

Judges 5: 1-13, 24-27

“That day Deborah and Barak
son of Abinoam sang this
song:

When they let down their hair
in Israel,

they let it blow wild in the
wind.

The people volunteered with
abandon,

 bless God!

Hear O kings! Listen O
princes!

 To God, yes to God, I'll sing,
Make music to God,
 to the God of Israel.

God, when you left Seir,
 marched across the fields of
Edom,

Earth quaked, yes, the skies
poured rain,

 oh, the clouds made rivers.
Mountains leapt before God,
the Sinai God,

 before God, the God of
Israel.

In the time of Shamgar son of
Anath,

 and in the time of Jael,
Public roads were abandoned,
 travelers went by
backroads.

Warriors became fat and
sloppy,

 no fight left in them.

Then you, Deborah, rose up;
 you got up, a mother in
Israel.

God chose new leaders,
 who then fought at the
gates.

And not a shield or spear to be
seen

 among the forty companies
of Israel.

Lift your hearts high, O Israel,
 with abandon, volunteering
yourselves with the people—
bless God!

You who ride on prize
donkeys

 comfortably mounted on
blankets

And you who walk down the
roads,

ponder, attend!
Gather at the town well
and listen to them sing,
Chanting the tale of God's
victories,
God's victories
accomplished in Israel.

Then the people of God
went down to the city gates.

Wake up, wake up, Deborah!
Wake up, wake up, sing a
song!
On your feet, Barak!
Take your prisoners, son of
Abinoam!

Then the remnant went down
to greet the brave ones.
The people of God joined
the mighty ones.

Most blessed of all women is
Jael,
wife of Heber the Kenite,
most blessed of
homemaking women.
He asked for water,
she brought milk;
In a handsome bowl,
she offered cream.
She grabbed a tent peg in her
left hand,
with her right hand she
seized a hammer.
She hammered Sisera, she
smashed his head,
she drove a hole through his
temple.
He slumped at her feet. He
fell. He sprawled.
He slumped at her feet. He
fell.
Slumped. Fallen. Dead

Well isn't this just one of the most Michael Usey Bible stories ever? You've got people letting their hair down (like regular Californians), fat lazy warriors, hard to pronounce names, an epic battle scene, and a nasty murder. The only thing we're missing, though some think it's implied, is a sex scene.

When Lin mentioned that I could pick any scripture that I wanted for this sermon, I knew immediately that only a story from the

book of Judges would suit Michael's anniversary Sunday, when we celebrate the years of ministry he's shared with this faith family. I'm a preacher, and even I rarely remember titles of other people's sermons, even really great sermons. But sometime in my teenage years here at College Park, Michael preached a sermon from Judges chapter 3, and I will NEVER, in all my days, forget that sermon or that Bible story. How could you forget it, with a title like "When Lefty Let Fatty Have It"??

I do encourage you to go home today and ready THAT crazy Bible story in Judges 3, but also encourage you to read the full version of today's story in Judges 4 and 5. The passage we read this morning is actually the second time the story is told. We first hear the narrative version in Judges 4, and just to catch us up, here's the cliffnotes:

First, we meet Deborah, the only known female judge in Israel's recorded history. She serves as prophet, legal and religious authority, mediator, and commander in chief of sorts. She send for Barak, the top general of the Hebrew armed forces, and sends him and his troops into battle against their oppressors. Barak hesitates at first, saying he'll only go if Deborah goes too. So she tells him that because he's being kind of whiny about it, the honor of defeating the enemy will be given to a woman. A massive battle with some supernatural assistance unfolds, with the Israelites emerging victorious. But the commander of the enemy army escapes and runs to the nearby tent of one of his allies. The ally's wife, Jael, is the only one at home, and he assumes that he's safe with her because of her husband's allegiance and because, well, she's a woman. She lures him to sleep with some warm milk, tucks him in for a nap, and then brutally murders him with a tent peg.

One of the many great gifts of Michael's is that he's not content to let people write the Bible off as a dusty, old, irrelevant book. He flings wide the gates to the stories of God in his teaching and

preaching, reminding us that God's word is just as full of plundering and pillaging, heroes and villains, giants and killers, and illicit sex as any of George RR Martin's best selling sagas.

And, in honor of Michael's ministry, this version of the story in chapter 5 seems most fitting. While Judges 4 lays out the story in all its gory detail, the chapter we read today is actually the ballad that's composed in honor of the three heroes after the battle's been won. It's the song that's penned after the action is over, and is meant to celebrate God's power, as well as the unlikely heroes that God raises up to bring liberation to God's children.

