June 4, 2017 Text: Judges 4:1-10 “Deborah and Barak”

Several things jump out at me when I read this week’s text.

First, these verses seem to be about the achievement of some of the leaders of the Israelites. But in just the two verses that form the study passage, there are half a dozen references to the Lord (Judges 1:2, 3, 6a, 6b, 9). The writer of Judges understood that what might appear to be the work of successful humans may more properly be seen as the work of God.

Second, the key figure in this incident is Deborah, a woman. The idea that only men are gifted and called for leadership of God’s people does not match up with the biblical record. How about Miriam (Exodus 1:15:20)? What about Huldah (2 Kings 22:14)? How about Noadiah (Nehemiah 6:14)? Think of Rahab (Joshua 2:1, 16; Hebrews 11:31). Naomi. Ruth. Jael. God does not intend gender to be a barrier to serving God.

Third, even though individuals have a role to play, teamwork and community and consultation shape the positive movement in this week’s story. See Judges 4:5. Look at Judge 4:6-7. Consider Judges 4:8-9. The pattern of God’s work among us is formed by life in community.

One Sunday I worshipped at Church of the Dunes United Methodist in Grand Haven, Michigan. As one enters the parking lot, there is a sign that reads “Welcome to worship.” On the back of the sign—to be read as one exits the parking lot—there is the message: “Leave to serve.” This would not be so unusual except for a second message that is under the “leave to serve” wording. This weather-warning sign says “Caution: Hill may be icy.” It dawned on me that there is more truth in that juxtaposition of signs than was perhaps intended! There is indeed a caution that the hill on which we try to serve may indeed be icy. Leaving worship to serve the Lord is not an easy proposition. Leave to serve indeed, but the hill may well be dangerous!

That is what Deborah experienced in this week’s lesson. Serving God is not easy and sometimes it involves changing original plans (Judges 4:9-12). Serving God takes a depth of courage. Thank You, Lord, for using Deborah to teach us that!

What Someone Else Has Said:
In his autobiography (A Magnificent Obsession, Abingdon) Bishop William R. Cannon tells of his call to serve: “I was only seven years old when I accepted Jesus Christ as my personal Savior, joined the church, and was baptized. At the same time I offered myself to his ministry. I was not so much called to preach as I asked for the privilege of being a preacher. But Christ accepted my offer and made me one of his preachers.”

Prayer:
As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Speak, Lord, Your servant listens…”

June 11, 2017 Text: Judges 6:11-18 “Gideon’s Call”

Many of us have a little bit of Gideon in us: Others think more of us than we think of ourselves. When Gideon is called a “mighty warrior” (Judges 6:12), he replies by saying, in effect, “Who me?” (Judges 6:15). The line between true humility and self-denial can be a narrow one.

There is an interesting word used in Judges 6:14. In the Common English Bible, the Lord tells Gideon “You have strength.” The New Revised Standard Version refers to “this might of yours.” The Revised English Bible translates it “this great strength of yours.” The Hebrew word for “strength” or “might” is קְוֵשׁ. For some reason beyond my grasp, this is the same Hebrew word used for large lizard or chameleon.

Hmmm. A chameleon changes its color according to its emotional state, thus often blending into its environment. A lizard is reputed to have power well beyond its size. Gideon has been doing tricks to hide from the enemy (Judges 6:11). Gideon has indicated that he comes from a small, seemingly insignificant family (Judges 6:15). I don’t want to make too much out of this, but I am fascinated by the double-meaning of the word קְוֵשׁ and how both meanings apply to Gideon!

The call to Gideon is to save Israel from the Midianites (Judges 6:14). The relationship between the Hebrews and the Midianites is a mixed bag. There are friendly connections that even include family (Exodus 2:15-18). There are all-out attacks of Israel against Midian (Numbers 31:1-3). Are the Midianites the descendants of Midian, one of Abram’s sons (Genesis 15:2)? They show up again in the story of Joseph and his brothers (Genesis 37:28). We Americans can understand this vacillating relationship between Israel and Midian; have we not had both good and bad relationships with the same country—for example, Japan and Germany?

Sometimes we are tempted to think that God’s call to us must be clear and dramatic. Indeed, some people do report such moments. For more of us, however, the experience is more like Gideon’s. Things do not seem so clear. We are not sure we have heard the call correctly. We keep thinking (and stating) reasons God could not be expecting us to be the one God needs. This is one reason that the Church expects those who hear a call to test that call with the Church.

What Someone Else Has Said:
Jerry Herslings (Last Call, Westminster John Knox) writes: “Maybe we need more leaders who will admit they are a train wreck and limping along. Leaders who are just trying to follow Jesus and don’t know what they are doing half the time.”

Prayer:
As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Are you calling me, Lord?!…”

June 18, 2017 Text: Judges 11:4-11, 29-31 “Jephthah Answers the Call”

My friend is a fine, successful businessman. His family is recognized as the community’s leading citizens. But, when he was in the third grade he once refused to eat his breakfast toast; in fact, he threw it back down on the plate and yelled at his mother, “You burned the toast!”

