

Righting Relationships, Becoming Ourselves

Joy Versluis (January 17, 2016)

The writers of the series “Do You See This Woman?” focus on how Miriam and Deborah (and Jael) can be a model for us in the church. They write: “These women represent the kinds of full participations possible for women in the church when individuals move toward right relationships.” In particular, we can look at Deborah for exemplifying stellar leadership, a true “example of a righteous and faithful leader.”

Here are three aspects to consider.

1. The Family Album

Songwriter-teacher John Bell suggests that God has a bias for choosing the *unexpected* as saviors of the people. This is especially noticeable when one sees the line of women in the Bible who unfold God’s story. We’ll look at three of them: Miriam, Deborah, and Jael.

Miriam is part of the blueblood family with Moses and Aaron who led the Hebrew people out of Egypt. We first meet Miriam when she “saves” her baby brother Moses by cleverly suggesting that a Hebrew woman, her own mother, nurse and raise the child until old enough for Pharaoh’s daughter to assume responsibility for this adopted son. Already a line of women had defied the patriarchal law. When the king of Egypt declared that Hebrew male babies must be killed, the two midwives Shiphrah and Puah refused to obey the order. When Pharaoh extended the order for genocide, Jochebed also refused and hid her baby Moses.

Though later narratives tell a more complicated story about Miriam, this “snapshot” of her after the Israelites escaped from Egypt demonstrates her role in the community. She leads the women with song and dance and tambourine to celebrate the victory over Pharaoh and his army. She is a prophet and leader, recognized by her brothers to be a colleague, accepted by the community to fill her leadership roles.

Turn the pages of the family album and we’ll find Deborah, who, as one female scholar notes, “. . . makes a brief, albeit intense, appearance in the Book of Judges.” Unlike her fellow male judges, she meets all the expectations of the role. Her resume includes: military strategist, prophetess, poetess, and judge, that is, a person who ruled, and political leader. Deborah’s report card shows that she was the only “good” judge among the cycle of judges and she delivered Israel from a 20-year occupation.

She initiates a meeting with Barak and reveals the prophecy that he is to lead an army to defeat King Jabin. Barak is to gather ten thousand warriors at Mt. Tabor to meet the opponent’s nine hundred chariots and troops. This is serious stuff, and

Deborah shows that she is made of “the right stuff.” She is a most competent woman and leader.

The third family member in our album is Jael. Someone has noted: “Stories that are memorable tend to have within them something which is odd” (John Bell). Jael is a non-Israelite, a family group descended from Moses’ father-in-law. The prose account in Judges 5 is vivid and suggestive. Jael offers Sisera, the commander of the oppressor’s army, the only one who escaped the fierce battle, refuge in her tent. “Turn aside, my lord, turn aside to me, have no fear,” Jael tells him and extends the expected Near Eastern hospitality. He’s exhausted. He asks for water; she gives him milk and covers him with a rug. Apparently the work of pitching tents fell to women among the Bedouin so she was familiar with hammering tent pegs into the ground. As we might say today, she had tools and she wasn’t afraid to use them.

“Then, 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 Barak went into her tent; and there was Sisera lying dead, with the tent peg in his temple.” (Judges 4:22)

2. Countering the Patriarchy with Exemplar Relationships – Deborah and Barak

The authors of the series note: Gender is not a determining factor in whether one will be called to lead or follow. The Judges 4 narrative is as much about the role of women and the relationship between a female and male leader as it is an account of military victory.

We notice that Deborah, sometimes called “Mother of Israel,” had a place from which to function in her role as judge. It was public, it was recognized, and possibly was close to trade routes.

A series of events brings Deborah and Barak together. First, the “Israelites cried out to the Lord for help.” King Jabin of Canaan “had oppressed the Israelites cruelly twenty years.” (Judges 4:3) Their situation was unbearable. Second, Deborah was tasked with countering this oppression by hearing God’s command to fight the empire and expect victory. Unexpectedly though, Barak departs from the usual story and insists that Deborah accompany him. In fact, Barak is not deterred when Deborah points out the cost of this partnership for Barak: she tells him, “. . . 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.” (Judges 4:9) Twice the narrator tells us that Deborah got up and went with Barak. When the Israelite army is in place, it is Deborah who gives the command, reiterates the prophecy, and endorses 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.” (Judges 4:14)

In some ways, Barak might be considered a protégée. He is not diminished by Deborah's coming with him, nor by hearing that a woman (he might have wondered who that would be) would receive credit for Sisera's demise.

