

“Deborah Arose as a Mother in Israel”
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus
concerning Judges 4:3-10; 12-16
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco
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This going to sound weird, but I have been fascinated by the book of Judges since I was a child. Of course, I was kind of a weird child, so maybe it's not that surprising. I don't think most children have read the book of Judges, which is probably a good thing, because the ending of Judges is like the NC17 section of the Bible. Comparatively, today's story about Deborah is quite tame, minus the bit about war.

Deborah was considered a very dangerous sort of story when I was growing up though, because it was just the kind of story that might give you the wrong idea that women could lead men any old time, and not just under super special circumstances. I remember asking my pastor about Deborah once, wondering if she could be proof that God does call women to lead. He told me that God only used her because no men would step up to the plate. (I didn't buy it.)

It's no wonder that I was fascinated by the book of Judges because Judges has more major female characters than any other book in the Hebrew Bible. In chapter one we have Aksah, who asks and receives land from her father—an unusual event in the life of a biblical woman to say the least. Next on the scene is Deborah—prophet, judge, leader in battle.

But all the women in Judges do not fare as well as Aksah and Deborah; in fact, the most brutalized women in all of Scripture appear in this same book. There is a fascinating but tragic trajectory regarding the fate of women in Judges, and I want to follow their stories together.

To remind you of the wider chronology, the period of Judges is sandwiched between the Israelite conquests in Canaan and the establishment of the monarchy. In other words, the Israelites have settled in a place, but they do not have a king. They were supposed to be following YHWH—hence no need for a king. But that didn't always work out so well. The basic pattern of Judges goes like this: God's people rebel, they end up living under the oppression of another nation, they finally cry out to God for deliverance, and God raises up a judge to deliver them. The judges often functioned as military leaders but they also settled disputes and delivered messages from God. But by the end of the book of Judges, things are so bad for the Israelite people you are left feeling desperate for a king already who might be able to keep things in better order.

Interestingly, archeologist Jo Ann Hackett has discovered that pre-monarchy, women were likely able to rise in power and take on various roles that would later become unavailable to them in the period of the monarchy. That so many women play key roles in the book of Judges, prior to the establishment of the monarchy, is therefore, not surprising. The fact

that the Bible makes no bones about the fact that Deborah was judge, prophet, leader and also woman is a good indication that there was perhaps nothing unusual about her role.

As I explained in the church newsletter this week, I will be reading the book of Judges through a feminist-critical lens. Now, I've heard through the grapevine that might have caused a bit of a stir. I think there was some concern about what feminist-critical meant and maybe people even wondered: why must Kyndall always be such a feminist? Maybe you even wondered is all of this even relevant to my life, my struggles, my pain, my fears and my hopes? (The answer to that question, by the way, is yes, but first I've got to do some explanation.)

Let's chat for a moment about biblical interpretation and my own hermeneutic. Hermeneutic is just a fancy word for how a person reads the Bible. In case you didn't know, you also have a hermeneutic. Literally everyone who reads the Bible has a hermeneutic. It's impossible not to have one, even if you don't know what one is. Because everyone who picks up this book brings his or her own experiences and preconceptions with them. In other words, we all wear a certain lens when we read, and the lenses we wear are shaped by who we are, our place in life, and our place in society. It's inevitable.

Take a silly example. You are reading a picture book Bible to a child, and the child points to a picture of Jesus preaching and says, "He's so old," and you're thinking, "Eh, no, he's not even 33 yet, so he's quite young." So which one of you is right? Jesus *is* old if you're only four, because everyone who has graduated kindergarten is old when you are four. If you're retirement age, though, Jesus is super young. And what if you ask a teenager? What if you ask a 33 year old?

See what I mean? Everyone interprets a story through their own lens. The worst sort of problem we get interpreting the Bible is when people won't admit that there is a lens and instead act as if they possess the real and ultimate meaning of Scripture and anyone who doesn't see it the way they see it is simply wrong. This is a very dangerous way to read the Bible. It gets people making all sorts of claims on behalf of the Bible, and worse, claims on behalf of God based on very narrow ways of reading.

This is doubly compounded by the fact that not only do readers have a particular lens, so do writers. I'm sure you've heard the phrase before that history is written by the winners. We are generally hearing the stories through the eyes of a particular segment of the population, but we miss out on hearing how the story unfolded from the perspective of the others.

