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## **“Marvel: Deborah”**

### **August 14, 2022**

*Judges 4:4-9 (CEB)*

*Rev. Amanda Moseng, Pastor of Discipleship*

We are continuing today in our Marvel sermon series, where we are focusing on unsung heroes of the bible. Last week we explored the story of Daniel and this week we are stepping back in time to explore the story of Deborah. Her story is found in the book of Judges, and in order to understand it fully, I am going to set the stage for us. The book of Judges is a collection of stories set between Israel’s entrance into the land of Canaan and the emergence of the monarchy.<sup>1</sup> These stories focus on individuals from the various twelve tribes of Israel who are raised up by God in particular situations. These leaders are traditionally said to “judge” Israel, hence the name of the book, but the term judge does not relate to legal arbitration, like we might associate with judges in modern times. The era encapsulated by the book of Judges is presented as a time of increasing social disintegration and religious unfaithfulness. Things will quickly spiral downhill as there is an increasing number of disturbing actions, such as fratricide, revenge killings, and violence toward women, as well as moral and religious decline. The decline will come into sharper focus when Rev. Call preaches about Samson next week, whose story is found in the latter part of Judges.

At the start of Judges, we learn that Joshua has died, the one who led them into the promised land. However, with Joshua’s death there was no central leader, just the twelve tribes functioning mostly as separate units. The tribe of Judah was successfully defeating nearby territories and peoples, the Canaanites of primary interest. All of the individual tribes were going to battle and driving groups out, but with varying success. Because some of the tribes were unsuccessful at driving out the inhabitants of various lands, they had to settle in the land together and share it. By doing so, they made covenant with their new neighbors and started taking on their customs and traditions, including religious ones. God was angry that the Israelites made covenant with others and did not tear down the altars of false gods. God was angry at their disobedience. This will begin a pattern that continues throughout the book of Judges. The Israelites will do what is evil in the sight of the Lord, such as serving the Baals and other gods. God will then hand them over to their enemies. They will cry out to God for help so God will raise up a leader, a judge, who will deliver them, and all will be well for a period of time, essentially until that leader dies. Then the whole cycle will start again. There are several iterations of this cycle leading up to the story of Deborah.

At the beginning of Judges 4 we the cycle starting again after the death of Ehud. The Israelites did what the Lord saw as evil, so the Lord gave them over to King Jabin of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. The commander of his army was Sisera, who had a strong military force and had cruelly oppressed the Israelites for twenty years. As in previous judge stories, God heard the distressed cry of God’s people and raised up a leader. Following the example of previous stories, we anticipate that the person named judge will lead Israel’s army against the enemy. That person is Deborah. We learn that she is a prophet and a leader of Israel at that time. She would sit under Deborah’s palm tree (named after herself) in the Ephraim highlands and the Israelites would come to her to settle disputes. It is important to note that Deborah is one of only four women in the Old Testament identified as prophets. The other three are Miriam (Ex 15:20), Huldah (2 Kgs 22:14), and Noadiah (Neh 6:14). Deborah is unique in combining the roles of prophet and judge.

In ancient times, the role of a judge could be understood in two different ways. The Hebrew *shofet*, or judge, can mean either a ruler and military commander or an arbitrator of disputes. Scripture affirms that Deborah lived into this second aspect of being a judge, given that she has a special palm tree under which she settles disputes among the Israelites. Scripture leaves some ambiguity about Deborah in the first understanding of judge, given that it does not clearly define her as a military leader. Deborah manifests the ambiguity of the role of judge itself, as scripture does not explicitly call her a judge. However, this does not prevent scholars and commentators from wholeheartedly affirming Deborah as a judge and living out that role as a military leader. By all intents and purposes, Deborah is a judge in the military sense. As we are about to see, Deborah will play a key role in taking down the Canaanites.

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<sup>1</sup> Wesley Study Bible, Introduction to the Book of Judges, 313.

Our scripture passage tells us that Deborah sent word to Barak, a military leader, asking him “Hasn’t the Lord, Israel’s God, issued you a command? ‘Go and assemble at Mount Tabor, taking ten thousand men from the people of Naphtali and Zebulun with you.’” She continued by saying, “I will lure Sisera, the commander of Jabin’s army, to assemble with his chariots and troops against you at the Kishon River, and then I’ll help you overpower him.” Clearly, Deborah had been discerning God’s will and as a prophet, knew what God had spoken. She checks Barak on it, “didn’t God ask you to do this? Weren’t you given a command? What’s the hold up, buddy?” She details the plans and her involvement, handing Israel the victory over Sisera and Jabin’s army. Piece of cake!

We would expect Barak to bravely and boldly step into this assignment, but he doesn’t. Instead, he says, “If you’ll go with me, I’ll go; but if not, I won’t go.” Now, it is interesting to consider the ambiguity I mentioned once before. As a military leader, there is potential that Barak himself was a judge. In fact, Barak’s name is preserved in Hebrews 11:32 among a list of Israelite judges, while Deborah is not. This does not negate Deborah’s role as a judge but can most likely be attributed to personal choices and perspectives of the author of Hebrews. If true, Barak was not living up to the call and role of a judge, particularly as a military leader. His hesitation does not encourage confidence in him or his leadership.