Okay, I just made that up. But, here’s the point. If you dig deeply enough, you’ll find some flaw, some broken place, some wrong in each of us. Thus it is in this week’s lesson about Jephthah. In the study text, he comes across as a clever negotiator (Judges 11:7, 9). He is a man captured by the Lord’s spirit (Judges 11:29). But our study stops just before we learn that he committed child sacrifice, killing his only daughter (Judges 11:29). We are all a mixed bag.

Jephthah was the son of a prostitute (Judges 11:1). His half-brothers ran him away because they did not have the same mother (Judges 11:2). He got none of his father’s inheritance (Judges 11:2).

He surrounded himself with shifty men who were outlaws (Judges 11:3). But when push came to shove, the elders back home knew that Jephthah had the leadership qualities they needed in order to defeat the Ammonites (Judges 11:6). And defeat the Ammonites he did.

Wouldn’t life and relationships be simpler if God only used holy people to do God’s work? We are often suspicious of those with whom we have disagreed. When hearing about Jesus, Nathaniel even wondered, “Can anything from Nazareth be good” (John 1:46)? So, in this lesson, we have to face up to Jephthah, certainly a questionable character, but one whom God uses to lead Israel for six years (Judges 12:7). Jephthah was used by God (Judges 11:32) and yet he was a trickster (Judges 12:5-6).

What can I learn from all this? For one thing, I am not the final word on those whom God chooses. For another thing, I have to recognize
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that I too am a less than perfect vessel of God’s love. Then, there is this: I can’t hide from being God’s servant simply because I am not perfect. Good heavens—do you suppose God really is in charge!

What Someone Else Has Said:
In the novel My Name is Asher Lev (Fawcett Crest), Chaim Potok has one of his characters say: “Many people feel they are in possession of a great gift when they are young. But one does not always give in to a gift. One does with a life what is precious not only to one’s own self, but to one’s own people. That is the way people live, Asherel. Do you understand me?”

Prayer:
As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Open my eyes to others, O Lord, and open my heart to You…”

This lesson is another in a series on God’s call. This theme will continue through September. So far, we have looked at Deborah/Barak, Gideon, and Jephthah. Now we pick up one of the most dramatic stories in the Old Testament: Samson.

What do you remember about Samson? He killed a thousand men with the jawbone of a donkey (Judges 15:15). He killed a lion with his bare hands (Judges 14:14). He fell in love with Delilah (Judges 16:4). Delilah tricked him into having his hair cut (which makes him lose strength) (Judges 16:19). He regained his strength enough to tear down the house where thousands of Philistines came to mock him (Judges 16:22). Hooray. What else is new?

Almost lost in this blur of power and chicanery is the constant movement of the spirit of God. It begins with God’s messenger touching a barren woman with the news that she shall have a son who is to be a Nazirite (totally consecrated to God)—Judges 13:5. The Lord blessed Samson as he grew up (Judges 13:24). God’s spirit continues to shape him (Judges 13:25). God’s spirit rushed in when Samson needed that spirit to rescue him (Judges 14:19). In battle times, God’s spirit reached him (Judges 15:14). God salvaged Samson when he was dying of thirst (Judges 15:19). God gives Samson renewed strength to overcome enemies (Judges 16:28).

The only constant in this undulating story of evil, deceit, sexual prowess, muscle, revenge, and defeat is the continual breaking in of the spirit of God. Samson battles the Philistines in order to protect the Israelites. Even when Samson seems to be in violation of the values of the Israelites by marrying a Philistine woman (Judges 14:2), the Lord uses the relationship to save His people (Judges 14:4). What is good and what is evil is not always the clear “yes or no” that we might desire.

The account of Samson is a reminder that God can show up in some unexpected places. Sometimes nibbling, sometimes grabbing, sometimes hidden—God’s spirit continues to shape and restore and employ the life of Samson. Look around you. God’s spirit is nibbling, grabbing, hidden. Thanks be to God!

What Someone Else Has Said:
Karl Barth (Church Dogmatics, Volume 1, Part I, T & T Clark) wrote: “To stand in the faith means to be called to new faith….keeping before one and expecting the Word and faith, fresh direction to the free realization of the grace just experienced, fresh clinging to the promise…”

Prayer:
As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Surprising, ever-present God…”

UPCOMING EVENTS:

North Carolina Conference Annual Conference 2017 June 16 -18
Greenville Convention Center, Greenville NC, Theme: Generosity in all Places. To get the latest updates and information, check https://nccumc.org/ac2017/.

12th National Gathering of United Methodist Men July 7-8
St Lukes UMC, 100 W. 86th St., Indianapolis, Indiana 46260. Use the following link to see more information: http://www.gcummm.org/12th-national-gathering/

Methodist University, 5400 Ramsey St., Fayetteville, NC 28311. More info and registration can be found at: http://ncumw.org/

A Quote for Spring: I believe in my heart that faith in Jesus Christ can and will lead us beyond an exclusive concern for the well-being of other human beings, to a broader concern for the well-being of the birds in our backyards, the fish in our rivers, and every living creature on the face of the earth. - John Wesley