At Shalom, we have the opportunity to be Deborahs and Baraks in organized ways such as on committees and during worship services, and in less formal ways such as during social gatherings. I recall teaching Sunday School for the high schoolers with Kevin T. taking a supporting role. I remember meeting with Susan H. and Ross R. as we worked to articulate the "Second Sundays" model. It is good for our children to see men and women working together and affirming each other's value, that this is part of what it means to be in the church and people of God.

3. Creating New Songs

The authors of Exodus and Judges provide two versions of the same events in two different formats: prose and poetry. The song Miriam sings and the song Deborah and Barak chant are considered to be the oldest compositions of the Bible, perhaps written before the narratives themselves.

Sometimes called the Song of Moses, the Exodus 15 victory song is also known as Song of the Sea or the Song of Miriam.

The Ann Arbor Word of God community, a charismatic, ecumenical group, which flourished in the '70s, and still has remnants in the area today, was known for its songs. Before associating more with the Episcopal renewal, Paul's and my intentional community in the Upper Peninsula sang from the Word of Community songbooks. Usually the words were scripture based—a nifty way to learn Bible passages. So Miriam's song:

I will sing unto the Lord
For he has triumphed gloriously;
The horse and his rider has he thrown into the sea.

is a catchy number and it's easy to picture Miriam's shaking the tambourine and leading the delivered people in a celebratory dance after crossing the Sea.

I think our counterpart is the chant heard at sports' events:

We will, we will
Rock you!

Not unlike today, the Exodus song captures the emotions of the underdog who WON! We really showed them!

The poem the Song of Deborah gives a lyrical, jubilant account of the event in Judges Chapter 4 and provides details not given in the prose version. It recounts the Lord's

role in the victory, praises the leadership of Deborah and Barak, recognizes the tribes who participated and those who didn't, and concludes with a moving viewpoint of Sisera's mother, who awaited her son's return.

But what's most striking to me is the designation given to Jael: "Blessed above all women be Jael." We're used to associating this phrase with Mary, mother of Jesus, not with someone who wields deadly tools.

Though not affirming Jael's action, I think we can sympathize and seek to understand her position. She was vulnerable; she was alone; she was tied to many cultural norms that were not friendly to women. She knew of the oppressive regime.

I find this similar to what many women face today. I think of the horrific stories we hear of poverty, gang rape, honor killings, mutilation, stoning, kidnappings, trafficking, intimidation, and rape as a weapon of war. We could say Jael's story even pales in comparison, but I think a more helpful understanding is to recognize that for many women their fragile position in society might demand the courage and resistance Jael demonstrated. With limited options, she acted.

I think *new* songs are required as a way to counter the patriarchy, to embolden women, and to celebrate women in our lives who have shaped and blessed us.

We need a song about Barbara Rebstock, an Anabaptist prophet in Strasberg in the 1530s who stood up to ". . . David Joris a misogynist Anabaptist leader who tried to shame the Anabaptist men she worked with that they were weak because they let her lead." (MenoNerd)

We need to sing songs about Jean Kaufman who faithfully typed up the bulletin and ran it off on the mimeograph machine at Maple Grove Mennonite Church for years and years and one for Pearl Bauman Zehr who felt free in the church basement but not on the sanctuary platform, even though she was a "Deborah". We need to sing songs about the women who met monthly to lay precise stitches into handsome patchwork quilts, while Geneva Gerber, who was blind, rolled and rolled strips of white sheets into bandages, their useful gifts spanning the ocean.

We need to recall Ruth Brunk Stoltzfus, who, at age 74, was the first woman ordained in the Virginia Mennonite Conference, though she had been preachin' and teachin' for years and mentoring men and women along the way.

We need to create songs about the 300 young girls snatched from their families in Nigeria so that we don't forget.

We need to discover songs that bless the women who blessed us. We need songs about the visible and invisible women; we need to sing songs for women who found solace in song because they were otherwise silenced.

Let me end with some questions for us to ponder:

- What woman in your family album needs to be recognized? Or how do Miriam, Deborah, or Jael inspire you?
- Where have you experienced mutual and rewarding female-male relationships in the church, in your work, in your own family?
- For whom might you create a song?

And if anyone is plucky enough to dance that song in the community, the circle is wide and the tambourine is ready.