

“Living Amongst Violence”  
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus  
concerning Judges 4:17-23; 9:50-56  
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco  
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The first time I read about Jael as a youth, it was for me, a little like watching Wonder Woman in theatres for the first time—a woman who takes down the bad guys! I found it exhilarating after growing up with stories about damsels in distress but never damsels in the line of duty, directly involved in the fight.

It wasn't until I was older that the grotesque violence of the tent scene sank in and I finally wondered if I ought to rethink my plan to name my first daughter Ja'el after this stunning character in the Bible. This week when I talked to Claire about giving the children's sermon while she was at camp, we joked about bringing tent stakes for a children's sermon prop, but I knew all along I wouldn't touch this story in a children's sermon. It's not very family friendly.

What is curious to me is that while I had to discover Jael on my own by reading the Bible myself, I learned about David and Goliath over and over from a very young age, even though David kills Goliath first with a sling, then takes Goliath's sword and chops off his head (1 Kings 17:51). Sunday School was filled with stories about the great biblical hero, King David, the guy who murdered Uriah after raping Uriah's wife, though most of the felt figure flannel boards left that bit out. (If they did mention it, Bathsheba was the bad one for daring to take a bath without clothes.)

I am left wondering if the story about Jael makes us uncomfortable because the story is violent or because the violence is done by woman? All we really know about Jael is that she was a foreigner, who, though it was of no personal advantage to her for her family had good relations with the Canaanites, took it upon herself to slay Sisera, commander of the army of the Canaanites who oppressed Israel. By contrast, whoever defeated Goliath was promised the king's daughter, great wealth, and an exemption from all taxes (1 Kings 17:25). Jael, unlike David, had nothing to gain. The text doesn't tell us her motive, so we are left guessing, wondering if she was secretly a YHWH worshipper or if she'd seen the oppression of her neighbors at the hands of the Canaanites and decided enough was enough.

That doesn't mean we shouldn't squirm at the sight of violence in our sacred texts. The violence is very disturbing. All I'm advocating for is equal opportunity squirming. Like, if Jael makes you squirm, King David should make you puke. Otherwise, you're not reading the stories honestly.

Jael did something very gutsy. That doesn't mean I advocate following in her footsteps, but I am an advocate for not allowing her name to be erased from our historical memory. She's fascinating, not just as a character in the plot, but also as a literary tool. You may remember from last week that Barak won't go to battle unless Deborah agrees to go with him, and Deborah is like, “Sure, I'll hold your hand but just so you know, victory will belong to a woman,” and you think she's referring to herself, but—plot twist!—enter stage right a previously unknown woman,

not even an Israelite woman, minding her own business when along comes Sisera, fleeing for his life, having left his troops behind as they are being slaughtered.

Sisera approaches Jael asking for water. Jael changes the dynamic, offering not water, but milk. Like a mother with an infant, she feeds him milk, covers him with a blanket, and while he sleeps she agrees to stand guard like a protector. Sisera trusts her, lulled to sleep by her maternal care. While he sleeps, she returns to him, this time weapon in hand. Seemingly without hesitation, she drives the tent stake into his head. And this is how Sisera, commander of the great army of King Jabin of Canaan, meets his demise.

In Judges chapter 5, Jael's story is repeated, this time in the form of a victory song in the mouth of Deborah. The song is considered one of the oldest texts in the Bible. In the song, Deborah recounts the tent scene:

“Most blessed of women be Jael,  
     the wife of Heber the Kenite,  
     most blessed of tent-dwelling women.  
 He asked for water, and she gave him milk;  
     in a bowl fit for nobles she brought him curdled milk.  
 Her hand reached for the tent peg,  
     her right hand for the workman's hammer.  
 She struck Sisera, she crushed his head,  
     she shattered and pierced his temple.  
 At her feet he sank,  
     he fell; there he lay.  
 At her feet he sank, he fell;  
     where he sank, there he fell—dead.”

Then Deborah does something really interesting with her song. She switches the point of view to Sisera's mother, who is waiting at home for her son's return.

