

Reflection by Pastor Hubert Den Draak
Pinegrove United Church, Nov. 19 2017 (Reading: Judges 4:1–7)



We don't really like to talk about it in church, but the Bible is not all about love, grace and forgiveness. The New Testament is okay, but the Old Testament is pretty bloody and revolting in places, with buckets of blood and guts being spilled, sometimes for no good reason other than that the victims were at in the wrong place at the wrong time. I know people who have told me that it's these violent stories of revenge and hate that keeps them from believing in a good and forgiving God. How do you reconcile that? It's a bit like the proverbial elephant in the room; we

know it's there... but we don't want to talk about it.

One of those violent Bible books is the book of Judges, from which our first Scripture reading was taken. It's the beginning of the story of Deborah. Deborah was a great prophet, and a leader of Israel. In those days society really didn't allow women to be leaders, but God rarely pays attention to the limitations we humans place on people, so there she was.

Now this was a tough time for Israel. It was under the thumb of cruel King Jabin of Canaan. And the leader of the king's army was the dreaded Sisera. (Say his name: *Sisera*. Say it with a sneer; he's *eeevil*: *Sisera!*). Sisera had 900 iron chariots, the present-day equivalent of a huge army tank division! No one could stop him.

There were legends and rumors about Sisera. Some said that his 900 chariots were pulled by 900 fire-breathing horses that were invulnerable to arrows! Others said that he could kill a lion just by screaming at it, and that he could destroy the walls of an enemy's city with a huge shout – just like the Israelites had done at Jericho! Compared to him Chuck Norris is just a wuss.

Then there was Deborah, a strong and wise ruler, and people would come to her for advice. But one person who apparently didn't come to her for advice was Barak, leader of Israel's army. Maybe it was because he had been taught that women were supposed to remain silent... Or maybe it was because he knew she would tell him something he didn't want to hear... Or maybe both.

At any rate, since *he* didn't come to *her*, Deborah sent word to *him*: "You're a leader in the army; why aren't you leading that army into battle? Israel needs someone to rescue it! Go! Don't worry about Sisera, I'll take care of him."

Now you probably noticed that our scripture reading stops right at that point, leaving us dangling. What did Barak say, what did he do next? Well, turns out that Barak was

looking for an excuse to not have to go, so he said, “Okay I’ll go – but only if *you* go with me”, thinking a woman would never go into battle.

And basically Deborah says, “Oh, Barak, so nice of you to ask me along... Sure, I’ll go with you, but know this: Sisera *will* be defeated. And not by you, but by a woman!” A serious embarrassment for any soldier, let alone a general.

Long story short: a terrible and bloody battle ensues; and wouldn’t you believe it, Israel’s army is actually getting the upper hand, despite Sisera’s 900 chariots with 900 fire-breathing horses!

It’s at this point that Sisera turns out to be not as courageous as he liked people to think: he panics, and runs away! The Israelites kill all of his soldiers, while their mighty general is run-run-running to save his skin.

Finally, a tent; he can hide in there! He can’t believe his luck when the woman who lives there, Jael is her name, takes him in. And not only that, she gives him cool water to drink, feeds him a good meal, and lets him sleep in her own bed under her own blanket. And when the exhausted Sisera is fast asleep, Jael gets a big, sharp tent pole, and drives the pole through his head with a big hammer. Turns out she was an Israelite who knew right from the moment she saw Sisera who he was. And so Deborah had been right: the mighty warrior Sisera was defeated – not by a strong warrior, but by a woman. End of chapter 4.

The next chapter, chapter 5 – the whole chapter! – is a song of praise for Deborah and what God had accomplished in helping Israel defeat the evil Sisera and King Jabin... and there much rejoicing... and there was peace... But not for long. Because in chapter six, it starts all over again... This time it’s the Midianites who attack and take control of Israel. And the wars and the battles continue, with different kings and different generals.

Now let’s step back for a moment here. The same thing happening again? Is this a coincidence or some sort of *déjà vu*? Let’s quickly flip through the Book of Judges to see how we got here.

Chapter 1: The tribe of Judah fights for Israel against the Canaanites. Judah captures the city of Jerusalem and kills everyone who lives there, women and children included. Then Judah attacks other Canaanite towns and regions.

In chapter 2, there is a flashback to Joshua’s death, and then Israel is “handed over to raiders who plundered them.” Leaders rise up and deliver Israel, and there is peace... but not for long. Because those leaders die, and war returns.

Chapter 3 is going full tilt: Israel is captured; then Israel is delivered; and there is peace. But not for long. Then Israel is captured again; then Israel is delivered again; and there is peace again. But not for long. Then Israel is captured *again*, by evil King Englon, who is described as “a very fat man.”