Recent biblical scholarship has helped us to be more aware of these dynamics. Namely, the Bible has largely been written by men who were victorious, and the Bible has been predominately interpreted to us by men, and not just men, but most often white men who hold positions of power and influence in the church or academy. Liberation theologians and feminist theologians and black theologians and womanist theologians and Latin theologians and so forth and so on have stood up to say, "Hold up! There's more than one possible interpretation here. There's more than one way to tell the same story and there's more than one way to hear it."

An example of this would be James Cone's *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. I talked about this with you a couple months ago—how Cone helps us re-imagine the cross through the lens of lynching, and how that perspective helps us understand the cross in a whole new way.

I believe the most responsible way to interpret Scripture is to name and own your lens; otherwise you're just wearing a particular lens but pretending you have 20/20. My consistent lens is the feminist one, and I'm honest enough to tell you so. Okay, but what is a feminist-critical lens? A feminist lens is an intentional taking off of the dominant, default, patriarchal lens. You take those glasses off. The usual way of looking at things just won't do anymore. With a feminist lens, you pay extra attention not just to women, but to anyone in the story who is ostracized, marginalized, or silenced. Feminism does not mean my interpretation is somehow female-limited to the exclusion of men. Every lens has its limits, that is for sure. But feminism is a particular tool for broadening our perspective beyond just experiencing the story through the eyes and ears of the victors. Compared to the dominant, default, patriarchal lens, a feminist lens is a more deeply human and humane way of looking at the text. It is somewhat about gender, but it's also about so much more than gender. It's this intensely Jesus-y way of reading the Bible, because Jesus always, always saw the outcast, regardless of gender or social status or ethnicity or able-bodiedness.

So, just to be clear, when I say we'll be reading with a feminist-critical lens, that is not something new or different from what I always try to do when I read the Bible. Secondly, it doesn't mean I have some liberal agenda driving my interpretation. It's basically a Jesus-agenda and I believe my calling as a preacher of the Gospel is to help us see the world through Jesus eyes. If we can learn to read the Bible with Jesus eyes, then hopefully we will also read the world with Jesus eyes. So why not just call it the Jesus lens rather than a feminist one? Because I think it is important to own the fact that as a woman, I read the text in a particular way. Just like the four-year old brings a different perspective from the grandma, I can only read the text as I am, and it is important that I own my lens when I interpret so that you will be encouraged to own yours.

When I preach, I'm always delivering a message to you about God and how I believe God works in this world. But I am also delivering an approach. I'm saying, here are some ways you can engage the biblical story. I recommend curiosity, good question-asking, imagination, empathy, attention to the ostracized, etc. Because my job as a teacher is not to tell you what to think about a Bible passage; it's to equip you to read the Bible for yourselves, to empower you to ask your own questions and develop your own acknowledged hermeneutic. I want to take from having an unexamined hermeneutic to an intentional one, and so I model it.

Why does this matter? Because if we are not intentional about our hermeneutic, we unconsciously default to the norm, and the norm is patriarchal. The default interpretation led to the Crusades and the Inquisition. The default lens led to theologians in Germany defending white supremacy and to our ancestors in this country defending African slavery

and Manifest Destiny. The default lens is what we see in certain pockets of evangelicalism today that co-opts the Gospel for political gain. Hermeneutics matter. I don't just read the text as a feminist because I'm bored or because I hate men. I am a feminist because it is vital to the survival of Christianity that we name the ways the dominant hermeneutic has damaged people and it is vital to the survival of human life that we create and sustain new, healing ways of interpreting our texts. Feminism is not the only healing lens through which to read the Bible, but it is a lens, and it is the lens I am most uniquely situated to use faithfully. I try to expose us to black theology, for example, but I can only learn from black theologians. I can't *be* a black theologian, and it would be dishonest to pretend that I could because it's not my perspective. It's someone else's, and my job is to honor that perspective and learn from it.

