

Psalm 95

- ¹ O come, let us sing to the LORD;
let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!
- ² Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;
let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!
- ³ For the LORD is a great God,
and a great King above all gods.
- ⁴ In his hand are the depths of the earth;
the heights of the mountains are his also.
- ⁵ The sea is his, for he made it,
and the dry land, which his hands have formed.
- ⁶ O come, let us worship and bow down,
let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!
- ⁷ For he is our God,
and we are the people of his pasture,
and the sheep of his hand.
O that today you would listen to his voice!
- ⁸ Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah,
as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,
- ⁹ when your ancestors tested me,
and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work.
- ¹⁰ For forty years I loathed that generation
and said, "They are a people whose hearts go astray,
and they do not regard my ways."
- ¹¹ Therefore in my anger I swore,
"They shall not enter my rest."

Judges 4:1-24

The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, after Ehud died. ²So the LORD sold them into the hand of King Jabin of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor; the commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth-ha-goiim. ³Then the Israelites cried out to the LORD for help; for he had nine hundred chariots of iron, and had oppressed the Israelites cruelly for twenty years.

⁴ At that time Deborah, a prophetess, wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel. ⁵She used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim; and the Israelites came up to her for judgement. ⁶She sent and summoned Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali, and said to him, "The LORD, the God of Israel, commands you, "Go, take position at Mount Tabor, bringing ten thousand from the tribe of Naphtali and the tribe of Zebulun. ⁷I will

draw out Sisera, the general of Jabin's army, to meet you by the Wadi Kishon with his chariots and his troops; and I will give him into your hand." ' ⁸Barak said to her, 'If you will go with me, I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go.' ⁹And she said, 'I will surely go with you; nevertheless, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the LORD will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman.' Then Deborah got up and went with Barak to Kedesh. ¹⁰Barak summoned Zebulun and Naphtali to Kedesh; and ten thousand warriors went up behind him; and Deborah went up with him.

¹¹ Now Heber the Kenite had separated from the other Kenites, that is, the descendants of Hobab the father-in-law of Moses, and had encamped as far away as Elon-bezaananim, which is near Kedesh.

¹² When Sisera was told that Barak son of Abinoam had gone up to Mount Tabor, ¹³Sisera called out all his chariots, nine hundred chariots of iron, and all the troops who were with him, from Harosheth-ha-goim to the Wadi Kishon. ¹⁴Then Deborah said to Barak, 'Up! For this is the day on which the LORD has given Sisera into your hand. The LORD is indeed going out before you.' So Barak went down from Mount Tabor with ten thousand warriors following him. ¹⁵And the LORD threw Sisera and all his chariots and all his army into a panic before Barak; Sisera got down from his chariot and fled away on foot, ¹⁶while Barak pursued the chariots and the army to Harosheth-ha-goim. All the army of Sisera fell by the sword; no one was left.

¹⁷ Now Sisera had fled away on foot to the tent of Jael wife of Heber the Kenite; for there was peace between King Jabin of Hazor and the clan of Heber the Kenite. ¹⁸Jael came out to meet Sisera, and said to him, 'Turn aside, my lord, turn aside to me; have no fear.' So he turned aside to her into the tent, and she covered him with a rug. ¹⁹Then he said to her, 'Please give me a little water to drink; for I am thirsty.' So she opened a skin of milk and gave him a drink and covered him. ²⁰He said to her, 'Stand at the entrance of the tent, and if anybody comes and asks you, "Is anyone here?" say, "No." ' ²¹But Jael wife of Heber took a tent-peg, and took a hammer in her hand, and went softly to him and drove the peg into his temple, until it went down into the ground—he was lying fast asleep from weariness—and he died. ²²Then, as Barak came in pursuit of Sisera, Jael went out to meet him, and said to him, 'Come, and I will show you the man whom you are seeking.' So he went into her tent; and there was Sisera lying dead, with the tent-peg in his temple.

²³ So on that day God subdued King Jabin of Canaan before the Israelites. ²⁴Then the hand of the Israelites bore harder and harder on King Jabin of Canaan, until they destroyed King Jabin of Canaan.

Sermon

One of my favorite tropes in a movie or television show or book is the “unlikely criminal” storyline. I love to be surprised by the totally unpredictable culprit of the caper. This was, for me, the case with the BBC show “Broadchurch,” about a small town cop and her partner investigating the death of a local child. I had no idea who the killer was until the great reveal. And I was totally surprised by that scene in LA Confidential, where the police sketch artist starts drawing the face of the killer, and all of a sudden, you recognize it and you know exactly who it is? I didn’t see it coming at all. I’m being a bit purposefully vague, because I don’t want to spoil either for you, if you haven’t seen them. But even if you haven’t seen either show, you know this trope.

The sort of classic enactment of the unexpected culprit, of course, is always to make a woman the killer. Because apparently most of us have an inborn assumption that women are unlikely to actually commit murder, which I suppose most crime stats bear out. But we love the exception to the rule.

These sort of stories are great because they’re unexpected, but they’re also important, because they have a habit of laying bare our own assumptions and stereotypes about how the world around us works. And that’s really what’s happening in today’s story from Judges.

This is the story of Deborah and Jael. Two of the 19 women characters who show up in this book, which is one of the highest tallies of any book of scripture. Women, and gender more broadly,

along with race and tribal identification are two hugely important tropes throughout this book. Gender and ethnicity are both used as foils for much bigger questions about violence and shame and social degradation. Because of this, the book of Judges has some of the best and most complicated feminist interpretation you can find in the biblical studies market. And oh boy, do scholars love to disagree with one another about Deborah and Jael.

