

“Unbelievable, Crazy, Courage”

January 21st, 2018

Rev. Jordan McKenzie

4 ¹⁻³ The People of Israel kept right on doing evil in GOD’s sight. With Ehud dead, GOD sold them off to Jabin king of Canaan who ruled from Hazor. Sisera, who lived in Harosheth Haggoyim, was the commander of his army. The People of Israel cried out to GOD because he had cruelly oppressed them with his nine hundred iron chariots for twenty years.⁴⁻⁵ Deborah was a prophet, the wife of Lappidoth. She was judge over Israel at that time. She held court under Deborah’s Palm between Ramah and Bethel in the hills of Ephraim. The People of Israel went to her in matters of justice.⁶⁻⁷ She sent for Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali and said to him, “It has become clear that GOD, the God of Israel, commands you: Go to Mount Tabor and prepare for battle. Take ten companies of soldiers from Naphtali and Zebulun. I’ll take care of getting Sisera, the leader of Jabin’s army, to the Kishon River with all his chariots and troops. And I’ll make sure you win the battle.”⁸ Barak said, “If you go with me, I’ll go. But if you don’t go with me, I won’t go.”⁹⁻¹⁰ She said, “Of course I’ll go with you. But understand that with an attitude like that, there’ll be no glory in it for you. GOD will use a woman’s hand to take care of Sisera.” Deborah got ready and went with Barak to

Kedesh. Barak called Zebulun and Naphtali together at Kedesh. Ten companies of men followed him. And Deborah was with him. ¹¹⁻¹³ It happened that Heber the Kenite had parted company with the other Kenites, the descendants of Hobab, Moses' in-law. He was now living at Zaananim Oak near Kedesh. They told Sisera that Barak son of Abinoam had gone up to Mount Tabor. Sisera immediately called up all his chariots to the Kishon River—nine hundred iron chariots!—along with all his troops who were with him at Harosheth Haggoyim. ¹⁴ Deborah said to Barak, “Charge! This very day GOD has given you victory over Sisera. Isn't GOD marching before you?” Barak charged down the slopes of Mount Tabor, his ten companies following him. ¹⁵⁻¹⁶ GOD routed Sisera—all those chariots, all those troops!—before Barak. Sisera jumped out of his chariot and ran. Barak chased the chariots and troops all the way to Harosheth Haggoyim. Sisera's entire fighting force was killed—not one man left. ¹⁷⁻¹⁸ Meanwhile Sisera, running for his life, headed for the tent of Jael, wife of Heber the Kenite. Jabin king of Hazor and Heber the Kenite were on good terms with one another. Jael stepped out to meet Sisera and said, “Come in, sir. Stay here with me. Don't be afraid.” So he went with her into her tent. She covered him with a blanket. ¹⁹ He said to her, “Please, a little water. I'm thirsty.” She opened a bottle of milk, gave him a drink, and then covered him up again. ²⁰ He then said, “Stand at the tent flap. If anyone comes by and asks you, ‘Is there anyone here?’ tell him, ‘No, not a soul.’” ²¹ Then

while he was fast asleep from exhaustion, Jael wife of Heber took a tent peg and hammer, tiptoed toward him, and drove the tent peg through his temple and all the way into the ground. He convulsed and died. ²² Barak arrived in pursuit of Sisera. Jael went out to greet him. She said, “Come, I’ll show you the man you’re looking for.” He went with her and there he was—Sisera, stretched out, dead, with a tent peg through his temple. ²³⁻²⁴ On that day God subdued Jabin king of Canaan before the People of Israel. The People of Israel pressed harder and harder on Jabin king of Canaan until there was nothing left of him.

[TITLE SLIDE] Well in case you haven't noticed we are here today for worship.

And when people come to visit us for worship, there are a lot of different things they notice. But there's one thing that just about everybody who worship with us notices. That's our stained glass windows. Most of the people that come in here for worship notice them. And that's for good reason. Look at them. We get used to them, but they're hard to miss when someone comes into our sanctuary. They're very beautiful and even majestic so it's no surprise that people notice. Just last week actually there was a pastor who was here for a meeting and he came in and he was looking at them.

