

Leadership: Ehud and Deborah

Judges 1-5; Judges 5:1-9

We ended our story last week with a covenant renewal ceremony. Having led the children of Israel into the Promised Land and given allotments of land to each of the twelve tribes, Joshua called all Israel together to renew their vows to God. We will serve God, not the gods of other lands, they promised. Then Joshua went home to farm his new land until he died.

That's worth commenting on – the fact that Joshua had led a successful military invasion of a land and then became a private citizen. Israel did not declare him king. I can't overstate how weird this is for its time. Every one of the dozens of little city states in Canaan that they conquered had a king. Egypt had a king. Everybody had kings. But Israel, despite having an obvious choice, did not. I have said several times that when looking for the light of God within the sometimes rough and brutal stories of the Old Testament, we should always pay attention to the things that feel weird, things that break the norms of the culture. God speaks best through the weird. This remains true today: the more comfortably we fit into our cultural context, the harder it is for God use us or even to get through to us, but God can usually find openings to speak through weirdness. Anyway, this is one of those weird times. The new "nation" of Israel was not a kingdom. It was a loose confederacy of independent tribes, without any hereditary leadership class. Instead, families and clans settled their own problems, and when there was a need for central leadership, for instance, in a time of war, God would choose a leader. Then, when that crisis was over, that leader – like Joshua – would go back to the farm. Weird. Weird. Weird.

Ah, you might be saying, but why would there be war? Joshua had conquered all the land. There weren't any enemies left to be a problem. We saw that last week, in Joshua 11 and 12, which were just lists of all the cities and kings that Israel had conquered. Yeah, about that . . . it turns out that those lists of victories in Joshua were more in the nature of "To-Do Lists," because the next book in the Bible, the Book of Judges, starts right out with a long list of all the cities and nations that Joshua hadn't actually gotten around to defeating. And some of the cities are the same ones listed as victories in Joshua 11. In fact, all Joshua's conquest seems to have accomplished is to take enough of the land to force the remaining Canaanites to deal with the fact that the Hebrews and their weird single-deity religion were there to stay.

But, no, there were lots of cities in the land that were still ruled by Canaanites. To make matters even more complicated, about the same time that the Israelites were moving into the land from the east, there was another group of invaders moving into Canaan from the west, across the Mediterranean Sea. This one of the great migrations of history, a group of people coming maybe from Crete who settled all around the Mediterranean. The ones who landed along the coast in Canaan were called the Pelushtim, but in English we usually say Philistines. This is what you call "foreshadowing." The Philistines aren't going to appear in today's story, but we'll see them again. For now, what matters is that Israel absolutely did not conquer all the land. There was still plenty of war to go around.

Things fell into a sort of pattern for Israel. The Hebrews would relax, get comfortable, make friends with their neighbors, and start worshiping their neighbors' gods. At that point, some foreign or Canaanite king would rise up and conquer some Israelite lands, enslaving the Hebrews, who at that point would remember the God who brought them out of Egypt and cry out

to the Lord for help. Then the Lord would choose a leader – the English Bible calls these leaders “judges,” but the Hebrew word means something like “one who sets things right,” and that can happen either in a courtroom or on a battlefield. That “judge” that God chose would drive out the oppressor and restore peace until the next time the Hebrews got comfortable and the pattern started over. The Book of Judges is about these leaders.

So there was one time when the King of Moab – a land on the east side of the Jordan River – grew strong and attacked the southern Israelite tribes, captured some of their territory, and forced the Israelites to pay large sums annually. Judges calls this Moabite ruler King Eglon, but I’m not sure if that was his real name or just what the Israelites called him, because it means something like “Fatted Calf.” Anyway, Eglon held power over the southern tribes of Judah and Benjamin for some eighteen years, collecting annual tribute from them. After eighteen years, though, when time for the tribute came, the tribe of Benjamin sent the payment by the hand of a man named Ehud, a left-handed man. Hang on to that detail.

Ehud arrived at King Eglon’s court, showed the tribute money, and was ushered into the throne room, where the king lay reclining. He was, in fact, a little bit like a fatted calf. King Eglon heaved himself to his feet to receive his money. Ehud showed him the gold but then said, “O King, I also have a private word for you.” Fun fact here: the Hebrew for “word” – *davar* – can also be translated “thing,” so Ehud *could* have been saying, “I have a private thing for you.” Hang on to that detail. Anyway, King Eglon dismissed his courtiers and said, “Yes?” Ehud waited until the door was closed, then stretched out his right hand with the tribute money. King Eglon stepped forward to take it, and Ehud reached with his left hand over to his right side, where a short sword was concealed. Taking the sword, he drove it deep into King Eglon’s ample gut. The king died there, and as he died, his muscles loosened and his bowels emptied on the floor beside him. Ehud slipped out and locked the doors.

Soon King Eglon’s officials came back to check on him. “How long is that Hebrew going to take? You want to knock on the door?”

“Sure, I’ll just . . . oh, wait.”

“What is it?”

“Smell that. I think he’s . . . um . . . on the Jonah.”

“What, with a Hebrew in there with him? I’m going in.”

“You just do that. I’ll wait out here.”

“I suppose I could give it a few more minutes.”

In the delay, Ehud got clear of the court, crossed the Jordan, and sent word to the Israelites, “King Eglon is dead! Now is the time to rise and throw off the yoke of tyranny! Who’s with me!” Ehud led the Hebrews to victory and delivered them from Moab. The land had peace for a couple of generations.

