



Honeybee and Mountain Goat

Judges 4:3-9, 15-21; 5:1-3

Mother's Day, May 11, 2025, Aledo UMC

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Sermon, "Honeybee and Mountain Goat" (Judges 4:3-9, 15-21; 5:1-3)

As part of my devotional readings lately, I've been reading a devotional commentary on Paul's First Letter to the Church at Corinth. And wouldn't you know, but in the run-up to Mother's Day, my readings have come from that part of Paul's letter where he says things like:

- The head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man (1 Corinthians 11:3).
- Every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head (vs. 5).
- Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says...for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church (1 Corinthians 14:34-35).

You and I know that there are many churches—there are entire denominations—who say they take the Bible literally, and as a result, they do not ordain women or allow them to preach in their churches.

That prohibition against women in leadership has spread through other institutions of our society. Women in business talk about the "glass ceiling." Historians tell us that the Puritans who settled in New England have cast such a long shadow over American culture that women have been relegated to second-class status for much of our history.

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We as a nation have nominated two women to be president, one in 2016 and another in 2024. Obviously, neither woman won. But with such a large segment of our population holding to a belief that a woman should not preach, it seems logical to me that that same segment of our population would also believe that a woman should not govern.

Sadly, one of the reasons why women have been suppressed is because of the way some people interpret the Bible. That's why we do not take the Bible literally. But we do take the Bible seriously. **We take the Bible seriously.** As United Methodists, we interpret the Bible in the context of tradition, experience, and reason. And reason would tell you that if you're going to draw your beliefs on the role of women from scripture, then you cannot rely solely on St. Paul; you must consider the totality of scripture, including the story of Honeybee and Mountain Goat.

Honeybee is not to be confused with Honeytree. Nancy Honeytree was born in Davenport, Iowa, on April 11, 1952. With the release of her first album in 1973, she became one of the pioneers of the Jesus Music movement of the 1970s. I think I have a copy of that album somewhere in the parsonage.

Honeybee is the Hebrew word for the name Deborah; Mountain Goat is the Hebrew name for Jael. Their story is found in Judges 4, and on this Mother's Day, let's look at the story of these two heroic women.

³ Sisera, who had 900 iron chariots, ruthlessly oppressed the Israelites for twenty years. Then the people of Israel cried out to the Lord for help.

⁴ Now Deborah, a prophet, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at that time.

I want to stop right there and let that sink in: Honeybee—Deborah—was a prophet. But that's not all. She was married to a guy named Lappidoth, but Lappidoth was not the leader of Israel; his wife was the leader of the nation. In our vernacular, Lappidoth was the First Gentleman. Incidentally, Lappidoth means "Torches." Together they were Honeybee and Torches.

In that day and that culture, judges were not like judges of our times. Rather, in the Bible a judge was a kind of savior; someone who was raised up by God to deliver Israel from her enemies. And Honeybee was one of those judges.

It is no small coincidence that there are twelve judges recorded in the Book of Judges, just as there were twelve tribes of Israel and twelve apostles who followed Jesus. One could argue that that put the twelve judges on equal footing with the twelve sons of Jacob and the twelve apostles of Jesus. And Honeybee was one of those twelve judges.

Deborah governed Israel at a time when the Hebrews were "doing evil in the eyes of the LORD" (4:1) and they fell under the oppression of Jabin, "a king of Canaan."

Jabin oppressed Israel with the help of 900 iron chariots. Archaeologists tell us that these events took place as the Bronze Age gave way to the Iron Age, so these chariots were a recent technological development. It is unlikely that they were made entirely of iron; most likely they featured iron axles for a much sturdier vehicle—and a much more violent technological advantage.

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This Jabin was no foreign conqueror; he was from the very land that the Israelites inhabited—the very land they were supposed to conquer and clear of idolatry, but they had not. And so they were cruelly oppressed by the very ones they had failed to conquer.

Times really haven't changed all that much, have they? That which we fail to conquer often comes back to oppress us. And I wonder: What are the Jabins in your life? In my life? Is there something life that you've failed to conquer? Are you clinging to a bad habit? An obsessive behavior? If we fail to conquer our Jabins, they will come back to oppress us. That's what happened to the Israelites. Clearly, they needed a deliverer. And that deliverer was Deborah the judge: aka Honeybee. Let's pick up the story in verse 5:

⁵ [Honeybee] would sit under the Palm of Deborah, between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites would go to her for judgment. ⁶ One day she sent for Barak son of Abinoam, who lived in Kedesh in the land of Naphtali. She said to him, "This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, commands you: Call out 10,000 warriors from the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun at Mount Tabor. ⁷ And I will call out Sisera, commander of Jabin's army, along with his chariots and warriors, to the Kishon River. There I will give you victory over [Sisera]."

Deborah is also the only judge in the Book of Judges who actually does what judges are supposed to do: she judges. She holds court beneath a palm tree where she institutes and maintains justice and shalom among the various peoples and tribes of Israel. That makes Deborah the undisputed leader of Israel.

Of the twelve judges, Deborah is the most morally upright—and the least violent. If polls would have been taken at the time, they would have shown that Deborah had the highest approval rating of Israel's twelve judges.

But Deborah is more than a civil servant; she is also a prophetess and as such, she enlists the help of Barak to take on Sisera, the commander of Jabin's army, with the promise that God "will give him into your hands" (4:7).

