

## Uppity Women of the Bible – Part VII

Welcome to the latest installment in my occasional series of sermons entitled “Uppity Women of the Bible!” This is the seventh in the series, which has included looks at such uppity women in the Old Testament as the matriarchs Sarah and Rebekah, Shiprah and Puah (the Hebrew midwives mentioned in Exodus), Jochebed and Miriam (Moses’ mother and sister, respectively), Tamar, Ruth and Bathsheba (the scandalous ancestresses of Jesus), Hannah (the mother of Samuel) and the beauty queen, Esther. From the New Testament, we’ve heard about the ever-controversial Mary of Magdala, Martha and Mary of Bethany, the prophesying daughters of Philip the Evangelist, and Paul’s honored co-workers, Phoebe and Priscilla. Our last foray into the world of these Spirit-led ladies, or “Red Hot Mamas” as I called them one Pentecost, was a look at “Revolutionary Mary,” the mother of Jesus, who, contrary to her compliant reputation, was actually quite the subversive young person.

Now, those of you who’ve not heard me say this previously may take umbrage at the term “uppity.” With apologies to those of you have heard me on this topic before, let me explain myself. To begin with, some definitions: On-line dictionaries define “uppity” as “Taking liberties or assuming airs beyond one’s station; presumptuous.” It is an adjective most often applied to those in society who are expected to know their place as second-class citizens but who refuse to stay in that place. When I was growing up, I heard it applied to kids, people of color, and, of course, women. In recent years, what was meant as an epithet has become a badge of honor to those struggling to gain a sense of equality denied to those of their race or sex. A now-defunct feminist journal was called “Uppity Women Magazine.” Its website proclaimed, “This is a place for uppity women. You know who you are. You are a woman who refuses to keep your place, to limit yourself in any way, to live down to others’ expectations. You are a woman who gets up again and again, every time life knocks you down. You’ve learned how to survive.” There was an all women’s theatre troupe that called itself That Uppity Theatre Company. According to their website, “Our name reflects who we are: Bold, brave, willing to step outside the status quo in order to instigate social change, promote civic dialogue and produce transformative theatrical art of the highest quality.”

I grew up surrounded by uppity women. Both of my grandmothers were charming Southern ladies and both had backbones of iron, which they displayed upon necessity. Nearly all of my aunts were and are an opinionated, unbowed bunch. My mother’s streak of uppity-ness diminished along with her health but it is still what is remembered most by those who knew her the best. I married an uppity woman, which I’ll bet y’all have figured out by now, and together we have raised another. As I’ve said before, being the parent of an uppity woman can be difficult in the daily workings of life but it gives me great hope for the future. There are one or two other uppity women in this congregation. No, really, it’s true.

I have a great deal of admiration for uppity women and uppity people in general. They remind me of how far our society still is from the Beloved Community, the Kingdom of God, while at the same time inspiring me to stand up for anyone at the short end of a power equation. I think I come by this love of the underdog naturally. I come from a long line of people who were looked down upon by society’s elite. Some of my ancestors came to this country looking for opportunity, only to be greeted by signs saying, “Irish need not apply.” Others were here long before any European settlers, only to be chased from their ancestral lands in the verdant foothills of the Appalachians and the bountiful hunting grounds of Montana and the Dakotas. The ones who knew how to be uppity without raising the ire of the Powers That Be survived and thrived. I think it is from that part of my heritage, as well as from the Scriptures, that I have learned to be interested in issues of social justice, equality and fairness. Throughout the Bible, we read that God stands against the oppression of one set of people

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by another set. Indeed, many who regularly spend time reading the Bible will tell you that the Scriptures point to God's preference for the poor, the dispossessed and the underdog. I agree with that assessment and so I believe that the uppity women of whom I speak and uppity people in general are specially blessed by God because in their importunate pursuit of their rights and the rights of those like them, they are helping to move the world towards the Beloved Community.

