

Sunday May 9<sup>th</sup>, 2021

Mother's Day

Judges 4: 1-16

Series: "People We All Need in Our Lives"

Sermon: "We All Need a Deborah"

Have you noticed that everyone seems to think their dog is the most amazing one there is in the world? Well, one man I heard about might actually have the most amazing dog in the world. Over the years this particular dog lover had trained his pet to do some pretty amazing things, beyond the usual tricks. Recently, the dog had picked up his greatest trick ever, and the man was obviously ready, willing, and able: to show everyone he met the new trick.

One day, while exercising his dog on the beach, the man and his dog crossed paths with another man meandering along the sand. The eager dog owner said to this complete stranger, "Hey! You've got to see what my dog can do." And with that, the man grabs a piece of driftwood, tosses it into the ocean, and immediately the dog takes after the driftwood, not swimming after it, but actually running across the top of the water to retrieve it.

Surprisingly, the stranger doesn't seem very impressed by the trick, so the dog and his owner repeat the same trick twice, just for good measure. Finally, he says to the stranger, "Well did you notice anything unusual about my dog?" To which, after a pause, the visitor replied, "Certainly, it seems your dog can't swim." (1001 Humorous Illustrations, p.126) What is it about human beings, that we so easily find fault with things, and especially with other people.

It's like a saying I read that went, "A nice thing about being imperfect is the joy it brings to others." I personally think that finding fault is one of the reasons some people watch sports. Nothing pleases some sports fans more than to sit around after a game, and tell anyone who will listen, all the mistakes the coach or players made, and how they could, or would have done things differently. We used to call this "armchair quarterbacking". There is even an awful ghoulis observation I've heard many times, that the only reason some people watch NASCAR racing is they hope to see a crash.

No wonder so many people are so fearful of failure. The specter of judgement and criticism is ever present. There is even a long running joke in church circles that quite often after church services, families gather around the table to enjoy their lunch of "roast pastor". If service for God is as demanding as I think and know it is for all of us, then all of us need someone in our lives who has got our backs. Someone who will commit to making sure we don't get blindsided.

The person who does this for you can be referred to as your Deborah or for today, Mom. Deborah, herself was a rare personality in the bible. Not only was she a woman in a male dominated society, but only three individuals in Israel's history ever combined the offices of prophet, judge, and military leader. Moses and Samuel were two, and Deborah was the third. We also know she was a very good poet, because in Judges 5 we find the "Song of Deborah" which is the oldest known piece of Hebrew poetry ever found.

Deborah's story centers on a time when God spoke through her to General Barak. God wanted Barak to organize troops from two tribes of Israel to fight the Canaanites on Mount Tabor.

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The general is at first very reluctant to undertake the task, despite the command coming from God. His reluctance is a bit ironic considering his name in Hebrew means lightening. His reluctance is fully understandable, considering the fact that the Canaanites at that time were very powerful militarily.

The Canaanite military was centered on 900 iron chariots; a pretty formidable fighting force. In other words, he was afraid. Barak finally agrees to fight the Canaanites, but only after Deborah agrees to go with him. It's like encouraging a child, "You can do it". Then the child asking if we will be there to watch them or support them.

In other words, Barak wants Deborah to cover his back. It is a situation we can all understand, because all of us face situations in which we would be a great deal braver, knowing someone is watching our back, or in military jargon, "watching our six". Just think of all the things we have tried growing up, because our mothers or fathers encouraged us to try and yet they remained nearby watching our six.

It is a harsh fact that our human experience includes some desperate and dangerous situations. The longer we live, the harder life seems to become. We face the deterioration of our bodies and minds, the cruelty of illness, the inevitability of death, and the absolute mess people make of themselves and each other. We need to face the reality that the monsters who ruin our lives are not found in horror movies or under our beds, but in the men and women we meet.