Finally, if my hermeneutic is all about seeing things with Jesus eyes, why the heck read the book of Judges? Couldn't we just read a nice healing story from the Gospels and be done with it? Or at least find something more relevant? It is my belief that these stories are deeply relevant. They do not just deal with what it means to be a woman in an ancient world. They deal with what it means to be human in tumultuous times. To think these stories about women are just about womanhood is to fail to see these women as fully human. They are not a subcategory of the human species, and thus inaccessible to the men or to the women who don't identify as feminist. These women deal with life and with family and with grief and with fear and with challenges just like the rest of us, and in fact, because they are marginalized, they are relatable. They are inspirational. Because they have known bondage, they can speak to our liberation and they can lead us to be liberators. We can find our own stories reflected in theirs, and it is vital that we develop the capacity to see ourselves in the lives of these women, because it is vital that we see ourselves in the lives of our marginalized neighbors. It is vital that we develop the capacity to see the world through the eyes of these women, because it is indispensable to Christianity that we learn to see the world through the eyes of the least of these. This is Gospel-oriented work, and we train ourselves to do it in here amongst the safety and support of friends so that we will be freer and more equipped to do it out there when the going gets tough. Do you see what I mean?

Okay, so I've nearly ran out of time to talk to you about Deborah. Some of you might appreciate that little lecture about biblical interpretation and some of you are trying to stay awake. Thanks for hanging in there. I think these things are important. I really do. Some people like having all that background information, and some people would rather I just tell a good story and preach a good sermon and not over-explain it. I get that. Today is explanation Sunday. Sorry I didn't warn you. Next time I will give you a heads up so if it's not your cup of tea, you can volunteer to work the nursery that Sunday.

Some brief remarks about Deborah, and then I will leave you with some words of hope and encouragement.

Deborah. We have finally arrived at your story. You are such a rich character, and there is so little time left to say so. Our English Bible translations call you Deborah, wife of Lappidoth, but that could also be translated "woman of Lappidoth," noting where you are

from, not who you are married to. It's hard to be sure. Lappidoth means torch and has the connotation of fiery, so perhaps "woman of Lappidoth" means you are a woman of fire. I like that translation. Your name, Deborah, means "bee," and it is easy to imagine you as the queen bee of the Israelite people. They come to you for judgment. They come to you for a word from the Lord. You lead and direct and guide, and no one seems to object based on your gender. Cool.

In Judges chapter five, which we didn't get to read today, you lead the people in song after victory in battle. I'm a bit of a pacifist, personally, so I struggle with your war involvement, but that is a sermon for another time. You offer this long poem about Israel's deliverance in which you call yourself a "mother of Israel." We don't know if you had biological children or not. The text doesn't say. But you mothered a nation into forty years of peace.

Oh, what I would give for someone to mother our nation. Male or female, it doesn't matter. Just someone to lead us into forty years of peace. Someone to nurture us and take care of us and show us the way.

My mom had the stomach bug last week the same exact time I had the stomach bug, even though we were a state apart. Her mom died of cancer twenty-seven years ago, but my mom says that to this day, when she's sick, she still wants her mommy to bless her heart. She misses her every day; and then there are the days she misses her so fiercely it hurts. I have an independent streak, but if I'm sick, I always call my mom. I can tell you what she'll say, "Oh honey, I'm so sorry. I wish I could make it better. I wish I was there. Have you taken medicine? Here's what you should do . . ." I know what she'll say, but I still want to hear her say it.

Not all of us had good mothers who were there for us when we were sick, of course, but I think all of us have experienced that longing to be taken care of—when we are sick in body or in spirit, when we are sick as a family or as a nation, please, somebody, help me.

This is the repeated story of the book of Judges. The people cry out, "Please help us. We know we mostly got ourselves into this mess, but we don't know how to get out. Help." And God, like the mother God is, brings aid.

There is no Gospel-faithful way to preach comfort to you if it is not also comfort for your neighbor. There is no liberation for you if there is no liberation for your neighbor. It is my job as a preacher to remind you week after week that God loves you *so much* **and** God loves the world so much. Those two loves cannot exist independently of each other. God loves you with all the ferocity of a parent. *And*, the immigrant, the outsider, the outcast, is God's baby too. That's the message. That's the Gospel. (It also happens to be feminist.)

I want to take you with me on this journey through the book of Judges because I think it will be worth our time, and I think you're up for the task. O God who is like a Mother and a Father to us, deliver us from our mess. Amen.