With those preliminaries out of the way, let's turn to our two uppity women for this morning, Deborah and Jael. Their stories are probably less known to most of you than several of the others I mentioned. They are told in the Book of Judges, a tumultuous and bloody set of stories from the early days of the Children of Israel in the Promised Land. With our modern sensibilities about the deplorability of violence, these stories have fallen out of fashion and, indeed, the first seven verses of chapter four are the ONLY passage from Judges in the Revised Common Lectionary. As a result, we only get sanitized versions of the tales of Gideon and Samson in children's Sunday School and nobody talks about Jephthah's daughter or the Levite's concubine anymore. Perhaps those will be subjects for future sermons or a Wednesday night series. You know how I love to stir up trouble.

The Book of Judges covers several centuries of the history of the Hebrews between the death of Joshua, the great general who led them into the Promised Land, and the advent of Samuel, the final judge before the era of the kings. The book is built on a recurring pattern: the people of Israel forget how Yahweh has blessed them and begin to worship other gods and do other kinds of evil. As punishment or to bring them back to their promises, God allows their enemies to descend upon them and the tribes of Israel are defeated, oppressed or enslaved. Over time, they cry out to God for forgiveness and release and God raises up a judge – a hero possessed of the wisdom needed to guide them and the strength needed to free them. The enemy is defeated, the people are happy and faithful and all goes well until the judge passes from the scene. Then the cycle begins again.

There is a slight variation with the story of Deborah. Obviously, she is a woman, the only woman among the twelve judges. The people respect her wisdom and bring her their problems. Her name, by the way, derives from the word for "Bee," and, as the 17th century commentator Matthew Henry noted: "she answered her name by her industry, sagacity, and great usefulness to the public, her sweetness to her friends and sharpness to her enemies." But Deborah's people do not expect her to lead them into battle. For that, Deborah calls on Barak, a warrior from the area now dominated by King Jabin of Canaan and his general, Sisera. Barak is willing to go to war to rid his people of their oppressor but he wants to be sure that he really has God's blessing – he wants the prophetess to accompany his army and so she does. Barak and his ten thousand warriors meet Sisera and his army with nine hundred chariots in the dry wadi of the river Kishon. If that sounds like good odds for the Israelites, consider that the military advantage offered by the Canaanites' chariots was not dissimilar to modern tanks versus infantry and also that each chariot would have led a contingent of several infantrymen as well. Chapter five of Judges gives us some more detail about the battle – by the way, the poem or song which comprises chapter five is considered by scholars to be the most ancient part of this book, possibly composed shortly after the battle. It is also considered one of the finest pieces of ancient poetry extant. That Song of Deborah and Barak tells us that God intervened in the battle by sending a rainstorm which fed the river Kishon and flooded the wadi, trapping the less maneuverable chariots in the mud much like the Egyptians pursuing the Israelites in the Exodus had been trapped and making the Canaanites easy prey for the men of Naphtali and Zebulun, the Israelite tribes in that area. Deborah and Barak were successful and the power of King Jabin over those tribes was broken. Ultimately, Jabin was completely defeated and, as Judges 5:31 says in a familiar refrain, "And the land had rest forty years."

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There is another uppity woman in this story, however, that we've not yet met. Midway through the story of Deborah and Barak in chapter four, there is a seemingly throw-away verse 11: "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." It's a verse that seems of very little interest, unless you are familiar with the part of northwest Arkansas where my mother's family is from, where Heber Springs is a popular holiday spot. But the aftermath of the battle between the forces led by Sisera and the army of Barak shows the significance of this odd reference. Those of you who recently studied the Apocrypha with us in "Soup, Salad & Soul" may be reminded of the story of Judith and Holofernes. "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. 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. 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. He said to her, "Stand at the entrance of the tent, and if anybody comes and asks you, 'Is anyone here?' say, 'No.'" 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. 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." Isn't that a charming little story?