Deborah is one of the judges. She is wise and thoughtful and passes her days under a shady tree pronouncing decisions for all who come seeking her counsel. She is known, in the Hebrew, as a “woman of fire.” One day she calls to this military leader, Barak, and she says to him, God’s going to give you victory of Sisera and his army who have been controlling us for 20 years. It’s time, go kill them. And Barak, shockingly, says no. I’m not going unless you come with me. And Deborah says, fine. Sure, I’ll come. But you know what? Your victory is going to be just a little less shiny, because everyone will look at you and say that a woman had to come out and fight your battles for you. And at first, we sort of think she’s talking about herself, which in my opinion is a little self deprecating, but whatever. But she’s not.

She’s actually talking about the next woman we’ll meet, Jael, the wife of Heber, a Kenite who happens to be living in the area. A foreigner living alongside the Hebrew people. So, the battle goes exactly as Deborah foretold: the Canaanites under the leadership of Sisera are absolutely routed. We’re told that the entire army is slaughtered at the sword of Barak, under the direction of Deborah, a woman. But crafty Sisera escapes. Exhausted and battle beaten, he ends up at the tent of Heber, and who should be home, but his wife, Jael.

Jael invites in the enemy commander, offers him food and drink, and even, so kindly, offers to let him take a nap, she'll guard the door. But while he's asleep, she creeps into the tent, stake and hammer in hand, and drives that tent stake right through Sisera's open, snoring mouth. Later, Barak arrives looking for Sisera, and Jael points to the open door of her tent, where the man lies, dead. Pinned to the ground by her vicious stake. It's a brutal act of violence, even against an enemy leader. And made even more so because it was at the hand of a woman.

And this is where the scholars have at it. One scholar¹ thinks that Jael might have actually been an ally of Sisera, since she wasn't an Israelite but a foreigner. Once Jael realized the Israelites won, she had no choice but to kill her friend, Sisera, lest she be branded an enemy herself. It's an act of self preservation.

Another scholar² thinks Jael is courageous, doing what none of us would have the courage to do. Inviting in an enemy, tempting him with her hospitality, and then, without hesitation, murdering him in cold blood, because she is a brave woman.

Still another, actually, Elizabeth Cady Stanton if you'd like to know. Yes, that Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the suffragette and first wave feminist, she thought Jael wasn't a woman at all, but a "fiend." According to Stanton, "The deception and the cruelty practiced on Sisera by Jael under the guise of hospitality is revolting under our

¹ Dana Fewell, as quoted in Bellis' "Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes."

² Van Wijk Bos, same book.

code of morality. To decoy the luckless general fleeing before his enemy into her tent, pledging him safety, and with seeming tenderness ministering to his wants, with such words of sympathy and consolation lulling him to sleep, and then in cold blood driving a nail through his temples, seems more like the work of a fiend than of a woman.”³ Although few women scholars today agree with Stanton’s perspective, it is unsurprising to me to find that this is actually a strong theme in a lot of preaching and scholarship written by men about Jael. That her violation of the rules of hospitality, her unladylike behavior, makes her somehow abhorrent and unacceptable to good Christian men and women. In this reading, Jael is a cautionary tale against violating womanhood, and women should heed her example carefully.

Now, while I disagree with this reading, I do understand the underlying tension of Jael’s story. As a preacher in a tradition that theoretically preaches peace, I get it. Jael, and even Deborah with her bloody pronouncements of wiping out the enemy army, they’re two hard stories to hear. And they should invite conversation about the role and value of violence, whether it is ever warranted, and if so, in what case. That’s actually the fundamental question of this story: when is violence justified? I’ll give you a hint as to my perspective by simply saying that Jael was on the very, very short list of names John and I had drawn up, if any of our sons had actually been daughters.

But there was a final perspective I came across this week. A story from a seminary professor and friend of mine, a true giant of the

³ Bellis 106-107

field of feminist biblical interpretation. And I'd like to end with it, as a sort of invitation. What I hear in her story, and by turns in the story of Jael and Deborah, is an invitation to see that a singular perspective on scripture is never enough. We should be attentive to the stories and voices of others, to provide our communities with a broader and more durable vision of what scripture might be saying. Katherine Sakenfeld, regarding this story, wrote this:

“A group of Korean women were expressing some enthusiasm for Jael’s exploits, and I commented that most women I knew—white, middle/upper-class North Americans like me—had trouble with this story. I suggested certain roots for our difficulties with the story: we are too accustomed to not having to defend our homeland. Many of us are also influenced by the Christian theme of “turning the other cheek,” I asked these Koreans what they could offer out of their setting that might be of help to me. After a brief pause, there came a bold reply from the far end of the table. “If you American women would just realize that your place in this story is with Sisera’s mother, waiting to collect the spoil of your interventions across the world...” I did not want to hear that. I did not want to be reminded of the negative effects of first-world colonialism and military might in which I participate by my citizenship. But as I have reflected longer about it, I wonder whether I did not hear God’s prophet as that woman spoke. That thought and that exchange remain among the most disturbing and the most profound moments of my Asian journey, a time of hearing the Bible as word of God through the voices of those not like myself.”⁴

⁴ Ibid pg 108.

The unexpected culprit can sometimes raise for us unexpected questions. About what we expect from others, where we identify inside the story, and about whether we consider our perspective to be the only one worth seeing. We would do right by Jael and Deborah, by the women of Judges, the stories of the whole Bible, to approach with an air of humility, acknowledging the limitations of our own singular perspectives. And if we allow the voices and experiences of others to shape the way we read, question, and ponder these stories.