

Little Known People 1: DEBORAH

Judges 4:1-9 [MW20-26]

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Mangawhai and Wellsford, Sunday 12 July 2020

Is God your steering wheel or spare tyre? [Powerpoint slide]

- keep that in mind as we go through things this morning

Ever been driving a car and got stuck in the mud?

- you put your foot down, the engine races
the wheels spin round and round and the car just sinks deeper ...
not a good feeling is it?!
- finally, someone comes along and rescues you
and you promise yourself you'll never get in that situation again!

Keep that thought in mind and consider the history of God's people

- the Israelites, at this time
the Lord God put before them a clear sealed road from slavery in Egypt
to the Promised Land
- sure there have been a few hiccups, but now they're there
there is a clear, dry, sealed, marked road and all they have to do is keep on it ...

... and they do, for a while

- then it happens, they see something off on a side road
it looks to them better than the way they're going
so they turn off the road and on to a track and before too long
- they're stuck in the mud, wheels spinning, engine revving
they sit there and yell for help

Eventually someone comes along and puts them back on the right road

- and things are fine for a while
then they get another driver and what happens ...
- they go off on a side road, get stuck, blow the engine,
sit there screaming for help, until ...
- ... someone comes along, fixes the engine, puts them back on the right road
and things are fine for a while
then they get another driver and what happens ...
- you get the picture?

God is supposed to be driving

- but God's people, the Israelites, find themselves in deep trouble
every time they wrench the wheel away and say: 'hang on, we'll drive!'

Against this backdrop, today we hear about some people

- who we maybe don't hear about too often, if at all
Deborah, Barak, Sisera, Jael
- and the question is, who is in charge?; who's driving?

The beginning of Judges chapter 4 records:

After the death of Ehud, the Israelites again started disobeying the Lord. So the Lord let the Canaanite King Jabin of Hazor conquer Israel ... and for twenty years he made life miserable for the Israelites, until finally they begged the Lord for help.

Now in that land, BD, that is Before Deborah, things were pretty bad

- sure it was the so-called Promised Land
but God's people lived only in scattered pockets, here and there
and there were all sorts of other tribes living about the place too
- these were chaotic times
gangs roamed freely, villages were empty, people fled to the walled cities
and people feared travelling, keeping away from the main roads
- and it just went on and on and on ... and on

Then along comes Deborah, described as 'the mother of Israel'

- this Deborah is one cool customer
she sets up business under a palm tree in the middle of a plain
and before long people from all over are coming to her
- it was easy to see the palm tree and the queue of people
a long winding queue made up of people from all different families, villages, tribes
young and old, men and women, children and slaves, rich and poor
they're all God's people, but maybe there are others too - she's that good!

Deborah, should I make an alliance?

- where should I invest my money?
tell my neighbour he's put the boundary peg in the wrong place!
is it safe to travel, I've got a truckload of goods to move?
my teenagers are driving me to distraction!
my cousin stole my goats

Deborah deals with all this wisely and justly

- and before you know it, things are on the improve
inflation is down, employment is up, money and happiness are flowing
- except, except ...
one huge, dark cloud remains on the horizon:
- that horrible King Jabin and his commander Sisera
continue to make trouble and bring misery
threatening to burst the bubble before it's even been blown!

Then one day, out of the blue, a messenger knocks on the door of Barak's house

- now Barak is the CO of the local army of God's people
he's inside busy honing his sword and polishing his armour
- Deborah wants to see you, the messenger says
Deborah, I don't know any Deborah
I don't answer to any man so I'm certainly not going to answer to a woman!
- would you answer to the Lord? says the messenger
because Deborah speaks the word of the Lord
- the Lord God speaks through a woman? How can this be ...

The messenger explains how Deborah sits under the palm tree giving good advice

- and that the Lord's favour is upon her
perhaps I'd better go and see her Barak says
yes you better had says the messenger, then leaves
- so Barak gets his gear on, adopts his most imposing look, and strides off

When he gets straight to see Deborah people grumble

- who does he think he is?
he should wait his turn
we've been ages out in this hot sun

Deborah invites Barak to sit beside her

- I have a message from the Lord God of Israel for you
you, Barak, are to get the army of God's people together
and attack King Jabin's army
- Sisera will be commanding that army as usual
with their Centurion tanks and computer-guided weapons
- but don't worry
the Lord God has promised to help you defeat them!
- a note: I have made a few adjustments to the telling of the story
to emphasise the situation between the Israelites and their enemies

Time was when someone heard a word from the Lord like this

- even if they had questions, they would leap up and get to it straight away
but not Barak
- maybe Barak was not 100% sure that a woman would get the message straight?
there'd never been a woman in a position like Deborah's before
so you can appreciate his hesitation
- or maybe Barak was worried about the nine hundred (900!) Centurion tanks?
(the Bible calls them chariots, with wheels of iron)

So Barak has a proposition which he puts to Deborah

- to test her? to see if she puts her money where her mouth is?
Barak says: I won't go unless you go
- but if he was hoping for a change of message he was very, very disappointed
Deborah says sure thing, let's go, now!
- I won't be in the fighting but I'll be there to give guidance and encouragement ...