Take any newspaper, on any day, and you soon realize as you are reading it, that this world is full of people who would like nothing better than to kill us—kill our reputation, our spirit, our mission, and even our very lives. Sometimes even with a ghoulish eagerness. For example: in 1883 in England, the public executioner died, and the Home Office received no fewer than fourteen hundred applications from people keen to take his job killing people.

If you believe your mission is for good, and for God, I guarantee, you will be the first to be fired on. It doesn't matter how good you are at what you do, or how pristine your character is, you will get criticism. Look at Jesus, who was doing wonderful work healing the sick, and the Pharisees saw this and declared his good work as "the work of the devil". (Matt. 12:24) Just look at any impending election period, and how each party shot at the others.

Robert Frost wrote that "Politics is an honest effort to misunderstand one another." (Notebook of Robert Frost, p. 445) Politics is just one occupation prone to receiving criticism. Ministry and the arts, especially acting, is open to a great deal of back stabbing. As the old joke goes, "The church is the only army that shoots its wounded." The church is often full of the walking wounded, and no one is laughing.

In fact, I don't know why this is, but have you ever noticed that when someone is wounded, it draws others to the fray like sharks in a feeding frenzy. We are becoming more conscious of this reality as we consider cyber-bullying. Hurtful statements and embarrassing photos are spread over the internet to humiliate someone, and like a virus, hundreds, thousands even, join into the fray, further aggravating the pain.

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Also, did you know that televised Poker games are now drawing bigger audiences than golf or tennis? Just look over your TV times, and see how often poker programs are scheduled. Now, any mathematician worth their salt, will tell you that success in poker is pure luck with some psychology, but still some people seem to win more often than others, and they become stars in the poker world. Why are they successful?

They are successful, because they can sense weakness, and they pounce with all they have to win. In the church, a rear guard is needed now more than ever, because as we know, most of the church is opposed to advancing.

It is an important issue for any church family. Most of us have the tendency to clump together in an observational role, where we only see the leader's back. There is even a name for this behavior. Behavioral scientists call this "negative affectivity", and it shows itself in people when they are seemingly perpetually crabby, critical, or irritable. It is often demonstrated every time someone suggests a change in procedure, or worship style.

No wonder the Barak's among us are so fearful. No one wants to be on the frontlines. It's much safer, and easier, to be in the rear guard. Deborahs, watch your back, so you can face the enemies of the church, without fear of friendly fire. But we need to be cautious, because one of our back watchers can also become one of our back stabbers. One of them may betray you.

You might be inclined to protest by saying, "Not my friends!" Really? Are you better than Jesus? Did you know that Goethe in writing about da Vinci's painting "The Last Supper" argued that that famous painting was created to focus on Jesus' phrase, "One of you will betray me." Leonard Sweet tells a powerful story of a time he was meeting with a Pastor and the head of a church's elder board. They were seeking ways to take their leadership to the next level.

Sweet states that as they were rising to leave the meeting, he felt compelled to say to the pastor, "Remember one thing: You can count on one of your confidants betraying you." The lead elder laughed, and said to the pastor, "You don't think it's me, do you? The pastor laughed back, "Just don't do it with a kiss." A year later it came out that the pastor's wife, and that elder were having an affair.

I can't tell you how many times, in the ministry of one of my closest friends and colleagues, where a trusted deacon or church member has suddenly, without warning, turned on their pastor, and friend, and ruined their ministry. Tragically, it is often those who have the closest relationship with a pastor, who pull out the knives. Deborahs can help us in many ways, both close to us, and even from a distance. A Deborah praying for our protection is a great ally.

Did you realize in football who is the most valuable ally to a right-handed quarterback? It is the left tackle on the offensive line. This player covers the blind side of the quarterback. Usually, the best defensive lineman is placed on that side to intimidate, and disrupt the quarterback's thinking and execution of plays. In the old story of King Leonidas of Sparta, his 300 warriors held off the Persian army of thousands, primarily because each man could depend on the others to watch their backs. Incidentally, Leonidas and his men were only eventually defeated by being betrayed.