But the pattern resumed eventually, this time in the northern regions of Canaan, north of the sea of Galilee, in lands allotted to the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun. In that region was the city-state of Hazor. This is one of those cities that the Book of Joshua claims was conquered by Israel, but it seems to have been not so conquered after all, because it was ruled by a powerful

Canaanite king named Jabin, who had a great army led by a general named Sisera. With that army, Hazor wielded power over the northern Israelites for twenty years.

Then God raised up a judge. Now one of the things that happens when God calls a leader – as opposed to having, say, a royal line of kings – is that God doesn't play by the rules. We've talked about this before. God seems to delight in calling unexpected leaders. This is a thing that we United Methodists probably should keep in mind as we continue fighting over what sorts of people God can call as leaders in the church. We can make rules and draw limits if we want, but God doesn't pay any attention. Anyway, the judge that God raised up this time was named Deborah.

Except for being female in a world where all leaders were male – weird! – Deborah was a more traditional “judge,” because when we meet her, she's sitting under a tree hearing cases and settling disputes for the northern tribes of Israel. But the Bible also calls Deborah a “prophet,” one to whom God speaks directly, and in that capacity, Deborah sent for a man from the tribe of Naphtali named Barak. “I have a message for you from the Lord, Barak.”

“Yes?”

“Thus says the Lord, You are to raise an army and lead it against Hazor and set Israel free from King Jabin and Sisera.”

“Me?”

“You.”

“How come God speaks to you, but I'm the one who has to go fight Sisera? He has iron chariots, you know.”

“Look at it this way: You're the one who'll get all the glory.”

“Great. Write it on my tombstone, why don't you? Look, I'll do it, but on one condition. You go with me. Do you believe this is God's word enough to risk your own life?”

“I do. And yes, I'll go with you to prop up your faith, if you want. But because you have so little faith of your own, you won't get the final glory, either. A woman will.”

So Deborah and Barak headed out to raise an army from the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun. That sort of thing is hard to keep secret, and soon word got to Hazor. Sisera summoned his troops and brought out his iron chariots to put down the Hebrew rebellion. Barak and Deborah watched them approach, and Deborah said, “This is your day, Barak. Take your men and fight. The Lord is going before you and will give you the victory.”

Barak and his army met Sisera's army on the plain, and just as Deborah had promised, the Canaanites were routed. The soldiers from Hazor fled on foot, leaving their chariots in the dust, and the Hebrews pursued them. Few escaped, but one who did was the biggest prize of all. Sisera, the commander, got away and fled alone across the hills until he came to a nomad's encampment. This was a camp of the Kenites, an ancient nomadic people that claimed no land and thus managed to maintain neutrality during wars. They were, however, marginally connected to Israel. Moses' father-in-law, the priest of Midian, had been a Kenite. Anyway, Sisera recognized this neutral camp and ran to the largest tent, where he was met by a woman named Jael. “Help me!” he cried. “The Hebrews are after me! Give me a place to hide!”

“Come in,” said Jael. “Can I get you something to drink?”

“Some water, please.”

“Here’s some nice warm milk. Sit down. Relax.”

Sisera did. He drank the warm milk – something so soothing about it – took a deep breath, lay down concealed under a blanket, and went to sleep. It had been a hard day.

Some time later, Barak and his men arrived at Jael’s tent. “Have you seen a general come by here?”

“You mean Sisera? Took you long enough. Yes, he’s inside.”

“Quick, men! Surround the tent.”

“Don’t waste your time,” Jael said. “He’s not going anywhere. I didn’t want him to run off before you got here, so I tent-pegged his head to the ground. Go inside and get him, and do let me know if I can do anything else for you.”

And so was that once again God delivered the Israelites from foreign rule, this time primarily by a pair of women. Following this story from the Book of Judges, we have a poem. Scholars who study this sort of thing claim that the language of this poem is some of the oldest Hebrew in the Bible. It is a song of victory and a blessing on all who give themselves to serve the Lord, because God might call anyone. We read Judges 5:1-9, from the Song of Deborah:

5 Then Deborah and Barak son of Abinoam sang on that day, saying:

*2 ‘When locks are long in Israel,
when the people offer themselves willingly—
bless the Lord!*

*3 ‘Hear, O kings; give ear, O princes;
to the Lord I will sing,
I will make melody to the Lord, the God of Israel.*

*4 ‘Lord, when you went out from Seir,
when you marched from the region of Edom,
the earth trembled,
and the heavens poured,
the clouds indeed poured water.*

*5 The mountains quaked before the Lord, the One of Sinai,
before the Lord, the God of Israel.*

*6 ‘In the days of Shamgar son of Anath,
in the days of Jael, caravans ceased
and travelers kept to the byways.*

*7 The peasantry prospered in Israel,
they grew fat on plunder,
because you arose, Deborah,
arose as a mother in Israel.*

*8 When new gods were chosen,
then war was in the gates.*

*Was shield or spear to be seen
among forty thousand in Israel?
9 My heart goes out to the commanders of Israel
who offered themselves willingly among the people.
Bless the Lord.*

Benediction:

God, we pray for leaders for your people – people who will turn our hearts back to you,
remind us of your covenant, inspire us with hope, train us in faith.
Raise up leaders among us,
and raise up our eyes to be able to see them, to recognize them, and to accept them.
Even if they are not the sort of people we expect our leaders to be.
Especially if they are not the sort of people we expect our leaders to be.
Work through those who will listen to you in their weirdness,
and grant us the grace of being weird enough ourselves that we may hear you. Amen.