**Under the Palm Tree of Deborah**

Imagine for a moment the challenge that awaited the people of Israel having now crossed the Jordan River and undertaken the conquest of the Land of Canaan. They faced strong, entrenched Canaanite city-states with military prowess and no intention at all of surrendering their land to foreign invaders. These are the people of Num 13: There we saw the Nephilim [the ‘sons of God’ the ‘warriors of renown’ of Gen 6]; and to ourselves we seemed like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them (Num 13:33).

For their part, the Israelites are a loose confederation of tribes and clans whose cohesion as a people is based on their allegiance to Yahweh, the Law of Moses, a promise that the land was their divine right to possess, and charismatic leadership of Joshua.

But as we join our story today Joshua, the last of Israel’s great charismatic leaders, is gone. They have no political state. No ability to raise and conscript armies. No tax base, no economy, no trade, just what agrarian enterprise they could put together or coopt in the land. It just seems like such a hopeless enterprise to me.

I wonder if they also thought, like Paul, like the Thessalonians, that the kingdom of God would materialize today or tomorrow?

But for 200 years the people of Israel would strive to consolidate their place in Canaan; their campaigns were a mixture of success and failure (see Judges 1-3). It was not until the reign of Solomon would the realize the consolidation of political over Judea proper.

In the Text

Once Joshua is gone can you guess what happened next?

Then the Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and worshiped the Baals; and they abandoned the Lord, the God of their ancestors, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt… (Judges 2:11).

To remedy the situation: And then the Lord raised up judges, who delivered them out of the power of those who plundered them (Judges 2:16).

So the Judges is part of the broader Deuteronomist History, that is, the people obey and the Lord drives out all before them, the relapse to worship the Baals and the Lord delivers them into the hands of their enemies.

By the way, since we are heading into Year B with Advent, we will spend our OT time in the books about confederacy and monarchy (Judges and 1 & 2 Samuel, as well as the Writings, e.g. Ruth, Esther, Proverbs), so we’ll begin the year with a five-week series in Epiphany on Job, that great counter-Deuteronomistic biblical story.

The first judge is Othniel under whom Israel had 40 years rest, then rebellion (Judges 3:9)

Ehud, 80 years rest, then rebellion (Judges 3:15)

Shamgar, who kills six hundred Philistines with and oxgoad, which is warm work I imagine (Judges 3:31)

And so we come to Deborah “Honey Bee” of Lappidoth, the fourth to judge Israel, a prophetess.

Deborah summons Barak “Lightning” son of Abinoam, of Kedesh far to the north in Naphtali who becomes her collaborator in bringing the King of Jabin to heel.

[Insert Map of Israel During Judges]

Deborah used to sit under a Palm tree in the hill country of Ephraim between Ramah and Bethel.

Why a palm tree? She sits under a palm because it is the symbol of “the oasis, the place of fertility in the midst of the wilderness” and it is the symbol of the image of the woman.

Of the woman in the Song of Songs the man declares, your stature is like that of the palm… (Song of Songs 7:7-8). Of the righteous the Psalmist declares …the righteous will flourish like a palm (Ps 92:12). Deborah sits under her palm tree in the hill country of Ephraim.

Why the hill country is because that is where the Israelites could safely dwell, until they had the divine command to take on the plain dwellers. The plains were not only best for agriculture but they gave control over trade. Nobody really wanted the hills. Good for some grazing, but not great.

When I was in Idaho in one of my retirements (I’ve had 3-three!) I bought a six-acre plot of which 5 and half acres were hills. Quite useless from a human point of view but it is satisfying owning a small mountain.

Deborah is a remarkable woman, the only female to ever fulfil the role of judge in Israel, and to the best of my knowledge, therefore the only female political leader in Israel’s history, that is until Golda Meir, the modern Israeli Prime Minister.

There were four other prophetesses in Israel’ history (Miriam, Ex 15:20-21; Hulda, 2 Ki 22:14, Noahdiah, Neh 6:14; and Isaiah’s wife in Isa 8:3. All pretty much minor fleeting characters.