But, you know with prophets there's always a 'but'

- a woman is going to defeat Sisera and you won't get any recognition for it
ah well, thinks Barak, at least we'll be shot of the pesky varmint

Let's skip ahead now to the big day, the moment of engagement, the moment of truth

- the Big Battle
Sisera has all his forces lined up, all 900 gleaming Centurion Tanks
with state-of -the-art computer guided weaponry
- thousands of men in crisp uniforms just waiting for the word

Imagine Barak and his men as they survey this scene with lumps in their throats

- and wonder what they have let themselves in for ...
then Deborah speaks those immortal words, actually that immortal emotive word:
Attack!
- C'mon! What are you waiting for?
this very day the Lord is going to help you defeat Sisera.
in fact the Lord has already gone on ahead to fight for you.
- there's nothing to worry about
yeah right!

Barak was still not too sure as he looked again at those gleaming tanks

- bristling with all manner of sophisticated weaponry
but he gave the order
and off raced the Israelite army in a haze of blue smoke
from their clapped out Suzuki Jimnys
- I hope that Deborah knows what she's doing Barak thinks as he leads the charge
in a particularly noisy and hard to steer Jimny

On the other side of the battle field the tank crews took one look

- at what was coming towards them and stopped in their tracks
get it, the "tank" crews stopped in their tracks!
- scared and confused they baled out, took to their heels
and the whole army was destroyed ...

Sisera saw it coming and ran off to the homestead of some folks by the name of 'Heber'

- now the Hebers were Kenites who were rellies of Moses back a bit
but this bloke Heber had made an alliance with King Jabin,
- Sisera thought he would be safe there
so he knocks on the door and Heber's wife, Jael, lets him in, welcomes him
even though he's all sweaty and dirty and covered in blood
- Sisera asks for some water and Jael makes him really welcome
like a mother caring for a lost child
she gives him not water but milk - sweet, heavy milk, which makes Sisera very sleepy
- then this wisp of a woman tucks the mighty warrior Sisera into bed
soon he's sleeping like a baby, safe and sound ... or is he?

Middle Eastern hospitality is a sacred tradition

- someone under your roof
someone who has shared a meal, or at least a glass of water - or milk
is treated as one of the family
- so there's poor defeated Sisera catching some much needed z's when Jael comes in
drives a peg through his head and kills him
- what is she up to, that's certainly not going to make her 'hostess of the year'?
and what's her husband going to say - she's just destroyed his precious alliance?

Did Jael have a message from the Lord?

- did Sisera make an unwelcome advance, look at her the wrong way?
was she on the side of God's people?
- we can't say, but in a moment it was all over
and the Israelites, the Lord God's people
went on to totally wipe out King Jabin and his entire army

Such a high point in the history of God's people went on to become a number 1 hit song

- True! For real!
Deborah and Barak recorded it and we still have the words
(sadly not the tune or original recording)
- in Judges Chapter 5: 'The Song of Deborah and Barak'

Does any of this have anything to do with who is in charge, who's driving?

Deborah, Barak, Jael

- they're all important and God worked differently through all three
maybe Deborah is the most important because without her the whole thing would never have got off the ground
- without Deborah ... a woman ... a woman who listened to the Lord who had the respect and admiration of everybody
- which was very unusual for those times

Another unusual thing about this story

- is the two strong, independent and courageous women
Deborah, prophet and arbiter of disputes
Jael, non-Israelite assassin
- the Book of Judges has other strong women characters
which is unusual for a patriarchal record of an extremely patriarchal time
- in fact Judges has the greatest number of women characters of any book in the Bible
19 in all!

Then Judges chapter 4 is unusual even for Judges

- it shows the Lord God working through a group of people
involving shared leadership, mutual responsibility and distributed glory
- it also reminds us that God works unexpectedly through "outsiders"
and this story reminds us to listen and be faithful
- just like Deborah

Deborah's motives and actions are always up front

- her faith never wavered
she showed the way of the Lord God to a people desperate to be saved

Note too that her preferred way of working

- was to bring peace and settlement through arbitration
Deborah is most definitely not "Xena: Warrior Princess"!
rather than fighting skills she displayed faith, wisdom and compassion
- Deborah went where she felt God was leading and took others with her
surprisingly sometimes, like Jael

Deborah gives us this question to ponder, answer, and live by: [Powerpoint slide]

- is the Lord God a backseat or a front seat driver for you?

Faith was Deborah's guide and watchword

- she knew who was doing the driving [Powerpoint slide]
and able to keep the Israelites out of the mud

This how *The Message* translation concludes: [Powerpoint slide]

*Thus may all God's enemies perish,
while his lovers be like the unclouded sun.
The land was quiet for forty years.*