

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Laura A. Tisher, Minister of Youth and Young Adults at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, November 16, 2008, 27th Sunday after Pentecost, and dedicated to the glory of God!

“Lives of Courage: Trusting in God”

Joshua 4:1-7

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Imagine: a woman sitting under a palm tree, offering advice as people go by. At first glance, she may seem like quite an insignificant person – just a lowly woman sitting on the ground, under a random tree, in a sea of so many other nameless women along the way. You may wonder if she’s giving sound advice or even if she’s in her right mind or and you may think it would pretty easy to pass her by, maybe even trip over her, without much notice at all.

In ancient Israel, there were probably many women like this – women selling things, women waiting, women passing the time. But there was one woman, in particular, who sat under a tree, like so many others, and she gave wise advice, settled disputes, and provided guidance to those who sought her out.

This particular woman made a lasting impact on her nation. She was in fact one of the most prestigious women leaders in all of

the Old Testament. This woman was definitely not just an ordinary or insignificant woman! She was quite unique – set apart from so many of the others.

Her name was Deborah, which means “fiery leader.” Deborah was called by God and was determined to share God’s word with everyone around her in order to bring about transformation and to change the world she lived in. Her determination, courage and trust in God allowed her fellow Israelites to overcome what initially seemed like an insurmountable task. “Never underestimate the power of a determined woman,” they say. Deborah was indeed a determined woman – determined, that is, to act out her faith in God, above all else.

For this reason, her witness has remained in the Biblical tradition that has been handed down from generation to generation for so many years. Her witness has been remembered, even when so many other women have been so easily and so often overlooked and forgotten.

The Bible does not give much information about Deborah. We only know that she was a judge and a prophet for the Israelites. As a judge, she acted as a spokeswoman in matters of national importance and societal disputes. Being a prophet, she also guided Israel spiritually. She brought the word of God to them.

Deborah was the only female judge and she was the first among only a handful of female prophets named throughout scripture. She was the fourth of 12 judges in Israel’s history, most of whom were so insignificant that today we don’t even know their names. These judges ruled in Israel *after* the death of famous leaders like Moses and Joshua, who had led the Israelites through the wilderness, and *before* the rise of the great monarchs like King David.

It was a turbulent, “in-between” time for the Israelites, an era when they came into conflict with many surrounding tribes. The Israelites understood these continual conflicts to be the result of their unfaithfulness to God. They strayed away from God time and

time again and consequently, they thought, God led them into the oppressive hands of foreign attackers, as punishment for disobeying God. When the Israelites cried out to God, either in desperation or in repentance, God always saved them and renewed their relationship with God. The Israelites and God repeated this pattern of sinning, repentance and salvation over and over again.

These are the stories we hear throughout the Book of Judges. As they were experiencing national crises, the Israelites saw the judges as charismatic leaders who were raised up and commissioned by God in order to bring about God's deliverance and save God's people from the oppressors.

In Deborah's case, the Israelites had once again disobeyed God. And so they were attacked by King Jabin, who ruled over Hazor, a city about 10 miles north of the Sea of Galilee. It was a city that had gained much popularity and prestige because of its proximity to many trade routes. It was a city over which many wanted control. Jabin's army was quite powerful, especially in the face of the puny Israelites. In fact, at first glance, it probably seemed like it would be an easy fight for King Jabin and his army.

Yet in the face of these attacks, Deborah came to the Israelites' rescue. She summoned Barak as the Israelites' military leader and ordered him to assemble troops from a couple of the northern tribes, and she told them to gather on Mount Tabor. There, Deborah was confident that God would draw out the enemy and would give the victory to Israel.

Many may not have believed that victory against this powerful army from Hazor was ever possible. But Deborah was right! We didn't hear about it in today's reading, but in fact, what ended up happening was that (even as smart and strong as King Jabin's army was), they were defeated in the end because they got stuck in a mudslide and panicked, when a nearby river flooded the area. This gave the Israelites an easy opportunity to kill them all and win this battle.

For all intents and purposes, though, the mudslide was not really an important part of the story for the Israelites. They understood this victory theologically. It was as a sign that through the words and actions of Deborah, God had shown them divine grace.

We may not completely comprehend or agree with the ancient theological understanding of divine punishment and judgment, as it is described in these biblical passages. Nor may we see or understand God acting in our lives today in the same way as the ancient Israelites did, particularly in the midst of national crises and interactions of foreign policy. Yet if we read and hear these accounts as stories of faith, and not necessarily as historically accurate accounts, they can indeed hold powerful meaning for us today.

This is especially true when we look at and study the visionary spirituality of individuals like Deborah. Despite the oppressor's forceful power, Deborah was inspired by a vision of freedom – a vision that she believed in so much that she found the strength to claim that vision and organize and inspire others to overcome the oppression they were experiencing. This vision of freedom was rooted in Deborah's steadfast confidence and trust in God's unfailing and unending love and forgiveness. This was God's grace – providing her and her followers with opportunities to grow, even in challenging times.

Seeing and hearing about this prophetic vision of freedom in the midst of oppression reminds me so much of our world today. It reminds me of those who have been fighting for marriage equality throughout the U.S. In the past two weeks since legislation passed in several states banning the civil legality of same-gender weddings, protestors have been marching and speaking out, all around the country, practically every day. Just yesterday, nearly a million people protested, showing their support *for* marriage equality, in over 300 cities across the U.S. and the world.

These people who are speaking out have found the strength to claim a vision of freedom and equality, just like Deborah did. They

have organized and are attempting to inspire others to overcome oppression, just like Deborah did. Some, including many UCCers, are acting out of their faith and belief in a gracious God, just as Deborah did, so many years ago. Today these people know and understand God's desire for a life-affirming world in which all are loved, accepted and treated equally.

The fight for equal rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people is not only happening today with marriage equality in California. It is happening all over our country and our world, including right here in Ohio, with employment and housing non-discrimination, creating safe schools, and establishing fair-adoption and foster-parent rights. The work of organizations like Equality Ohio and so many others *are* making a difference. But the road ahead is long and sure to be bumpy.

In the midst of these struggles of our times, how can we look to Deborah's witness to affect our personal and collective response? Deborah heard God calling her to lead her people in the fight against oppression. She knew of and preached about God's desire to be in relationship with God's people, even when or if they strayed away from God. She shared her understanding of God's unending love and grace. She told the people all around her that God loved God's people and did not want to see them suffer, especially in the face of oppression; that God wanted to them overcome the oppression that they encountered.

Her biblical testimony leads us to know and believe that God would want these same things today. God calls each of one of us to be prophetic witnesses throughout the world, sharing this good news of God's steadfast grace. Our faith calls us into action today. Just like Deborah's understanding of God's unfailing love led her into action, in the same way, our own understanding of God's gracious and extravagant welcome also leads us to act today, knowing and trusting that God will carry us through, just as God did for Deborah and her people.

There are so many justice issues plaguing our world today, for which God is calling us to respond. The story of Deborah – a story

of courage, a story of trusting in God, a story of moving from words to actions – clearly still holds meaning for us today. The witness of Deborah continues to encourage us to look for new possibilities; to see a way, when there is no way; to discern God’s movements in difficult situations.

Faith in God, like the faith Deborah had, means trusting what is yet to be born, that which lies on the horizons and has yet to come. God is calling each one of us to be prophetic partners, just like Deborah, to bring forth great things in our lives and throughout the world today. Amen.

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