The Story
“A Few Good Men and Women”
A sermon by Dr. J. Matthew Burton, Jr.
Clemmons United Methodist Church
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Judges 4:4-9 (NRSV)
4 At that time Deborah, a prophetess, wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel. 5 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. 6 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. 7 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.” 8 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." 9 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.

SO MUCH VIOLENCE!

On March 13, 1944, Life Magazine ran a story entitled, FOX HUNT: Big Brave Men Beat a Tired Beast to Death. It was a story about a community in Holms County, Ohio that saw their fox population as a problem. Generally, the fox ate mice a crickets but sometimes they would get into the chicken coops wreaking havoc on the food supply of the small community. They would also kill quail, which angered the men of the community who wanted to kill the quail themselves during hunting season.

So on a Saturday some 600 men, women, and children formed a giant circle that stretched 5 miles across. They carried clubs which they beat on washtubs and pails as they walked toward one another. The foxes that emerged out of their nests and holes ran before the crowd trying to escape but were eventually trapped in the tight circle that closed in on them.
Some of the foxes turned towards their attackers and charged only to be beaten down. Others actually walked up to their attackers with their heads bowed only to receive a death blow from a club. Some of the foxes gave up and lay on the ground waiting to die. The men would beat the foxes to death and when they were tired or had had enough, they would turn the clubs over to their children. It was a story that horrified many and showed the propensity for violence in our world.¹

If you are a student of history, you know that the Life Magazine story pales in comparison to the violence that we humans can reap upon one another. While in London a few weeks ago I visited the British War Museum. The tour started with WWI and the horrors of trench warfare. It ended with displays from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The horror and violence that one group of human beings can perpetuate upon another is beyond comprehension. And, yet, I know that war and violence have always been a part of human history.

Violence is a part of the Biblical story. The Old Testament, especially, does not shy away from it. Abraham preparing to sacrifice his only son Isaac, Moses murdering the Egyptian taskmaster, Joseph’s brothers plotting to kill him, Joshua’s destruction of Jericho and continued warfare afterwards, Gideon’s raid on his enemies camped in the Valley of Jezreel, the violence in the Deborah story (especially the scene of Jael driving a tent peg through Sisera’s temple), do not lend themselves well to children’s bedtime story telling.

3000 years later in 2015, violence is still a part of the human story. But as followers of Jesus Christ we need to ask ourselves, when violence escalates, where do you think Jesus would be? We need to read these stories through the lens of the Gospel and by doing so we might in some

way break the circle of violence which continues even today. As Gandhi once said,

*I object to violence because when it appears to do good, the good is only temporary; the evil it does is permanent.*

There is a point to all of this talk about violence. The Bible is full of great stories and wonderful lessons but it is also a conveyor of the reality of life in Biblical times. The Book of Judges is a case in point. After some background information and a few words about Joshua and his death, Judges gets right to the point:

*Then the Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and worshiped the Baals; and they abandoned the LORD, the God of their ancestors, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt; they followed other gods, from among the gods of the peoples who were all around them, and bowed down to them; and they provoked the LORD to anger. They abandoned the LORD, and worshiped Baal and the Astartes. So the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he gave them over to plunderers who plundered them, and he sold them into the power of their enemies all around, so that they could no longer withstand their enemies. Whenever they marched out, the hand of the LORD was against them to bring misfortune, as the LORD had warned them and sworn to them; and they were in great distress. (Judges 2:11-15)*

We see over and over again that whenever God’s people choose that which is in opposition to God and His Kingdom, bad things happen. Violence and war are not a part of God’s ultimate plan. Jesus Christ showed us the ultimate goal of God’s Kingdom work, the love for all of creation. Unfortunately, we continually fail to follow God’s path.
A FEW IMPORTANT LESSONS

So we have to acknowledge the sin and violence of humanity and understand that we bring it on ourselves in so many ways. And, yet, even in the midst of these difficult stories that we find in the Old Testament, there are lessons to be learned. Let’s turn to those lessons now.

The author Anne Lamott says,

That when God is going to do something wonderful, God always starts with a hardship; when God is going to do something amazing, God starts with an impossibility.²

All of these ingredients can be found in the Book of Judges. The people experience one crisis after another and when they do they cry out to God. God then responds by sending the right person to meet the challenge head on. These persons are called Judges. The judge in our story for this morning is a woman named Deborah.

GOD USES THE UNLIKELY

This is truly an amazing story when you consider the place of women in the society at this time. A woman at that time was considered to be on the same level as a donkey or cow and maybe even lower at times. A woman couldn’t sit with men inside so Deborah dispensed her wisdom outdoors underneath a Palm tree.