When he refuses to go without Deborah (credit to Deborah for her trusted leadership and presence), she responds, “I’ll definitely go with you. However, the path you are taking won’t bring honor to you, because the Lord will hand over Sisera to a woman.” From there they got up and together marched out with the army. This ends the scripture lesson for today, but I think the rest of Judges 4 is a compelling narrative and completes our understanding by providing insight to that statement of Deborah. As the story continues, we see that Sisera and his army fell for the trap that had been laid for them and assembled at the Kishon River. Deborah noticed and called out to Barak “Get up! This is the day that the Lord has handed Sisera over to you. Hasn’t the Lord gone out before you?” So Barak and his army went down from Mount Tabor to attack but the Lord threw Sisera and his army into a panic before Barak, causing them to flee. Sisera escaped on foot, but Barak and his army pursued Sisera’s army and killed all of them.

Sisera fled to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, because there was peace between King Jabin and the family of Heber the Kenite. Jael invited him in, hid him under a blanket, and gave him milk to drink. Jael, knowing Sisera’s deeds and cruelty, purposefully led him into a false sense of security. When Sisera was sleeping, Jael took advantage of the opportunity and killed him by driving a tent peg through his skull. Barak finally caught up after chasing Sisera, only to discover that he had been killed. Verses 23-24 read “So on that day God brought down Canaan’s King Jabin before the Israelites. And the power of the Israelites grew greater and greater over Canaan’s King Jabin until they defeated him completely.” Jael was a non-Israelite woman who helped to secure victory over Canaan. The Lord handed Sisera over to her, just as Deborah prophesied.

So what can we learn from Deborah and this portion of Judges? Don’t trust anyone with a tent peg, that’s for sure. But I think there are three key lessons for us today. First, **it is important to spend time listening for God’s voice and direction.** We have seen within Judges already what happened when the Israelites did not listen for God’s voice and direction. They served the gods of the lands they lived in, rather than the true God. God was clear about the covenant expectations, but they were not always faithful. But let’s not make this about the Israelites. We are equally capable of going our own way and stepping away from the path God desires for us. What can bring us back? Sometimes we encounter trouble or a situation that compels us to return, other times it is the wise voice of a trusted friend or family member, other times God moves in such a way that we cannot help but stop and pay attention. It is good for us to seek God’s wisdom and listen for God’s voice.

As a prophet, it was crucial for Deborah to listen for God’s voice and direction. By spending intentional time in God’s presence, she came to know God’s thoughts and ways. For example, she knew that God had given Barak a command and she was going to keep him accountable. As a prophet, Deborah had a direct line of intelligence for God’s strategic plans for Israel. Consulting with Yahweh before a battle was the judge’s responsibility. Notice how sure and confident she was that the Lord would be with them and grant them victory. That is from the time she spent in God’s presence, listening and discerning God’s direction for them.

The second thing we can learn is that **God works in surprising ways and through people we do not expect.** We can presume that it came as a surprise to Barak that despite being a key military leader, he would not be the one who would bring down Sisera. God did that through Jael, despite using unconventional means. He was the one who was supposed to overpower Sisera and his army. God accomplished what was promised, even if it looked a little different than anticipated. Reflect on your own life. When has God acted in an unexpected way? Where did it seem like on the surface nothing was happening, but God was really at work all along, making a way? Sometimes we do not always see the ways God is at work until retrospect, when we can look back and with confidence know that God was working on our behalf. And that confidence informs our present and our future, knowing that God is with us and for us. “As the people of God, we can be confident that

God is at work in and through our lives and communities to accomplish God's will, even when we may be unaware... God may work through outsiders or those on the margin of our community in ways we could never expect."<sup>2</sup>

Third, the story of Deborah reiterates that **women are crucial to the work and ministry of God**. God's main agents in this story are women: Deborah and Jael. God brought victory to Israel through women. The author of Judges had no reservations in depicting Deborah as a prophet and a judge. In fact, Deborah provides a refreshing counterpoint to the more patriarchal descriptions of women in scripture. The book of Judges contains the largest number of women characters of all the books in the Bible with 19 women characters. Initially the women are portrayed as strong, independent, and courageous, as well as identified by name. However, as the fate of Israel and the judges starts to decline and spiral downward, so does the fate of the women. Many will no longer be identified by name, but most tragic is that they will lose their independent power and become objects and victims. "In the ancient world as well as our own, the health and well-being of women provide an important barometer to measure the core health and values of a society or community."<sup>3</sup> Many women throughout scripture go nameless, but they are an important part of the story.

The Women's Bible Commentary suggests that "the text takes Deborah's status and responsibilities in Israel for granted. She is not introduced as an emergency for the men who have failed to come forward. Her standing in society is a secure and accepted one as a prophet through whom God speaks. As such she, not her husband, is the accepted leader, judge."<sup>4</sup> God called Deborah to this role, and she faithfully served God and the Israelites. Despite being unfortunately fewer in number in proportion to men, scripture reveals the stories of women who faithfully followed God and served a unique purpose. Their lives mattered; their ministry mattered. The same is true today. Everyone is needed. There is no limit to what God can call us to do. Listen to women. Learn from women. We have a place, and that place includes the pulpit, leadership, and wherever else God calls us.

The story of Deborah presents twists and turns. We see God working through unexpected people and in unexpected ways. We see two women boldly stepping up and stepping out, bringing about change. Deborah is not the conventional hero, acting with physical strength and might while bringing down villains. But we do see the strength she has that comes through faith and from being faithful to God. She had the eyes of faith to see where God was calling them and boldly led her people as a judge. Being a hero is not always about power and might, but faithfulness and doing what is right. Deborah's faith and fortitude led Israel to victory. She was not seeking power or honor, but to follow God and listen for God's voice. May we be inspired by Deborah to be faithful and follow God. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, vol. 2, 783.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 782-783.

<sup>4</sup> The IVP Women's Bible Commentary, 133.