

## Deborah: Be Available

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Judges 4: 1-7, 14, 23

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There was a pastor who approached biblical facts as though every single one in the congregation were going to show up on national television on a bible trivia show. From the children in Sunday School to the adults in study groups, he was a personal pop quiz generator. You could hear him going down the hall firing away at the children.

*"Who was the first king of Israel?" (Saul) "How many children did Jacob have?"(12) "Which church in the book of Revelation is named after a famous American city?" (Philadelphia). One of his favorites questions to stick somewhere in the middle of a rapid fire quiz was, "Where in the bible does it say, 'Give me liberty, or give me death?'" (not in the Bible)*

Strangely, his enthusiasm for the bible carried over into the church. Children actually loved it and many adults actually paid more attention to their bibles just hoping to catch the pastor at his own game.

But this pastor really stumped them as he began a sermon series on the critical role of women in leadership in the bible. *"There are many women who held critically important positions in the bible,"* he began, *"There was Paul's assistant, the deacon Phoebe. [check] Lydia was a central figure in the beginning of the church in Philippi."* [check], Dorcas was an honored seamstress whom Peter raised from the dead [check]. (Yes, she is part of the lesson in the study, too.)

Then the one that stumped most everyone: *"And of course you all remember the work of Mrs. Lappidoth."* *Mrs. Lappidoth?* *"Who on earth is Mrs. Lappidoth? Is this a trick?"* They wondered. Then he read a verse from our Old Testament lesson. *"At that time Deborah, a prophetess, **wife of Lappidoth**, was judging Israel."* *"Unfair! Unfair!"* People were thinking, *"Lots of us know who Deborah is."*

(John Jewell, "Mrs. Lappidoth," November 17, 2002, online  
Revised Common Lectionary)

Today our study is, as the sermon title hints, about the wife of Lappidoth, better known as Deborah. In the Book of Judges, Deborah was the only “judge” who actually settled disputes with her judgment. While the Book calls other leaders of Israel “judges,” Deborah was both leader and one who actually filled today’s understanding of what a judge did, and she was a prophetess, too. And, yes, she the only woman who was a judge of Israel.

Let’s read from Judges chapter 4:1-9

<sup>1</sup>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-goim. <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 [a river] 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.

God did bring victory to the Israelites. Deborah, God's messenger, became the nation's deliverer when Israel was in mortal danger. The wonderful thing about the story of Deborah is that there is no great explanation of why Deborah was leading Israel, or what exceptions God might have made to the Hebrew patriarchal system so that a woman could lead Israel. It is simply, *"Deborah was judging Israel."*

I love the fact that Barak is now a name all of us now know, since Barak Obama came along (even becoming a Nobel Peace Prize winner this past week!). And it's obvious that the Barak in this passage was leaning heavily upon Deborah for her leadership. Some of us think he was just one of those people who like being part of a team, more secure that way, while others see him as lacking confidence for the task. Whatever was the case, looking at Deborah, we can see that she was a woman who knew God and spoke for God, clearly and without hesitation. And when told by Barak that he would not go unless she would go with him, she said, "O.k., I'll go with you." We don't know how full her daily schedule was as a judge, but it is striking that Deborah was available to God. She was simply ready to do whatever it took for the prophecy to be completed. No hesitation.

Now, how about us, you and me? Do we talk about what needs to be done, and then sit back and watch to see if someone will do it (someone else, that is)? "It would be great to have our young children sing together in a choir." Someone said that more than 9 years ago, and the Joy Choir—now with well over 35 children--was born. Why? Because some members thought it could be done; then they made themselves available to actually DO it. They began a wonderful ministry among us!

I think it takes some Deborahs among us—not just as people of good judgment-- but also people who see ways that God is calling us forward. I think of the positive experiences so many children have in the Upwards basketball program we sponsor at Fairfield. Just two years ago, after we got our Family Center, the possibility of having Upwards BB became reality as two people made themselves available to lead it and others signed on to fill the positions as coaches, referees, timekeepers, speakers, and those who would make and sell hot dogs & coffee & refreshments. It took a team, and people gathered together to see that the hope was realized! They made themselves available.

I wonder how you may have responded to the Vision Task Force's Survey, which asks about what you would like to see in the future. If you wrote an idea down—a hope you have for this church--how might you be available to help that hope become reality? Perhaps you cannot lead it, but could you support it somehow, behind the scenes, or in other ways?

We are blessed by the community working together here at Fairfield as a people of faith. We always hold out the expectation and hope that each

person here would find a place of spiritual growth and nurture, as well as a place to serve one another for Christ. No matter who else we may ever be to other persons, we are being most who it is we were created to be when we are fulfilling the purpose God has for our lives.

We can hold fast to the truth that our identity as children of God is centered in who we are in the eyes of God more than it is in the eyes of persons around us. To God, we are no longer the "wife of Lappidoth" or the "wife of someone," or the "husband of someone," or the "son or daughter of someone;" -- we are the unique, gifted individual God has created. The one who prays is just as worthy as is the one who ladles the soup for the hungry or the one who sets up the room for the homeless, or the one who leads songs of praise to lift our hearts in worship . . . many gifts, many ways to be available and to act when we are needed. Consider your own gifts. Deborah had gifts of wisdom, leadership, and divine prophecy for a troubled nation, and she willingly served God in a way only she could do. Our identity is in who we are for God. We each are valued for serving God in ways only we can do, each of us, bearing unique gifts and abilities for the building up of the body of Christ, wherever we are.

*Dear God, thank you for the unique abilities we each have. Help us to be available to serve you in the coming week. And in this community bound together by your love, led by the Spirit, and resting in the resurrection hope of Jesus Christ, may we serve you with gladness. Amen.*