Deborah was like a 12th century B.C. E.F. Hutton. When Deborah talked, people listened. When Deborah summoned Barak, the leader of the Hebrew Army, he came! Then to Barak’s amazement Deborah tells him that they are going to go up against their enemy who just happens to

²Anne Lamott, Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith (New York: Riverhead Books, 2005), 33-34.
possess 900 iron chariots and a much better trained military. The modern day equivalent would be like a Toyota against an Abrams tank.

Barak was so doubtful about their situation that he refused to go without Deborah by his side. And then as if to deflate what little ego Barak had left, Deborah told Barak that he would get no credit for the defeat. The victory would go to a woman. That woman was Jael who killed Sisera, the leader of the Canaanite army of King Jabin of Hazor (Another story not fit for children by the way!).

So far in our reading, we see God using the most unlikely people to accomplish his task. There is Adam and Eve who throw away a wonderful life in the Garden of Eden. And then good old Noah who ends up being a drunk at the end of the story. There is Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who come from dysfunctional families. God uses them all.

God is able to use Joseph and self-centered arrogant youth who eventually becomes a leader who saves the nation of Israel. Moses is a murderer and coward who flees to Midian hoping to hide from the Pharaoh and God but ends up delivering the people out of slavery. There are more of these unlikely heroes to come.

Is God trying to say something to us in this grand story of creation and nation building? I think He is. I think God is saying that He is willing to be in the middle of the messiness of life. Even in the intrigue, sexual misconduct, murder, violence, and sinfulness of humanity, God sticks with us. In the midst of it all, God calls and uses the most unlikely people, people like you and me.

The Catholic Priest, author, teacher, and speaker, Brennan Manning who at one point sunk to the depths of alcoholism and all of its related problems said it best,
Suffering, failure, loneliness, sorrow, discouragement, and death will be part of your journey, but the Kingdom of God will conquer all these horrors. No evil can resist grace forever.\textsuperscript{3}

TEAMWORK WORKS

One of the things I noticed in Judges and in the story of Deborah in particular is that while God often uses one person to accomplish His task, God also uses groups of people. Teamwork is important to God. One of the things that smart leaders like Deborah seem to know intuitively is that they cannot accomplish God’s work by themselves. That’s a hard thing for jerk-yourself-up-by-your-own-bootstrap Americans to understand sometimes. God needs for God’s people to work together. It’s never about one person. It’s about all of God’s people.

Deborah needed Barak and Barak needed Deborah. They both needed Jael and of course all the others that participated in the battle to push back the Canaanites. I think one of the things I’ve found frustrating about church work over the years is the tendency for people to want to be a solo act or the refusal of hard working, well-meaning people to reach across the aisle and be in ministry with others. Teamwork seems to be a foreign concept in the church sometimes.

One of the thing that the poet, writer, and teacher Tom Geddie does in his workshops is ask people to draw an imaginary line on the floor. He then puts one person on each side. The purpose of the exercise is to have one person convince the other, without force to cross the line. He points out that U.S. players almost never convince one another, but their Japanese counterparts simply say, \textit{“If you cross the line so will I.”} They exchange places and they both win. I wonder who we need to reach out

to and what lines do we need to cross so that we can be in ministry together?

**GOD’S GOT YOU COVERED**

Deborah as a prophet and Judge was confident that God had her covered. Since the time of Abraham, the land had been promised to her people and she knew if she followed God’s lead that the land would be theirs. For years I did overseas missionary work. For most of those years I had 6’6” 250 pound Gary Walker was my back coverer. Whenever I had to go out of the streets in Costa Rica, Panama, or Jamaica to exchange money, Gary was there watching over me. When I started taking teams to Cuba, and had to carry thousands of dollars into the country, Gary stayed close by. He never let me out of sight. He would often say to me, “I’ve got your back.”

God is that close to you and me. God is there and if you listen closely, you can hear God say, “I’ve Got your back. I’ve got you covered.” I can say with confidence this morning that I would not be where I am if God and God through other people hadn’t watched my back. I’m grateful for all of those people that God worked through and I’m especially grateful to a God who has watched over me all of these years.

The Christian musical group Philips, Craig, and Dean sing these words:

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Sometimes when I look back it’s hard to explain
Just how far I’ve come yet how little has changed
I still long to hold what seems so out of reach
Only to find out it’s not what it seems

I come to the Father alone and afraid
In need of forgiveness yet it’s so far away
I cry out for mercy a child so in need
With a voice of compassion the Father calls out to me
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I know what you’re facing, I see you’re standing
I’m holding all the answers you need
‘Cause no situation will ever take you out of My reach

I’ve got you covered, I’ll pay the difference
You don’t have to worry at all
Whatever the cost is I’ll go the distance
If you fall, I will catch you
You know I won’t let you feel like you’re there all alone
I’ve got you covered

Even when things seem to be at their worse. God has us covered. God’s
got your back. May we learn to have a Deborah kind of confidence, a
confidence that knows that God is always there. Think about it in the
name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.