“Through the window peered Sisera's mother;  
     behind the lattice she cried out,  
 ‘Why is his chariot so long in coming?  
     Why is the clatter of his chariots delayed?’

Before we can finish rejoicing that Sisera is dead, we are reminded that Sisera has a mother, and for a moment, he is re-humanized before our eyes. But the song continues . . .

The wisest of her ladies answer her;  
     indeed, she keeps saying to herself,  
 ‘Are they not finding and dividing the spoils:  
     a woman or two for each man,  
 colorful garments as plunder for Sisera,  
     colorful garments embroidered,

highly embroidered garments for my neck—  
all this as plunder?’

Sisera’s mother, a woman herself, soothes her worry about her son’s delay by imagining him ravaging other women in celebration of his victory. She is comforted by the thought of his violence against women, because it would explain what’s taking so long. She imagines how her own neck will soon be adorned with the garments of the women Sisera has conquered.

She cannot imagine that instead he is lying dead at the feet of a woman. Commentators have noted that the tent scene is laden with sexual imagery so that the limp body lying underneath Jael is perhaps to be understood something like a reverse rape, with the tent stake as a phallic object used as weapon. This makes the violence all the more disturbing, even if it is intended to be a sort of reverse justice for the rape and plunder Sisera had planned. We see that even though Jael was free in the sense that she took matters into her own hands, no woman in this story is free from the patriarchal view of what defines power. Jael is less of a feminist hero and more of a literary device driving home Sisera’s humiliation. Her role in the story is also intended to lessen Barak’s achievement, for Barak arrives next on the scene, a passive observer to what Jael has accomplished, the final victory ascribed not to him but to a woman, just as Deborah predicted. A similar theme plays out in Judges chapter 9 when the woman of Thebez drops a millstone on Abimelech’s head, stopping him from burning down the tower in which her people sought refuge. Before he dies, Abimelech asks his armor-bearer to kill him with a sword so that he won’t have to endure the shame of dying at the hands of a woman.

These stories of Deborah and Barak and Jael and Sisera and Abimelech and the woman repeatedly play with and defy gender stereotypes. But the stories do not do anything to challenge violence itself as a patriarchal value. Violence is simply accepted as a necessary evil or even celebrated as a tool of liberation.

It seems to me that if we are going to challenge the violence in this text, we must also challenge violence in the many places it appears throughout the biblical text. We cannot reserve our squirming for violent women while praising violent men.

Furthermore, any challenge to violence in the text must include a challenge to the violence in us. For example, I like to say that I am a pacifist, but I know that I am basically pretending because in reality I’ve never had to make a decision about fighting for my life or protecting my family from danger. I am a pacifist only in the safe territory of my own mind. To say I’m a pacifist elsewhere is hypothetical at best, dishonest at worst because I’ve never been anywhere else where I actually had to decide. I think people with privilege ought to be careful using the language of non-violence as if it were a value we possessed. How would we know if we possessed it if it’s never been tested?

These matters are complex and require great sensitivity. It is unpleasant and deeply vulnerable for me to talk about this next part, but I’m going to share because I think it is relevant: the only time I have been assaulted, I didn’t fight back. Not because I was choosing nonviolence, but because I was frozen from shock and horror. It wasn’t a choice; it was a non-choice and it’s taken years of therapy to undo being mad at myself for not doing more to try and stop it. Experts

say lack of agency is a major contributing factor to whether a person develops PTSD after encountering trauma. If I had just punched him, regardless of whether it had deterred him, would the aftermath have been easier or the healing faster? Could I have bypassed some of the PTSD? I'll never know.

Recently I was talking to a friend. She was waving her hands while talking and as her hand moved this way, her two-year-old daughter's head moved that way and quite on accident they collided. Before my friend had time to apologize or even speak, her two-year-old reached out and smacked her mother in the face right back. My friend's face registered complete shock. Her daughter had never hit her before. She confided in me later that she was torn about how to respond. She wanted to teach her daughter not to hit, but she also didn't want to punish her because her daughter was having a natural reaction to *being hit*. My friend said, "I mean, if anyone ever does try to hurt her, I want her to know it's okay to fight back." I wanted to cry at the wisdom of her struggle because by the time someone was hurting me, the self-protective instinct had been beaten out of me long ago.