And I explained to this pastor how the windows tell us the biblical story of faith with different characters. And I mentioned that we actually had a sermon series a couple years ago where we went through all the windows and looked at all the characters. How many of you remember that? Yeah, it was a good series. But as we were talking about it I realized these windows are missing something: women. The characters on them tell the story of our faith from creation to redemption, from beginning to end, from Moses to David to Jesus to John to Paul to Martin Luther. But out of all the characters, there are no women. Now I recall that over 50% of us humans are female. So if there are all these characters that are supposed to tell the story of faith and there's half of the human population not represented, it tells me

something. It tells me maybe sometimes we forget a little bit about the role of vital role women have played in the church. I know some of you women out there are saying, duh! But it's true.

And it's not just in our windows. Think about Bible stories. We look at stories and while we do look at women from time to time who is it we usually look at: men? Now I've got nothing against men. If you haven't noticed, I'm one myself. I got three sons. Yes, my three sons. I've heard that joke already. Men are important. But so are women. So we decided that as we are in this new year talk of living boldly we should like at women.

Because we need women. Looking at the stories of women gives us another perspective, it enriches our reading of the Bible; it helps us to understand things from a different viewpoint. If the Bible is looked at with only men in mind, we miss out on a lot. But perhaps more important than just helping us in our reading of the Bible, it's something we need to do for another reason. Because we have a lot of girls in our church who need to know these stories. For instance, JP and Becky's daughter Liberty is being dedicated in a couple of weeks. I want Liberty and all those other girls to know that there are these stories where they are wonderful faithful women. That they are valued for who they are.

And that's where the timing of this series is perfect. Because there's a whole movement happening right now in our culture, the me too movement, where women are speaking up about sexual harassment and being mistreated because of their gender. And so with this series we can join those in this cultural saying that women are valuable and important. And so as we hear the stories of women today, we in the church need to hear the Bible stories from long ago of strong women. And so today we're beginning with two women Deborah and Jael. And I'll tell you this story today is one unbelievable one. A crazy women. If you paid attention the story of Deborah and Jael that we just read it sounds more like the Game of Thrones TV show than the Bible.

As the series starts we have the Israelites. They are God's people, of course, but like usual, they're not acting very godly. In fact, because they have walked away from God, God has given them over to their enemies the Canaanites. Now as they are oppressed by the Canaanites they don't have a king yet so they have these people, the judges they're called, who are leading them as they try to figure out their way. And these judges included this prophetess Deborah who the people went to for matters of justice. **[SLIDE #3]** The text actually alludes to the fact she solved disputes under a palm tree, which in Jewish tradition symbolizes the fairness and wisdom. So Deborah was seen as fair and wise by the people.

And one day Deborah decides based on what God is telling her that it's time to battle against the Canaanites. And so she calls for a man named Barack who's a military commander and says, here's the deal. God's told me it's time for battle so take ten companies of men, which is about ten thousand men, and go to this spot, Mount Tabor. The battle will happen there and I'll make sure you win the battle.

Now Barack refuses. And that's probably because the other enemy army had more people, and better weapons. The text goes to great pains to point out that the Canaanites had iron chariots, which were rare. So Barack is scared and he says I'll only go if you got with me. Because God is speaking to her as a prophetess. She agrees but she says, oh by the way, you're not going to get the glory for the victory. A woman is going to get the glory. In fact, a woman will be the one who kills the Canaanites great warrior, a guy named Sisera. **[SLIDE #4]**

So what happens, well Barak and Deborah lead the army to this spot, Mount Tabor. And as this battle unfolds all Canaanites are killed except their great warrior Sisera, who sneaks off and he looks for a place to hide. And he ends up going to the home of a woman named Jael, who welcomes him in her home, and who feeds him, gives him some milk. And the mighty warrior Sisera falls asleep.

And you know that prayer, Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray to God my soul to take. You know that prayer? Well I hope this guy, Sisera, the great warrior, was praying that prayer because this lady Jael goes and does something pretty extreme. She takes a tent peg and hammers it into his skull and kills him. **[SLIDE #5]** Like I said, this is intense story. This isn't kids stuff. And so the great warrior, Sisera, is killed by this woman. Just as Deborah said, it would be a woman who would get the glory. Barack probably thought Deborah meant she was going to get the glory, but it's really this other woman, Jael. So the Israelites win the battle because of the courage of Deborah and Jael.