But under the palm Deborah she hears the word of the Lord. And oh boy, it’s a good one.

Barak son of Abinoam is the great general of Naphtali, far to the north. He is a man with 10,000 men at arms, and she “summons” him. He probably got a messenger everyday from one of the tribes or clans… come and bring your troops to my area and help us. But when Deborah summons him he comes.

[Picture of Mt. Tabor looking east, with the Wadi Kishon to the right]

Deborah instructs Barak to assemble his troops on Mount Tabor because they are safe there from Sisera’s chariots, until the moment arrives to descend and engage in battle. When Sisera hears that Barak is on Tabor the assembles his 900 chariots on the plain below. And at the right moment Deborah says “Up! For this is the day on which the Lord has given Sisera into your hand (Judges 4:14).

The narrative doesn’t say how they defeat a much superior enemy, but they do. The Song of Deborah in chapter 5 says only that The stars fought from heaven, from their courses they fought against Sisera. The torrent Kishon swept them away, the onrushing torrent… (5:20-21). So a providential rainstorm perhaps mired the chariots.

So not only is the great prophetess calling the shots, the final blow to Sisera is delivered by the Jael wife of Heber, who tells the pursuing Barak, check my tent for the one you pursue, I think you will find him incapacitated (with a stake through his skull).

Said Deborah… 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. (Judges 4:8-9)

The guys are not going to be taking credit for this victory.

**From the Text**

What can we learn for our lives today from the story of this great leader in Israel, a woman who towered above her contemporaries in courage and audacity, in hearing and proclaiming the word of the Lord?

When we ask ‘Why was this story preserved? What does it intend to teach?’ The first thing to note is that our passage highlights the prominence and equality of women in leadership in what we know to be an entirely patriarchal narrative story world of the OT. We cannot see the barriers, the resistance, the oppression that Deborah overcame to fulfill her ministry as a prophetess. What a brave and audacious woman she was. What a role model and profile in courage for all women!

One of the things I love about the Nazarene polity is its views on the equality of the genders with regard to leadership and ministry. In our Manuel the CoN “…affirms the historic right of women to be elected and appointed to places of leadership, including the offices of both elder and deacon.” Further, “…In this redemptive community, no human being is to be regarded as inferior on the basis of social status, race, or gender.”

By the way, the new board met last night and it is 70% women. So this is a very fitting message for this week. The leadership of women in our congregation is so important and we are blessed. I think the board should be renamed Under Deborah’s Palm Tree.

All of this ought to inspire us today to continue the social project of gender equality in our culture, an equality which is slowly emerging in society but by no means fully realized on so many levels. Access to promotion, equal pay, freedom from harassment are all areas society has a long way to go.

And isn’t it a wonderful development that our neighbor to the south will now have its first woman, and woman of colour at that, as a vice-president. Kim Campbell will finally have some company at the top in North America.

I also take this “from the text.” An important aspect of the story is the relationship between the great warrior Barak and the Prophetess Deborah. The man of war knows that his might is not the determining in the battle. 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.”

He knows that without the presence of the Lord, represented by Deborah at the actual battle, it is just 10,000 warriors against 900 chariots. The great warrior is smart enough to know that it is only Yahweh that brings the victory, no matter how much military might you have.

And we will only see God’s fullest will realized among us as we work together, men and women, those with might and those with vision, for it is the proclamation of the Lord’s good news that we now strive to advance.

And finally this. Audacity. We often find this theme in the story of Israel wherein the odds are so great against the victory of Yahweh’s people, that it defies common sense to believe. “Between faith and reason there is a lot of room for mystery” (God and the Philosophers: The Reconciliation of Faith and Reason, p. 234). As we contemplate the next phase of ministry for our church may be have the gift of audacity of Deborah. May we have her bravery, her determination to stand in the face of all odds to proclaim the Word of the Lord.

And if we do, it will be as in the days of Deborah:

And the land had rest for forty years. (Judges 5:31)