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The Holy Spirit is often referred to as the Paraclete. It is a Greek term referring to the fact that Greek soldiers were trained in pairs, so each warrior had someone to watch their backs. A Deborah, therefore is someone the Holy Spirit can use to watch out for us.

Sometimes, and this is very true, a Deborah can keep us from harming ourselves. In other words, a Deborah can keep us from shooting ourselves in the foot. These Deborah's say things like, "Don't do that. Don't say that. Don't think like that." Sound like someone you know? All of this oversight to keep us from self-destructing. Many a celebrity has shown that they lack a Deborah, or at least an effective one.

They start out their career like a shooting star, only to descend into a lifestyle that makes them appear like bad joke. Justin Bieber is a good example, but there are many more. It is also true, that you can be a Deborah to people you don't even know. I was sent, one time, a funny story about a priest and pastor who were fishing at the side of the road. The two men had thoughtfully made up a sign that read...

"The end is near. Turn yourself around now, before it's too late!" And placed it near where they were fishing. One driver came along and clearly did not appreciate the sign and shouted at the two fishermen, "Leave us alone! You religious nuts!" The man drove angrily off and suddenly there was the sound of a big splash. The priest looked at the minister and said, "You think maybe we should have just written on the sign, 'Bridge Out', instead?"

Imagine how critical these things are. You are driving along and you read a sign that says, "Danger: bridge out". It was someone being a Deborah, who put that sign there so you don't learn the hard way that cars don't fly. Think about such a sign for a moment. Sure, perhaps it was someone's job to put it up, or someone was afraid of a lawsuit, but nevertheless, someone is looking out for you even if they do not know you specifically.

In the age of chivalry, the role of a medieval knight was to cover the backs of other citizens. Specifically, the weak, the unarmed, the priest, the peasant, the poor and children in a very violent world.

In the ethic of the "Round Table", a knight's glory came from royal service and selfless sacrifice. Whole professions are based on the work of Deborah. Health and safety researchers, drug testers, police and emergency personnel, and so many more. Sure, a researcher gets paid, but ultimately, why do they work tirelessly to cure cancer. They are Deborahs, and thank God for them. Maybe the answer is obvious, but what does it look like for someone to be pressed to the limit without a Deborah.

Well, I wonder if that is what the Apostle Paul is describing in 2 Corinthians chapter 11. Listen to his words, "I have worked harder, been put in jail more often, been whipped times without number, and faced death again and again. Five different times the Jews gave me thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. Once I spent a whole night and a day adrift at sea.

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I have traveled many weary miles. I have faced danger from flooded rivers and from robbers, I have faced danger from my own people, the Jews, as well as from Gentile. I have faced danger in the cities, in the deserts, and on stormy seas. And I have faced danger from men who claimed to be Christian but are not. I have lived in weariness and pain and sleepless nights. Often, I have been hungry and thirsty and gone without food. Often, I have shivered with cold, without enough clothing to keep me warm.

Then besides all this, I have the daily burden of how the churches are getting along.” (Vs. 23b-28) I think Paul's experience was all part of God's plan, for Paul to learn intimately the truth, “My gracious favor is all you need. My power works best in your weakness.” (2 Cor. 12:9) But I still wonder how things would have been for him, with a Deborah or two watching out for him.

But maybe he was able to go on, precisely because he had people praying for him and supporting him. Life's hard for those who take their work for God seriously. Maybe not Apostle Paul hard, but still, it can be rough. It is true however, that Paul's convictions were proven true because he stood firm while under fire. Our convictions are proven true if we also stand firm, in the face of opposition, and criticism.

When we think about how a congregation, a church family, can endure for 180 years or more, despite so many changes: changes like the people who come and go, changes in society and technology and so much more, it is clear how it was achieved. The family stood together. They watched each other's backs. They readily and willingly became Paracletes to each other. So, who's got your back? And whose back are you watching?

The vitality and relevance of this church, and our place in it, may depend on the answers to those two questions.