As I said before, a good deal of the Book of Judges is too gory and violent for our modern sensibilities. But, as always, in order to understand a scripture and what it means for our time, we must first look at it in its own context. In the case of the stories of the judges, this actually means two contexts: the context of the time in which the stories arose and the context of the time in which they likely came into the form in which we have them. Let's take these in chronological order. Before we pass judgment on Barak for taking advantage of a foe bogged down in the mud or on Jael for breaking the sacred laws of hospitality, we must put ourselves in their position. We must remember, for example, that Judges records that the Canaanites under King Jabin and General Sisera, "had oppressed the Israelites cruelly twenty years." To put this in perspective, this early Israelite culture was one in transition from that of nomadic herders to subsistence agriculture. They were used to lives of back-breaking toil, crop failures, disease, discomfort and short life spans. Few of us could endure such a life and yet this was not what they were complaining about. Life under the thumb of the Canaanites was worse. We can only imagine the constant threats of raids of pillage and rape, children whisked away to slavery or worse, for the Canaanites practiced human sacrifice. Is it any wonder that the Israelites finally took up arms? And what courage that would have taken – the Canaanites had iron swords and spears which would have cut through the bronze armor and weapons of the Israelites with ease. Biblical and military scholars believe that Sisera's iron chariots would have had iron scythes attached to the axels which would have caused untold slaughter to the civilians they were terrorizing and to any army that dared stand up to them. Without the immobilization of those chariots in the flooded wadi Kishon, Barak's army could not have succeeded. Even with the chariots eliminated, the victory of the men of Zebulun and Naphtali was remarkable. In the wake of Veterans Day, it is good for us to remember that it has been a long time since the armed forces

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of the United States of America took the field without a pronounced advantage in weaponry or manpower. Nevertheless, we rightly honor the courage of the men and women who have served our country in its wars. Can we do less for these heroes of Israel?

Jael would seem to be another matter entirely. Especially if we know how sacrosanct the rules of hospitality were and are considered by the nomadic cultures of the Middle East, it is difficult to justify Jael's actions against Sisera. But, again, let us consider the position Jael was in. Her husband, Heber, is absent from the action of this story. We must conclude that he was away somewhere, with the flocks perhaps. Jael is a woman alone, confronted by a fearsome warrior. Rev. Alex Joyner, pastor of Franktown United Methodist Church in Virginia writes that Jewish legend, which is, of course, prone to hyperbole, "says that (Sisera) was a giant of a man. It is said that he could freeze a lion in its tracks just by screaming at it. And he could destroy the walls of an enemy's city with a shout -- just like the Israelites had done at Jericho!" At any rate, Jael may have invited Sisera in to her tent to prevent him from forcing his way in, given him milk to drink to make him less dangerous and finally killed him because she feared what would happen when he awoke. Or, if she was aware of the ties between her clan and Israel, she may have acted out of the knowledge of what Sisera had done to her distant cousins and what he was likely to continue to do if he survived the battle. And if the Canaanites continued to dominate the Israelites, there was no guarantee they would not turn on the Kenites next. Not only were the Kenites related to the Israelites, but nomadic peoples have nearly always been the target of settled peoples over history or vice versa. A future with Sisera in it was more dangerous for Jael than a future without Sisera. There was no international peacekeeping force to which she could hand over Sisera, even if she managed to imprison him. There was no one who could "bring him to justice." We cannot judge Jael by 21<sup>st</sup> century, First World standards.

It is also useful to consider what this story would have meant to Israel at the time the Book of Judges came into final form. While these stories date back to the generations between 1200 and 1050 B.C.E., they were likely woven into what scholars call the Deuteronomistic History during or shortly after the Babylonian Exile in 587–538 B.C.E. The books of the Deuteronomistic History, Deuteronomy through II Kings, excepting Ruth, were meant to address the question most in the minds of the exiled Jews: "Has God forsaken and forgotten us?" What these books told them was, no, God has not forsaken Israel but Israel has forsaken God. These stories are stories of God's unending love for the people. Despite their continued abandonment of their promise to God, God will not abandon them but will continue to rescue them. In the Book of Judges, we see twelve such rescues, including that provided through the agency of Deborah, Barak and Jael. As we are finding in our study of Isaiah on Wednesday nights, God did send an unexpected rescuer to the Jews in Babylon in the person of the Persian King Cyrus. For the Chosen People throughout their troubled history, God has always been faithful in the long run no matter how dark the situation may seem at any given time.

