

Sermon: Meet You at the Wadi

Seth C. Burgess, seminarian
Sunday, November 12th, 2017
10:00am Worship
Lyons First Presbyterian Church
11 Queen Street, Lyons, NY 14489

Scripture for the Thirty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time¹

Judges 4:1-7
Psalm 123:1-2
1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Christian Service

All ye Christians, Thank You for your service! Thank you for the sacrifices you have made on behalf of your neighbor, in service to your God. And in such close proximity to November the 11th, thank you to our nation's armed forces veterans and veterans of armed conflicts who have served us, the people.

Following the example of being good—demonstrating good service to a greater cause—is something that we value together as American citizens, as a country. It is why we set aside a special day each year to thank our veterans. In the United States, we have identified and valued military service to our country as something that *is* good. We know that those serving in this way do sacrifice their time, and also an aspect of their soul—and this we hold up with gratitude.

In the Church, as a single community which does not have a national identity—as a community which extends beyond any borders drawn on a map—our institutional and theological framework also points to the service of its members. The good service of a Christian is characterized by being a witness to God's love in the world, and especially according to following the example of Christ in caring for the weak, the sick, the oppressed, the lonely. This also, we find, is not necessarily easy. There is personal sacrifice involved. This also, we hold up with gratitude.

¹Revised Common Lectionary Readings for Sunday, November 19, 2017, the Thirty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A), <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/devotion/revised-common-lectionary/2017/11/19/>

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On Sunday mornings it is so beautiful to dwell on our membership in the human community in relationship with God, and the abounding love of God. Yet as soon as we head home from worship back into the daily rhythms of our week, we find ourselves back in a situation which is really dual-citizenship. As Christians we believe in and place our hope in God's love and our salvation in Jesus Christ, and then as Americans we return to our homes and workplaces and schools where we are so quickly reminded of the stress, the competition, the financial constraints, and the inequalities that confront us. The "what-could-be, what-should-be" scenario we love to believe in so much in worship might seem to be at-odds with the "what-is" scenario outside of the church doors. Or sometimes, like with the horrible shooting just one week ago in Texas, it might walk right in the church doors, armed to the teeth.

Judges As Deliverers

When a wave of evil walks in the door, or when our worship on Sunday or any day of the week is disrupted by the challenges of dual-citizenship, of being people of God who live in a world that is not perfect—this is a time for our faith to kick in, for our Christian service to define us. In our Old Testament scripture reading this morning, we find ourselves in the Book of Judges. In it, we can find a little mantra to help us as Christians to navigate those intersections we face daily where life situations confront our loving nature. All rise. The Court of Ephraim is now in session, the Honorable Judge Deborah presiding.

In the time of the judges, God's people are in the time period after Joshua's death, after having been led out of the wilderness and into a new land. It is before the time of the kings in Israel, and the leadership for the Israelites is unclear. The first verse of Judges begins with a question, which is this: "After the death of Joshua, the Israelites inquired of the LORD, 'Who shall go up first for us against the Canaanites, to fight against them?'" (Judges 1:1) The answer

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comes in chapter 2 verse 16, reading: “Then the LORD raised up judges, who delivered them out of the power of those who plundered them” (Judges 2:16).

The judges we are given in this book are interim leaders of the Israelites, with no specific vein of continuity amongst them. They are generally militaristic in function, emerging onto the scene at a time when Israel requires deliverance from its enemies. The occasion necessitating God’s raising up of a new judge is depicted of a situation of human design. The Israelites failed to be obedient to God, found themselves in a tight spot, and then at such a low point turned back to God for help. This is a cycle that is evidenced in the history of the relationship of humanity and God, and can be observed yet today—a movement from disobedience (or weaker relationship with God) to obedience (or a strong relationship with God) and so on.

Deborah: Justice and Deliverance

The particular leader raised up by God for the Israelites in Judges 4 is the woman Deborah. As we listen for that mantra to assist us today, let us hear again her story in Scripture, starting with Judges 4:1.

¹The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, after Ehud died. ²So the LORD sold them into the hand of King Jabin of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor; the commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth-ha-goiim. ³Then the Israelites cried out to the LORD for help; for he had nine hundred chariots of iron, and had oppressed the Israelites cruelly twenty years.

The situation of the Israelites in Judges 4 is that following Ehud’s judging of Israel, they are once again moving in a direction away from God and toward a relationship so weak that another judge has become necessary. The Israelites were again being cruelly oppressed by a foreign king, a king so strong that his army contained 900 chariots. As modern-day hearers of Scripture, we can begin to picture an army similar to those of Pharaoh, or the Emperor, as depicted in Hollywood movies. The people of Israel know they are in trouble, and are hopeless.

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Judges 4:4 continues:

⁴At that time Deborah, a prophetess, wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel. ⁵She 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.

In the case of nearly all of the leaders in the Book of Judges, we do not find them to actually be judging in the sense that we understand court judges to do today. Deborah, however, is different. Deborah “is the only leader portrayed as administering justice”² in Judges. This is an important note for the following reason: it means in the case of this particular judge of Israel, there was a simultaneous effort to live with some sense of order, with some orientation on being good, while at the same time giving the cry out to God for help. It is the indication of a mantra that we might consider as Christians today, to ask God to *do* what we cannot, and in the meantime, we will try our best to *be* good. Stated another way, Let God *do* and in the meantime, *be* good.

Back to Scripture, Judges 4:6:

⁶She 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. ⁷I 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.”

This meeting at the Wadi Kishon—the valley where there various streams ran together into the Kishon River—was where the “rubber meets the road” of that mantra. It is a hand-off in that relationship of people being good and God acting. At the Wadi Kishon, it was God acting in causing the army of chariots to head into a place that would be disadvantageous to them, the mass of Barak’s forces occupying nearby high ground on Mount Tabor. This story of Deborah’s

² New Interpreter’s Study Bible, p. 344

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judging was recorded to emphasize that the appropriate response would be for the Israelites to again lean back toward stronger relationship with God, being good in response to what God has done. As in this story from Judges, at the intersections of real life for us—where the rubber meets the road—God will be present. Let God *do*, and in the meantime, God desires us to *be* good. God is jealous for our being good.

Being Good Together, Keeping Awake

Our New Testament scripture, Paul's letter to the church in 1 Thessalonians, is encouraging of the Christian community's ability to together be good while trusting in God to act, to intervene in human history. In chapter 5 verses 5-6 he writes: "... you are all children of light and children of the day ... so then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake." And in verse 8, "since we belong to the day, let us ... put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation." Let God *do* and in the meantime let Christian people *be* good. In leading to the conclusion of his letter to the Thessalonian church, Paul exhorts its members to "therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you *are* doing." Let God *do* and in the meantime *be* good, together. Help one another. God *will* be there

All ye Christians, Thank You for your service! Thank you for the sacrifices you have made on behalf of your neighbor, in service to your God. Thank you for continuing to extend your enlistment in the Church Militant on a daily basis. Like our nation's military veterans, know that your role today and tomorrow is still one of service. "So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake."³ Awake, awake, Christians! "Awake, awake, utter a song!"⁴ Thank you for both *who you have been* and *for who you are going to be*. Our service as the Church continues; as we marvel at what God is doing, in the meantime, let us be good—together.

Amen.

³ 1 Thess. 5:6, NRSV

⁴ Judges 5:12