Now I know for many of us, we kind of wonder about this passage when we read it. It seems so violent. And vindictive. This woman Jael takes this man, cares for him, even help him fall asleep, and then she puts a peg through his head and kills him? How could God want her to do that? That doesn't seem right. And those are very valid thoughts to have, questions to ask. But let's just put them aside for now. Because if we focus on those we can miss out on what we can learn from this passage. Because this passage can teach us a lot about courage.

First of all, this passage shows us that courage is not dependent on what other people say. [SLIDE #6] You remember that Barack didn't believe Deborah. And I'm sure he wasn't alone. They see the Canaanites with their great chariots and vastly superior army and they worried. The text really points out in detail how powerful the other army is. But Deborah doesn't waver. She knows it's right to go into battle. Being courageous, doing the right thing, means not being dependent or basing your actions on what other people say. In fact, courage often means going against what people say, against the grain. Robert F. Kennedy once said, "Few men are willing to brave the disapproval of their fellows, the censure of their colleagues, the wrath of their society. Moral courage is a rarer commodity than bravery in battle or great intelligence. Yet it is the one essential, vital quality for those who seek to change a world" Courage is the one essential, vital quality for those who seek to change the world. And courage starts with being willing to stand up for what's right regardless of outside pressure.

Now I do want to be very clear. We all need wise counsel. We all need people in our lives that hold us accountable. That is a very important. Because you know we can feel passionately and think something is right and we can be wrong. So we all need to have humility and allow other people to give us perspective. But that's a lot different than being swayed by the crowd or popular opinion. You look at

Martin Luther King Jr. If you know anything about him, you know he had people around him that worked with him, mentored him, like Benjamin Hays, Bayard Rustin, Howard Thurman, he was surrounded by them, but when they affirmed his truth, he spoke up even when everyone else didn't like it. That's courage. Knowing something is right and standing up for it in what you say or what you do. Someone that is courageous does not depend or base their actions on what people say.

But the second thing this passage tells us is that courage is dependent on God.

[SLIDE #7] When Deborah speaks up, Barack and other question her. But Deborah knows that because God has spoken to her she can have courage. And this trust she has in God really comes out in the next chapter, which details this situation. She knows that God will give them the victory. She says God will protect us. Because we are his people. Walter Brueggemann says, Christians are 'born anew' and we have peace with God. That assurance leaves for us the chance to re imagine the world--and our place in it--outside of the tired categories of fear and inadequacy. Our peace with God, knowing God is with us, is what gives us courage. God is our strength and our salvation. Courage is dependent not on what other people say or think, but it is dependent on God.

Now the third thing is this, courage is for everyone. It's for all of us. [SLIDE #8]

We are all called to be courageous. Raise your hand if you are called to be courageous. You know Deborah and Jael; they weren't supposed to be the ones who won this battle or led Israel. Deborah was the only female judge. Jael was an ordinary woman. But they knew that God was calling them, even though they were not the stereotypical markers for courage. In fact, it's subversive for them to be the ones who are courageous. This was a patriarchal society where men ruled. And yet this text surprises us, it's the man Barack who is scared and the women who are courageous. Courage is often presented as a very masculine, manly trait or a trait for the tough. But it's not. It's for men and women. For young and old. For abled and disabled. Courage is for all of us. Scripture is constantly subverting our understanding of who God can use, of who can speak up. Not just with these two women, but the stutterer, Moses, a young girl, Mary. This list could go on. We're all called to have courage.

Now this doesn't mean we all have to go out and be the next Martin Luther King Jr. Cause that's the image we often get of courage, right? I just used it myself. And that's certainly one type of courage. But when I say that we're all called to be have courage, that's not the only way. Courage doesn't always mean we have to go out and speak in front of 10,000 people. Courage can also mean being honest with

someone you have an issue and you've been avoiding and finally going and talking to them. Or it can mean standing up in a small way for someone around you who isn't being treated right. Or it can mean doing what I think is the most courageous thing of all, and that is letting go of your pride and admitting that maybe you were wrong or you need help with something. Sometimes having one of those tough conversations takes more courage than getting up and speaking in front of 10,000 people. Courage comes in many different shapes and sizes. God doesn't call all of us to go out and be Martin Luther King Jr, he just calls us, calls you to be courageous in our own way. We are not called to fear or weakness but courage. Because God is with us. Remember that's the foundation. 2 Timothy 1:7 ⁷For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind. We are all called to be courageous because God is with us. Deborah and Jael knew that. Let's remember their example today. Let's pray.