The question remains, how do we, God's people in 21<sup>st</sup> century Lynnwood, gentile Christians grafted on to the tree of Israel, interpret this story of divine rescue through battle and death, this story of two uppity women who dare to take matters into their own hands to deliver the people from oppression? Let's start with the most obvious lesson: A woman's place is wherever God leads her to be! I continue to be absolutely baffled by the number of Christians who continue to be chained by the cultural expectations of days long gone by that women must take a secondary

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place to men in the church. It really doesn't take a very deep reading of the New Testament to see that neither Jesus nor Paul really advocated such a position. I'm greatly amused by the fact that the Roman Catholic Church does not use this reading from Judges as their Old Testament reading for this Sunday but instead substitutes the 31<sup>st</sup> chapter of Proverbs, which famously describes the ideal woman as a capable woman who runs her household while her husband sits with the judges and is respected in public. Come on, boys, what are you afraid of? Could it be that the all-male power structure of the Catholics are nervous about holding up Deborah as a role model lest the sisters of their faith rise up? I'm glad to belong to a congregation and a denomination that has long recognized the validity of the ministry leadership of women. I think the story of Deborah shows that we've got good precedent. As Rick Morley, rector of St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Basking Ridge, New Jersey, writes: "the fact that Deborah was a judge of Israel, and no one seems to even blink at that, means that women probably had a far greater role in the everyday life of Israelites, and the ancient near east as a whole, than the typical androcentric ancient texts usually reveal."

For me, part of the strength of Deborah's leadership was that she wasn't afraid to recruit the accomplished Barak to serve alongside her. In my previous career as a non-profit executive, I always reminded people who praised my work that as far as I was concerned my greatest accomplishment was in recruiting good people to work for me, giving them the resources they needed and letting them do their jobs. Deborah's example in this regard is a good reminder that none of us are self-sufficient. Not only do we need God's presence in our lives but we also need the perspectives and strengths that other members of the Body of Christ bring. God uses seemingly ordinary people like Deborah or you or me but God uses us in combination. To quote Matthew Henry again, "The greatest and best are not self-sufficient, but need one another."

Ultimately, though, whenever I read one of these stories of God's people in battle, I feel that I must find a way to hear God's truth in that story without resorting to the myth of redemptive violence, the idea that somehow violence is necessary to God's plan. I simply do not believe that our Loving Creator requires us to take up violence in order to serve the Beloved Community – the two ideas seem mutually exclusive to me. After all, we hold up as the human exemplar the man who refused to take up arms against oppressors even to the point of his own torture and execution. The words of Jesus ring in my ears: "Love your enemies, bless those who persecute you... turn the other cheek... those who live by the sword shall die by the sword..." I am reminded of the words of Paul to the Ephesians: "...our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." When I read the story of Deborah and Barak and Jael, I see in part a story of larger-than-life superheroes, much like the cartoon characterizations of Deborah and Barak I chose for the front of the bulletin this morning. Like the comic books or graphic novels of today, the story can be read on at least two levels – the literal, good guys vs. bad guys, simple entertainment level or the more nuanced, metaphorical level that asks us to consider who or what it is that we are fighting against, what that fight will demand of us and how we shall win. As Paul also wrote in Ephesians, I believe that we are to take up not literal swords, but the sword of the Spirit, the helmet of our promised salvation by the faith of Christ Jesus, the faith that is also our shield. On our feet, we are to put the shoes of peace as we also don the breastplate of righteousness and the belt of truth. We arm ourselves for

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a spiritual fight against spiritual forces. Towards our neighbors, near and far, we are to offer only love.

So, that's our look at a couple of uppity women in the Bible. The story of Deborah and Jael is a story of war against oppression. We, too, must fight against oppression but we are to do so in a very different way. Let us remember, as we continue to remember our Veterans, that the Prince of Peace is also the champion of the oppressed and that Jesus calls on us to stand with the oppressed and against the oppressor but to do so in a way that reflects his love for both Creator and Creation. May God grant us the wisdom, the courage and the compassion to fulfill that calling. Amen.