

People Like Us

Deborah: A Leader of God's Choosing

Hebrews 11:32-35

July 17, 2022

Her name was Deborah, which means “bee” as in bumblebee. But it can also mean “to lead” or “pursue.” She lived sometime during the 12th and 11th centuries BCE. She lived during the time of judges in Israel, and she lived between Ramah in Benjamin and Bethel in the land of Ephraim. She was the sixth judge in a long line of judges.

Her story is unusual. Not because of the way it begins. No, it starts in a similar way to the stories of all of the other judges, and it goes something like this: The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord; then something bad happens to the people; the people cry out to the Lord; the Lord hears their cry; a leader is chosen from their midst to bring deliverance, salvation, and peace to the land. So, as the storyline goes, there is nothing unusual about its rhythm.

Deborah's story is unusual for another reason. It is unusual because she is a prophet, a judge, a military leader, a fierce warrior, a songwriter, and a singer. No one else in all of Scripture fills all of those posts. No one. And she was the only female judge. Deborah, we are told, would declare her judgements while sitting underneath the palm tree that would eventually bear her name between Ramah and Bethel. The people would come and would listen to her and would heed her decisions. As a prophet, Deborah would speak the word of the Lord to the people and command military leaders and generals. And they would follow her lead. In our story from Judges, Barak, the general, refused to go into battle without the amazing Deborah by his side.

She was indeed one of a kind. And she was a *she*.

In our text from Judges this morning, the translators of the New Revised Standard Version from which I read chose a translation that says that Deborah was the wife of Lappidoth. In other translations, that same exact phrase in Hebrew is translated, “a woman of Lappidoth.” But interestingly, there is no common name for a man at that time with such a grammatical construction, nor is there any city or region by that name mentioned in any other source or location. So, perhaps a more faithful translation would be to see the word as an adjective describing Deborah and not a proper noun. If it were understood this way, then she would be known as Deborah, the “torch bearer,” a “woman of lightning,” a “fiery one.” Now *that* seems to fit, for that is exactly who she was. In the time in which she lived, a woman in any leadership role was more than unusual. It just really didn't happen. But Deborah, the woman of lightning, this fiery one, was chosen for who she was, when she was, and where she was. She was not chosen in spite of anything. No, she was chosen because she was Deborah.

Now, how unusual was it that she was chosen? Well, consider this: By the time our Second Testament text was written, some 1100 to 1200 years after her era, the author of Hebrews did not include her in the narrative at all. The author writes, “And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and all of the prophets.” Three judges, one king, one prophet, all mentioned by name, but not Deborah. I would venture to guess that all of the women here and those joining us online are familiar with this part of the story. They understand what it is like to be Deborah, who had her leadership, her power, her prowess, her work, her wisdom forgotten, even erased.

But in spite of that, the story of Deborah was never truly gone. It can never be truly erased, for her story is there in bold print, in black and white for all to read and for those with ears to hear. The scriptural narrative is incomplete without her. Her story remains for all time, serving all of us as a reminder of who it is that God chooses.

So, there's our question for this morning. Who is it that God chooses? Whoever God pleases to choose. For God is not bound by the categories that we use or the limitations we place on one another or the boundaries we try to erect. For evidence shows that God chooses people like Deborah, who defy convention and societal norms. God is a God who chooses these people of lightning, those of all genders and identities, orientations and personhoods, races, and nationalities. God chooses all of God's children. And God uses all as a reflection of God's beautifully diverse self. Isn't that what we just witnessed in the baptisms this morning? In those waters, Colt, Jack, and Molly were reminded of the eternal truth that they belong to God, that there is nothing in heaven or on earth that can ever change that. They were chosen in this moment and in this time to be vessels of divine love and expressions of God's tender mercy. They are chosen by the divine. If it is true for them, and it is also true for you.

This has always been the case. It will always be true. For that truth is eternal.

Now, none of this happened by accident, and none of it happens in a vacuum. For without a nurturing community, a judge is just an individual with a lot of opinions that they only share with themselves. Without the acceptance of a community, a prophet is just someone making noise on a street corner. Without the love of a community, a song leader has no one to join in the chorus. For only a community can speak these truths into reality. Only a community can embody the call of a God whose love is radical and whose acceptance knows no end.

If we have eyes to see, we can see this drama play out in our midst time and time again. For it is in a

place like this that people like Deborah are reminded of their giftedness. They are surrounded with tender care. People of faith, like you, speak words of prophecy into their lives. It is in communities like this one where people are called. They are encouraged. They are equipped. They are summoned. They are sent.

We can see it in the three children who were baptized this morning and in their families, children of God reminded that they are gifts of God—people of God's own choosing.

It can also be seen in the lives of the children who gather every single year and fill all of the rooms of this building during VBS. Each and every day, their faithful volunteers and staff remind them that they are accepted and loved by God. We can see it in the faces of the confirmands who fill these chancel steps every May to claim as their own the baptismal vows made on their behalf when they were children. We see it in the lives of the Lake Fellows who are shaped by and help shape this community of faith for two years as they discern, along with you, their next steps in ministry. We witness it in all of the ordinations, the installations, the commissionings that happen right here on these chancel steps. We see it—we feel it—in the laying on of hands. All of that only happens in a community like this one. It only happens here—a community that reminds each individual that they are indeed chosen by God. And then, the community remembers. And then the community reminds. And then the community encourages. And then the community does the work of sending.

How do I know this? Well, I have borne witness to the ways in which you have done all of this in my own life. I know it intimately. For this is what you've done for me. It is right here with you that I have continued to become. It is because of you that I continue to be converted over and over and over again.

So, now here is the challenge. There are Deborahs out there in your midst and in the world who need to be reminded that they are beloved, because

there are voices out there telling them otherwise. It is up to us, it is up to you, to remind everyone that they are chosen by God. It is up to us, it is up to you, to remember the names and celebrate the leadership of those like Deborah, who a patriarchal and misogynistic culture tries to forget and often erase. It is up to us, it is up to you, to have the courage to remind every child, every individual, that they belong, no matter what. To remind them that they, that you, are treasures of the divine. That they, that you, are chosen because of their identity; you are chosen because of your identity. Because of who you are. Because of who you have yet to become. It is up to us to remind them that their, that your, magnificent one-of-a-kind gifts, talents, and personhood are needed. And then, we have to tell their stories. We have to share our own stories. We elevate their voices. We speak their names with love, again and again. And we keep sending these people into the world. Unique individuals chosen because of their uniqueness. Because of their identity. Because of who they are. Because of who they have yet to become.

Friends, this is who Second Presbyterian Church is. This is who you have been to me. This is who you will continue to be in the world.

All of this only happens in communities. Communities of faith, who believe that God sees, God loves, God nurtures, God forms, God calls, and God sends.

To say “I thank God for Second Presbyterian Church” seems not enough. But I do. I thank God that this is who you are, that this is what you do, that this is who you are still becoming as a community. Thank you for having the faith to be that community, because heaven knows that is exactly what the world needs you to be.

And friends, one more thing: You are loved. You are enough. And you are not alone. Amen.