

# EVERYDAY HEROES: DEBORAH, THE JUDGE

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Text: Judges 4:4-9

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## SCRIPTURE

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Judges 4:4-9

At that time Deborah, a prophetess, wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel. <sup>5</sup> She 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 judgment. <sup>6</sup> She 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. <sup>7</sup> I 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.’” <sup>8</sup> Barak said to her, “If you will go with me, I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go.” <sup>9</sup> And 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.

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## SERMON

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One of the remarkable things about the Bible is that in spite of its highly patriarchal character, we can find many, many examples of strong women. It both surprised me and excited me when I learned there were far more stories of women in the Bible than I thought. It was the reason that I wanted to lead an adult forum on the “Strong Women of the Bible.” And these women are not passive, demure, timid and submissive, but are active, bold, fearless and assertive. Howard talked about one of these women last week, Rahab, who, despite her unfavorable label, saved God’s people and made a bold statement of faith. Frequently, we see that the women who did not have positions of power were still able to have the most powerful influence in the story of God’s people.

In our story this morning we find for the first time a woman who has an official position of power. Before Ruth Ginsburg, before Judge Judy, there was Judge Debbie!

Our passage begins with a recounting of the theme of the book of Judges. “The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord ....” There is a pattern repeated over and over in the book of Judges: 1) The Israelites turn away from following the way of the Lord. They do evil and they worship other gods. 2) Then the Lord hands the Israelites over to oppressing nations. 3) and the Israelites cry out to the Lord. 4) Finally, the Lord rescues them through a judge who delivers them for a period of time. Then after the death of that judge, the pattern repeats itself. It looks like they would learn from their mistakes, but they repeat this pattern over and over until they finally get a king.

In this case, the Canaanites had oppressed Israel for 20 years under King Jabin. The commander of his army was Sisera who had 900 chariots of iron. A modern day equivalent would be 900 tanks. The Canaanites were the more established, powerful, and richer culture in comparison to the Israelites. So the Canaanites had access to the most recent military technology, which they used to maintain their power and cruelly oppress the Israelites.

When the people cried out, God sent them the female judge, Deborah. The text describes her as sitting under a palm tree, where the people would bring their problems to her for judgment. Men and women came to her for advice and to have their disputes settled. As a judge, Deborah made fair decisions and she had authority and a voice in serious matters when most women did not. But that is not all Deborah had going for her. She was also one of five prophetesses described in the Old Testament. So when Deborah heard a message from God, as commander-in-chief, she summoned her officer Barak, and instructed him to take 10,000 soldiers to Mount Tabor where God would give the enemy into his hand.

But Barak said to her, "If you will go with me, then I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go." Barak's response has puzzled interpreters. Some say it showed him to be cowardly, afraid, and distrusting of God. But I believe it shows a recognition that Deborah was God's representative.

The Israelites were serious underdogs in this fight. And Deborah knew the risk she was taking, that if the battle was lost she would most likely lose her life too. But she had no doubts about God's message, and she had complete confidence that God would provide the promised victory. She may not have fought on the front lines or directed the battle. But, she was the one who brought justice to God's people...she was the one who called out the leaders to do what God had equipped them to do...she was the one who encouraged them and made it possible for them to do the work God had given them. Her bravery and faith are inspiring. She breaks down the gender stereotypes in Ancient Israel and even in today's society. We don't have many women today who have the same power Deborah had in her time. That is why she is one of our "Everyday Heroes."

You see, God has a way of turning our preconceptions upside-down, especially when we try to apply them to God. Take for example, the story of Katherine Johnson. She is a woman of faith, a Presbyterian in fact, and one of the African American women who worked for NASA as a mathematician in the 1950s and 60s. Her story and contribution to the space missions has largely been unknown until last year when she and two other African American women were depicted in the movie, *Hidden Figures*." Known as "the computers in skirts" the three women worked behind the scenes in the segregated West Area Computers division of Langley Research Center. Their meticulous calculations helped the United States catch up in the "space race" and send John Glenn into orbit.

It is even said that Glenn, who was known for not completely trusting computers, asked personally for Johnson when it came time for him to go up into space. He asked the head engineers to "get the girl to check the numbers... If she says the numbers are good... I'm ready to go." One of my favorite scenes in the movie, and I don't know if this actually happened but I like to think it did, is where Johnson's boss, Al Harrison played by Kevin Costner, finds she is

leaving her desk for large amounts of time several times a day. When she explains that she must walk a half-mile to another building to use the colored people's bathroom. Harrison abolishes bathroom segregation, personally knocking down the "Colored Bathroom" sign. Harrison then starts allowing Katherine to be included in their meetings, in which she creates an elaborate equation to guide the space capsule into a safe re-entry. So Johnson and the other unknown African American women played a vital role, they not only broke a gender stereotype but a racial one as well. They were the "Deborahs" of their time.

It is easy to overlook Deborah's story. It is tucked way back in Judges, a seldom read book. And Deborah doesn't have a flashy story like Gideon or Samson. She doesn't really do anything of note, other than what God called her to do. Except...that's exactly why we should take notice of her. While the Bible has a number of memorable characters and stories, it also has many other characters like Deborah, people we would never know if we didn't take the time to know them. And yet, it's often in the stories like these where God is most present for us. Here we have God calling on people who the world would consider less than ideal—a father-in-law, a woman of questionable morals, a female judge.

By the time we reach the book of Joel, one of the minor prophets in the Old Testament, it becomes clear that God treats people by their skills, abilities and faith and not by their gender. Joel says, "Your sons and your daughters will prophesy," and that line is quoted later in the book of Acts. When God calls people, it doesn't matter if they are male or female, black or white. God calls young and old, God calls slave and free, no matter what place in life we are, God can call us, whoever we may be. It doesn't matter if we are in a place of power or not. There is no limitation because of our birth, because of who we are or what we look like when it comes to God's call.

And when God calls on us, we are called to what we can do. Deborah did what she was called to do, lead Barak in the defeat of Sesera. We do what we can do. As a prophet we can prophesy. As a doctor we can diagnose and heal. As a student we can study hard. As a parent we can raise our children. As believers, we can follow the teachings and example of Christ.

When we do that, we are no longer defined by our gender or our bank account, our job, or our relationships. When we strive to serve God we are no longer defined by our past mistakes or our wrong turns in life. Sometimes God calls on elderly people like Abraham and Sarah. Sometimes God calls on morally compromised people like Jacob and David. Sometimes God calls on a woman like Deborah or Mary. Sometimes God calls on people who are only noteworthy for how ordinary they are—people like you and me. Next week we are moving into the New Testament to hear about one of the 12 disciples... Andrew. I hope you come back to hear how he is an "Everyday Hero." May you remember that it doesn't matter who you are or what you do, God is calling you to be an Everyday Hero too.