

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Sunday, July 31, 2022
10am

Text: Judges 4:1-10, 23-24 [NRSVUE]

[prayer]

This story from the Book of Judges appears as a lectionary reading only once every three years, and it is an alternate reading, which means it is not read or taught much at all in our churches. One reason Judges is not popular is because Judges is one of the most violent books in the Bible. War, murder, rape, dismemberment – Judges does not shy away from bluntly cataloging the violence human beings inflict upon each other. But because we affirm that “all Scripture is God-breathed and useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (1 Tim 3:16-17, NIV), we believe that the Holy Spirit can use even the most challenging parts of Scripture to shape us as disciples. And so today we receive this story from the Book of Judges about a woman named Deborah, and we listen for what the Spirit is saying to the church.

In the Bible, Judges follows the Book of Joshua, another violent book that tells the story of Israel’s invasion of the Promised Land. Once upon a time God said to Abraham, “To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates, the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites” (Gen 15: 18-21).

These are the people groups that shared the Promised Land with Israel and Israel was forever going to war with them, particularly the Canaanites. At this point in history Israel is not a unified nation-state; there is no king upon the throne. Instead, she is a loose confederation of tribes led by tribal elders and a judge. Judges were leaders appointed to adjudicate disputes and lead the tribes in battle.

During the period of the judges, Israel's history follows a predictable pattern. The Israelites do evil in the sight of God and abandon God's teaching, so God gives them over to their enemies, who oppress them. The Israelites then cry out to God to deliver them. God has mercy on them and raises up a judge who not only defeats their enemies in battle but also teaches them how to live according to God's law. Israel then enjoys a period of peace and prosperity, until the judge dies, and the people begin to behave badly again. But over the course of the book the judges become less and less effective, until Israel descends into moral chaos and civil war.

There are nineteen female characters in the Book of Judges, more than any other book in the Bible, but Deborah stands out because of her unique leadership role. She is the only female judge, and she sits in judgment during a period of immense uncertainty. War is looming. Her family name – “wife” or “woman of Lappidoth” – literally translates to ‘woman of fire.’ Like the pillar of fire that led her people through the desert generations before, Deborah's leadership is a torch, lighting the way through a dark and desperate time. But I also imagine that Deborah had to have some serious fire in her bones to command authority as a woman in a male-centered world.

The question is: How did Deborah keep that fire burning?

Our Scripture lesson says that Deborah had a favorite palm tree. And she would sit under that palm tree and take in the beautiful view of the hill country around her – their gentle green slopes, and the sheep and goats that grazed upon them. And as she sat there under the palm tree, she would look and listen for God. Deborah was not just a judge; she was also a prophet. And a prophet trains the eyes and ears of their soul to notice what God is doing in the world. Deborah would sit under her palm tree, and she would practice noticing and listening. She would practice the discipline of being still before God. And out of this stillness would emerge the wisdom to guide her people.

Spiritual stillness does not require physical stillness. Sometimes my spirit is most quiet and able to hear the voice of God when my body is occupied with a repetitive movement. I know people who pray while they knit, chop vegetables, run on the treadmill, mow the lawn. Deborah was probably trained in the handicrafts of her people, so likely her hands were also doing something while she prayed. We often struggle in our prayer lives because we think we can only pray when we are sitting still with our hands folded and our heads bowed. But when I invite you to join me in an attitude of prayer, I am talking about the posture of your spirit and not necessarily your body. It does not matter if your body is fidgeting, so long as your spirit is quiet and attentive before God. The trick is learning how to create the conditions that allow your spirit to be still.

When I was in seminary, I went regularly to morning prayer in the divinity school's chapel. The prayer service was led by my Episcopalian and Anglican peers. Monday through Friday we would gather in Goodson Chapel at 7:45am to pray the morning office. The service would begin with several minutes of silence. And then the person leading would walk to the front of the chapel and kneel. That was the sign for all of us to join them in kneeling on the hard concrete floor and praying aloud the words of confession. Throughout the service our bodies would rest in various postures: sitting, kneeling, standing, bowing, making the sign of the cross. I had never had a confident prayer life before I learned how to pray the morning office. It was the ritual of the motions, more than the words of the prayers, that trained my spirit to be still before God. Only when I am out in nature do I experience the same kind of peace and clarity I experienced on those mornings at Goodson.

That chapel was my palm tree; it was the place where I could go and meet God. In that space I discerned parts of my calling to ordained ministry; I came to appreciate the power of praying in community with other people; I learned how to lead others in prayer; and I made peace with the discipline of silence. Above all, though, I learned the value of keeping a regular appointment with God. I am better equipped to face the plot twists of life when I spend daily time with God in prayer. Sometimes that prayer has words, but often it is just sitting in the presence of God, soaking in the assurance of God's loving presence.

God asks us to trust Him, to allow us to be used and moved according to His divine purposes. That trust is developed through a close relationship with God, and prayer is one of the cornerstones of that relationship. When we don't prioritize that relationship, our spiritual foundation grows weak. Just like any other trusting relationship, a healthy relationship with God requires time, attention, and commitment. I like how our artist for this week's image describes Deborah's prayer life: "attending to God with fierce trust."¹

¹ Artist statement for "In Tune" by Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman. A Sanctified Art, LLC. sanctifiedart.org.

Deborah knew the value of cultivating spiritual soil where her trust in God could put down deep roots. Her story in Judges 4 and 5 is actually the story of three people: Deborah; her military commander, Barak; and a foreign woman named Jael. When Deborah receives word from the LORD that it is time for Israel to move against the Canaanites, she summons Barak. But Barak hesitates at God's command. He tells Deborah that he will only go to battle if she goes with him. This an unusual request because women do not go to war. Unlike Barak, Deborah does not hesitate. She agrees to go with him, but she warns Barak that when Israel overthrows the Canaanites, the glory will not belong to Barak, but to a woman, because Barak hesitated to trust God's word. And in the end, she is right: Israel defeats the Canaanites, but it is not Barak who kills the Canaanite general Sisera. Instead, it is the foreign woman Jael. She lures Sisera into her tent and murders him with a tent peg. *(I chose not to read that part of the story aloud, for obvious reasons.)*

Deborah's actions stand apart from Barak's and Jael's because they are grounded in the discipline of prayer. When the pressure of war bore down on her, and the moment of decision came, Deborah was able to hear and trust the clear command of God because she had cultivated quiet space where she could distinguish God's voice from the clamor around her.

Do you have a palm tree – a place where you can go and meet God? What is the place or activity where you feel your spirit grow quiet and still before the LORD? The discipline of spiritual stillness is essential if we seek to follow the way of Jesus. Like Deborah, Jesus made regular space in his life for prayer and quiet reflection before his Father in heaven.

The discipline of spiritual stillness is also an essential practice as a faith community. Every time I walk through the main entrance of this church I pause and gaze upon the chapel at the end of the hall. And I dream about a regular prayer meeting in that chapel, where every week a group of people called to the ministry of prayer gather to pray for this church and its mission here in Coeur d'Alene. And then I realized that perhaps that dream is an invitation from God to start a prayer ministry here at Community UMC. So, starting in August, once a week I will be in that chapel praying for this church. And I will share the day and time that prayer meeting is happening so anyone who would like to join me can come and pray for the church, too.

As we attend to the business of our lives and to the business of the church, may we always attend first to the movement of the Holy Spirit. Let's find our palm tree, church, and let's sit under it together and attend to God with fierce trust.

Amen.