A new leader named Ehud promises to liberate Israel. He goes to the King under the pretense to pay his respect, and when they’re alone and no one’s watching, he murders fat king Englon with a small sword he had hidden under his clothes. And there was peace... but not for long.

Chapter 4: we just heard what happened there: Israel is oppressed, God sends a strong leader Deborah and delivers Israel. There is peace... but not for long; and the whole vicious cycle repeats all over again.

Hmm, pretty discouraging. Let's flip forward and see if things *ever* get better...

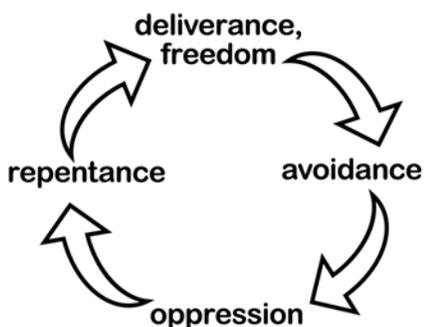
Chapter 7: Gideon. Oh, I've heard of him! He's the guy who put all the Bibles in hotel rooms! Actually, he was a great warrior, full of wisdom, who fought for his God and achieved a great victory. It's a great story, but it's also a long story, so read it at home, it's riveting stuff. Finally, at the end of Gideon's story at chapter 8, there was peace... But not for long.

Chapter 9: more violence and bloodshed and wars. Same for chapter 10, Chapter 11... more of the same... Chapter 15, chapter 16: oo, oo, the story of Samson and Delilah. Lots of lust and testosterone in this story...! And at the end of it we need not just buckets but tubs to contain all the blood and guts that are spilled.

By the end of the Book of Judges so many had been killed in all these battles and wars, that entire tribes are worried about their extinction. That's the price for using violence as a means to solve conflict – extinction. But finally, at the very end of the book, there is peace, but again: only for a while.

After all those battles and killings, no one seemed to have learned anything and no real progress had been made. The very last words of the Book of Judges are: "There was no leader in Israel at that time. Everyone did just as they pleased."

Now maybe I'm a little dense, but could we looking at a repeating pattern here?



Avoidance of God's will, oppression, Israel repents and God delivers them – avoidance, oppression, repentance, deliverance. Again and again and again.

So what's the deal with this book? What's the point here? All these battles and wars and bloodshed, and just when you *think* victory is achieved at great cost, it doesn't last. The fighting just goes on and on and on in an never-ending vicious cycle...

Every time Israel fights for peace, the peace doesn't last. Maybe *that's* the point of the Book of Judges. Remember that Jesus said, "Those who live by the sword, die by the sword."

Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "Darkness cannot get rid of darkness. Only light can. Hate cannot get rid of hate. Only love can." We prayed those very words when we lit the Christ Candle this morning.

And Mahatma Gandhi famously put it this way: "An eye for an eye only ends up making the whole world blind".

This Bible book seems to bring that message painfully home. This is the people of Israel admitting their addiction to weapons, to revenge and stopgap solutions; a vicious circle

that they never really managed to break. Admitting that takes guts – and humility. I cannot think of any other nation that would freely do that. If anything, most nations glorify their wars, making them look noble.

The ancient people of Israel told these stories to their children and their children's children so *they* might learn. They are also *our* stories. Stories of how every time we use violence to solve the problem of violence, IT DOESN'T WORK. Any peace that is achieved through violence doesn't last, and only creates new violence. Every single time.

The only difference now with the people then is, we make sure the new violence is not on our soil but somewhere else.

Maybe it's time to try something different. Maybe, as Christians, it's time to rely less on our weapons and more on God's promises.

Maybe, as Christians, we should seriously start thinking how to *break* that vicious cycle of violence and live the way Christ showed us, building outposts of God's kingdom of true peace, a peace that lasts.

Maybe it's not so much politicians and power brokers we should be paying attention to, but people like Martin Luther King Jr., Mahatma Gandhi... *and* Malala Yousafzai [we talked about her during our "Time for All Ages]]who are the wise leaders we really need.

Easy? No, of course not; Christ never said it would be. Just look at Martin Luther King Jr., Gandhi and Malala, it was far from easy for them. Impossible? I think those same people show us that with God on your side and Christ showing us the Way, and with the Spirit's energy, *nothing* will be impossible. Amen!

Judges 4:1–7 (The judge Deborah speaks God's word to the general Barak)

4 After Ehud's death, the Israelites again did evil in the LORD's sight.² So the LORD turned them over to King Jabin of Hazor, a Canaanite king. The commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth-haggoyim.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 Deborah, the wife of Lappidoth, was a prophet who was judging Israel at that time.

⁵ She 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 him."