Now you may be thinking, "A-ha! She couldn't do it alone! She needed a man." But that's not how the story is told. Rather, the scriptures make it clear that it's Barak who couldn't deliver Israel alone; he needed a woman. He needed Deborah. He needed Honeybee. Verse 8:

⁸ Barak told her, "I will go, but only if you go with me."

⁹ "Very well," she replied, "I will go with you. But you will receive no honor in this venture, for the Lord's victory over Sisera will be at the hands of a woman." So Deborah went with Barak to Kedesh.

Barak doesn't possess the same leadership skills as Deborah; he hesitates and then says to Deborah, "If you'll go with me, I'll go. But if not, I won't go."

Deborah agrees to go into battle with Barak, but her presence comes with a price. Because Barak was afraid to go it alone, Deborah says that the honor of attaining victory will not go to Barak; instead it will go to a woman.

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It would be easy to assume that Deborah meant that she would get the honor. But Deborah's not in it for the glory; she's a "humble bee" and leaves the honor to another woman, Mountain Goat.

Deborah goes into battle with Barak—not to fight, but to serve as the presence of the LORD for Barak and his army. Now we might be tempted to say that Deborah really didn't do much in the battle; indeed, she completely disappears from the story in the heat of the battle. But her work was accomplished on the front lines of prayer. Deborah went to intercede, to encourage and to motivate Barak and his troops. And Barak is indeed victorious, as we see beginning in verse 15:

¹⁵ At Barak's advance, the Lord routed Sisera and all his chariots and army by the sword, and Sisera got down from his chariot and fled on foot.

¹⁶ Barak pursued the chariots and army as far as Harosheth Haggoyim, and all Sisera's troops fell by the sword; not a man was left. ¹⁷ Sisera, meanwhile, fled on foot to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, because there was an alliance between Jabin king of Hazor and the family of Heber the Kenite.

¹⁸ Jael went out to meet Sisera and said to him, "Come, my lord, come right in. Don't be afraid." So he entered her tent, and she covered him with a blanket.

¹⁹ "I'm thirsty," he said. "Please give me some water." She opened a skin of milk, gave him a drink, and covered him up.

²⁰ "Stand in the doorway of the tent," he told her. "If someone comes by and asks you, 'Is anyone in there?' say 'No.'"

²¹ But Jael, Heber's wife, picked up a tent peg and a hammer and went quietly to him while he lay fast asleep, exhausted. She drove the peg through his temple into the ground, and he died.

Barak was unable to kill Sisera and seal his victory. Instead, Sisera escaped to the home of Heber the Kenite, knowing that Heber was a Jabin sympathizer. Unfortunately for Sisera, Heber's wife Jael was not a Jabin sympathizer. But Sisera didn't know that.

Jael offers Sisera hospitality by offering him some milk—probably mixed with wine—as well as a place to rest. Sisera lies down, enlisting Jael as his bodyguard.

Bad idea for Sisera, but it was fortunate for Israel. Jael assassinates him with a tent peg.

In the Eastern nomadic tribes, it was the women who put up and took down the tents, so Jael was using implements that were familiar to her. Her assassination of Sisera was an act of defiance, not only against Sisera, but also against her husband, Heber, who was known to be a friend of Jabin. But Jael was not named "mountain goat" for nothing!¹ And she, rather than Barak, is honored in a song for sealing the victory.

That song of victory was composed by Deborah and is recorded in Judges 5. Her victory song marks Deborah not only as a leader, not only as a prophet, but also as a priest.

¹ Lawson G. Stone's commentary on Judges in the Cornerstone Biblical Commentary, pg. 256.

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Thus, we see that Deborah is one of the very few people in scripture who functions as Christ functions, as prophet, priest, and king.

Let's take a look at Deborah's song of praise beginning in Judges 5:24—

“Most blessed of women be Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, most blessed of tent-dwelling women.

He asked for water, and she gave him milk; in a bowl fit for nobles she brought him curdled milk.

Her hand reached for the tent peg, her right hand for the workman's hammer.

She struck Sisera, she crushed his head, she shattered and pierced his temple.

At her feet he sank, he fell; there he lay.

At her feet he sank, he fell; where he sank, there he fell—dead.

I don't suppose the Connection/Forgiven Praise Band is going to add that to their repertoire any time soon. But there are other ways in which Honeybee can inspire us.

First and foremost, Deborah stands as biblical proof that women can have and should have a place of leadership among the people of God.

Secondly, Deborah is an example of women serving as a catalyst for others to rise to whatever occasion God has in mind for them. Deborah reminds me of Mary, the Mother of Jesus who served as a catalyst for Jesus to do something at a wedding at Cana when the wine had run out. Jesus, at his mother's behest, turned water into wine to save the day.

Thirdly, despite the violence and bloodshed we find in Judges 4, Deborah was committed to justice and shalom—not the off-the-cuff kind of peace that often gets thrown around in today's society, but the kind of practical peace that touches people where they live.

Fourth, Deborah was attuned to the word of the Lord. That's evident from the command she gives to Barak in verse 6 as she bravely orders Barak to take on Sisera, promising him that God would deliver Sisera and his army into his hands.

Fifth, Deborah was willing to go the distance. When it became clear that Barak was a reluctant leader who would not go it alone, Deborah agreed to go with him to support him, to pray for him and to assure him of God's presence.

Deborah stands as an example for all of us—men and women alike. God wants to use us to bring about victory for his people. But to accomplish that victory, notice how God uses a variety of people: a hesitant Barak; a resourceful Mountain Goat named Jael; and of course, an inspirational motivator named Honeybee. And the result is given in the final verse of chapter 5: “Then the land had peace for forty years.”