You see, I envision Michael as one of the characters in this Bible story. No, it's not the warrior general, nor the brave women, and, luckily it's not the opposing army commander who gets nailed to the tent floor. Much like the way Michael prefers to do ministry, he actually isn't in one of the starring roles. Rather, I think of Michael as the troubadour who penned the words to this soaring number. I know what y'all are thinking if you've ever sung next to Michael in worship - I'm not making any false claims that he's a crooner. What I do believe, with all my heart, is that Michael is among the ranks of of those ancient and modern poets and dreamers who've dedicated their lives to magnify the melody of God and intertwine it with the harmonies of the people with whom he journeys.

This text is also fitting because Michael loves pointing out God's wildness and weirdness. God delights in flipping the status quo on its head, choosing the least likely and often most deeply flawed heroes and heroines to get the job done, and sweeping us, God's beloved children off our feet around almost every corner. Michael, like the stories in the Bible, reminds us that we are all part of a great cloud of weird witnesses who've gone before us - some foolish, some brave, some not-quite-ready-for-primetime, some past our expiration date, some who dash into the fray with glee,

and some who must be dragged kicking and screaming into God's gospel work of justice and mercy.

If you've ever had the honor of hearing Michael preach at a funeral, then you already know what I mean, because you've heard him poetically telling the story of God wrapped up in the stories of a human life lived among us. At each and every funeral here over 25 years, Michael has sung the song of the deceased's life to the tune of God's everlasting love and redemption.

Michael was the first person I can remember who named and modeled for me the importance of using the voice God's given you to lift up the stories of others. That's what the author of the song in Judges is doing. He or she is using their skill and talent to give voice to the work of others. And what's really important to notice here is that this is one of the more rare biblical stories in which women actually get credit for their leadership and actions. The narrator could have chosen to focus only on the men in the story, it would actually have been quite common to do so. But, this writer chooses to intentionally lift up the underdogs, those women who could easily have been shuffled under the rug of a patriarchal historical narrative. Deborah and Jael are named, celebrated, and honored through the author's platform.

Here again, is a reason that this story is so fitting for today, as we reflect on Michael's ministry, because he also is so often the champion of the underdogs - whether it's women who, according to tradition or society should never have been leaders or preachers, or those whom society would say have little to no value who have their stories proclaimed for all to hear, and for us to remember thousands of years later. It cannot be understated how important this work is, and that the impact of someone naming you, singing your song, and inviting you to sing it yourself can change lives. I am among many whose life has been changed because Michael used his voice to amplify mine and who

graciously shared his platform, this literal pulpit, so that I might begin to sing Godsongs too. He is one who consistently nudges those around him to step ever further into God's calling to mercy and justice.

So, ok, enough about Michael, right? I'm pretty sure he's over all the attention at this point. What does this supremely weird yet awesome Bible story have to say to the rest of us on this auspicious day? I think that the text asks of us some things that you, beloved of College Park, have been doing already. Perhaps it nudges us just a bit farther along that path.

First, I think we are challenged to notice, name, and celebrate the wild weirdness of God - in the ancient stories of scripture and in the world around us. Make music to God, bless God with abandon. Let your hair down, like a good ol' Californian would do, and let loose with praise for the God of waterbugs and volcanoes; the creator of solar eclipses and the shaper of the tree frog's sticky webbed feet. Look around at the beautifully weird world God made, and at the eccentric and odd children of God around you. Let loose a peal of laughter and sing out praise to the creativity of the God who, for some reason, has promised to love us forever plus a day.

Second, I think this text bids us to lift up the stories of others, especially those whose voices are quaking too hard to sing the first note, those whose melodies don't fit the status quo, or those who, no matter how loudly or beautifully they sing, are not given the time of day or the ears of an audience. Notice whatever your own pulpit or platform is and use it to sing out and amplify the songs of underdogs. Better yet, do what this ancient ballad from Judges does, and invite the voiceless to join you on stage, giving them the spotlight and handing them the microphone so their own words and melodies can ring out, loud and strong. Listen carefully to the world and the people around you, especially for

those quiet whispers that are often ignored. Create space wherever you are, with whatever gifts God has given you, to ensure that the stories of all God's beloved can be heard, valued, and named.

Finally, we do all of this for the purpose of pointing others, not to our own merits or good deeds, but to the wild and inescapable love of God. Any song that we sing, any story we tell, any sermon we preach, and any laugh we share should always strive to be a signpost to God. All our speaking, singing, living and dying should elevate the mysterious abundant love of God, and draw crowds, not for our own edification or acclaim, but for the unbridled transformative Spirit at work within all of us. The author of the ancient hymn in Judges sings the song in such a way that it's clear that it's God who is the wind in the hair of Israel, it's God who beckons prophets and leaders, it's God who reigns over the night sky and the rushing rivers, it's God who liberates the oppressed, and it's God whose breath bears life into our lungs, allowing the notes of praise to soar into eternity.

In the style of the balladeer of the book of Judges, in honor of Michael, for the love of the gospel, and to the glory of God, may our songs forever be raised. Amen.