Believe me know. But I tell you, I just can't help it here. And it's not even my fault- it's the Bible. The Bible says that when the nation was facing it's greatest crisis, and the leader who could have been doing more to fix it weren't- well who does God raise up, but a guy with a really funny name. That's right- God raises up a guy named Barak. And it's even more meaningful to us here in the great Northwest, because where is Barak told to go? Why he's to set up shop at Mt. Tabor- right over in Southeast Portland off of Hawthorne.

So now we're thinkin' if Deborah isn't going to step up to the plate- thank goodness for Barak, right? Barak'll solve everything. He's go toe to toe with Sisera and all those chariots, right?

Well...as much as it pains me to say it, even Barak was not exactly the change Israel needed. In a very troubling exchange between Deborah and Barak, Barak tells

Deborah he's not going to face those iron chariots alone- that the only way he's going to go into battle is if she is by his side. I've quoted it before, but this is absolutely that moment in Raiders of the Last Ark when Indy is looking into the pit and sees all those snakes and his helpful friend says, "Asps...very dangerous- you go first!" Yeah, I've seen Patton. Saying, "Well there's no way I'm going if you're not going"- this is not what you hope for a general.

So Deborah isn't our hero. And Barak isn't our hero. And while it's true that together they route the Canaanites, Sisera, the leader- Sisera gets away.

And the story might have been over for the Israelites, except that Sisera winds up passing through a Kenite village, where this other woman, this other woman sees him, and opens her tent to him. The Kenites are friendly with the Israelites- at the beginning of Judges we learn that Moses' father-in-law is a Kenite- but they are not Israelites. So this other woman, this non-Israelite woman, she lures Sisera into her tent. Now she knows Sisera- everybody knows Sisera. You can't crush a people for 20 years and not become known. And giving him sleep inducing milk instead of water, she throws a carpet over top of him telling him not to worry- to just lie back and relax. Only this woman, this non-Israelite, does what the official judge and general can't- she puts an end to Sisera's reign of terror. Taking a page from Shamgar's book- she chooses the strange weapon of a tent peg and literally drives it into his Sisera's head.

So what do we do with such a strange story? Where is there good news here?

Well, it's good news, it's fantastic news that God works through people who don't exactly think of themselves as important, or leaders- or even terribly faithful or

religious. The pattern we see in this story- Deborah has the title of judge, but she doesn't really come through. Barak has the title of general- surely he'll save the day. But, not so much. No, the only hope for the Israelites rests in Jael- and she's not a judge, a general, she's not even an Israelite. She didn't wake up that morning thinking she was going to save the world- I bet she didn't even know what she was going to do when Sisera walked through her door.

I read an article a while back by Brian McClaren, a pastor who is doing some really interesting things. In the article he talks about the Wizard of Oz, the movie the Wizard of Oz, and how important it is for the church today. He says we've inherited a church that wanted to act like the Wizard. We wanted the church, and the church leaders, to be all knowing, to be confident, to have answers for our problems, and, a little bit like the Wizard blasting his threats from behind his little curtain, and we made churches into places that were a little intimidating, places to be seen maybe, but not heard.

McClaren's dream for the church, a dream I share, is a church not shaped by the Wizard, but by people like Dorothy. Now Dorothy isn't the likeliest leader in the world- she's a girl from Kansas who is lost in a strange world. She isn't all knowing or confident- she doesn't even really know where she's going. And she certainly isn't intimidating- in fact just the opposite, she's so welcoming she winds up collecting friends along the way, friends who find her safe enough that they can actually be themselves- one needing a brain, one needing a heart, and one needing courage. And even though she doesn't know how to solve their problems, they all agree to travel together, and it is as a community of friends that they finally make it home.

Beloved, I don't know about you, but there aren't many days I wake up feeling like the Wizard. There aren't many days I wake up feeling like a judge or a general. Most days I feel more like Jael, like Dorothy. Nearly every day I will read something or hear something and say, "I didn't know that!" Last week Will was showing me a magazine he has about camels- it turns out llamas are camels. I had no idea. And that's not even something all that complicated or important. No, there's so much I haven't seen, don't fully understand, questions I've never been asked before. And if God can only work through the usual suspects- the confident, the ones who act like they've mastered things, well we might as well stay in bed.

Last week, I was in Panera, finishing up this sermon. In the middle of the dining area were a bunch of high school students from Tualatin High School- they were students with physical and mental disabilities. I looked up there were three arm in arm going around the room- they had that lost look of people clearly searching for something. I was sitting close to one of the teachers, and feeling wizardly knowledge I offered to help. But the teacher very politely declined my offer- she said they were searching for the bathroom, and while it might take them a little longer than some to find it, they liked finding things, and they liked working together. And I took another look at those unlikely adventurers, smiling, and at home in one another's arms, and thought Jael would be smiling. **Amen.**