These matters are complex. I have a friend who works as a physical therapist for the army, and she absolutely loves her job taking care of soldiers. She's really good at it too. She loves the army, and she also asks herself these hard questions about what the army does, and the fact that they are being trained to kill. She is loyal, and she is questioning. She's also a gun owner—a very responsible one. She's been trained and she knows what she's doing. But after even more school shootings, she started rethinking whether she needed to own military grade weaponry, even if she is military. She began to wonder how and if she was contributing to a culture that idolizes guns.

I've known parents who don't let their children play guns. No Nerf guns, nothing. But to the parents' dismay, kids often pick up objects and turn them into pretend guns! When I volunteered at Talitha Koum, this was a constant challenge because the more you discouraged playing guns, the more popular it became.

The point is, learning how to deal with a violent society is complicated. We may not talk about violence a whole lot in the church, but we are surrounded by it in the news, in movies, in video games, in our homes. Self-harm and violence to the self is common problem, especially among teens. Bullying, school shootings, the violence of detention centers and the violence of our public rhetoric—there is no escaping it. We live in a violent world, and the answer is not always so simple as advocating non-violence. We have to make actual parenting decisions about video games and paintball guns and how to respond if our kid punches the school bully to protect someone else. We have to reserve judgments about the tactics of the oppressed, whose shoes we are not in, and we have to examine the violent tendencies within us. We have to think about public policy not just as it relates to guns but as it relates to any destruction of life and wellbeing, for violence comes in many forms. We have to learn how to cope with anger—not just suppress it but relate to it and understand it and channel it and release it. Some women have to learn how to feel anger at all and some men have to learn how to feel anything else. Kids and adults who don't learn how to express anger in healthy ways often turn the anger inward and become destructive to self.

Violence is not an easy subject, but it cannot be avoided just because you and I might be relatively safe from it. In fact, sometimes people of privilege use the ideal of nonviolence as a blinder. If the oppressed get too unruly, those with power say, “Hey, calm down. We don’t want things to get violent,” which is a failure to see that things were already violent. It is easy to ignore the violence that doesn’t affect you and decry violence when it threatens to spill over into your comfort.

Jael did not instigate the violence in our story. The story was already violent. There was a war going on, and before the war there was oppression. This is not to say Jael’s violence is therefore justified. I’m not God and I don’t feel qualified to make that call. But I am qualified to name the full truth, which is that violence had been going on for a long time. Jael, it seems to me, must have been awake to this, or she would have no motivation to want Sisera dead. I’m not sure if she did the right thing. But it is sure that she did something. Maybe doing nothing would have been another kind of violence, because, after all, doing nothing lets the violence continue.

There is not a simple answer or application to all this, so I’m sorry if you’ve been sitting here waiting for one! I don’t think these stories can be neatly wrapped up with a bow. I think maybe they are intended to undo us instead. Unwrap our certainties. Get us to ask questions and think. They are meant to disturb and unsettle and that’s okay because it is a disturbing and unsettling world out there. It often feels to me like things are getting more and more violent in the world, but I also know in many ways I’m just waking up to the violence that has been there all along, and I am more and more aware that to do nothing about it is itself a form of violence. I do not know the answers, but I know that I must be willing to be uncomfortable. I must be willing to wrestle with what I am seeing and wrestle with how best to respond. I must stay open to the possibility that even in the mess, God is at work and God is nearby and I have the chance to partner with God in making peace. Let us pray:

O God, we are so often lost and wondering what to do. The times are violent, and we long for peace. The human family struggles, and we cry to you for deliverance. In your mercy, hear our fervent prayers. Rescue us from violence. Rescue us from idleness and complacency. In your mercy, make us partners in peace. Amen.