

18 January 2015

## Echoes: The Other People

Judges 4:1-10

Judges 4:1-10. *The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, after Ehud died. So the Lord sold them into the hand of King Jabin of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor; the commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth-ha-goiim. Then the Israelites cried out to the Lord for help; for he had nine hundred chariots of iron, and had oppressed the Israelites cruelly for twenty years.*

*At that time Deborah, a prophetess, wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel. She used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim; and the Israelites came up to her for judgement. She sent and summoned Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali, and said to him, 'The Lord, the God of Israel, commands you, "Go, take position at Mount Tabor, bringing ten thousand from the tribe of Naphtali and the tribe of Zebulun. I will draw out Sisera, the general of Jabin's army, to meet you by the Wadi Kishon with his chariots and his troops; and I will give him into your hand."' ' Barak said to her, 'If you will go with me, I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go.' And she said, 'I will surely go with you; nevertheless, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the Lord will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman.' Then Deborah got up and went with Barak to Kedesh. Barak summoned Zebulun and Naphtali to Kedesh; and ten thousand warriors went up behind him; and Deborah went up with him.*

One essential part of any society is its distribution of social roles: the positions and the responsibilities that different individuals have in society. Now there are two different kinds of social roles. There are achieved roles – that is, positions that individuals earn through their gifts and effort. For instance, in a tribal society, an achieved role might be shaman or warrior or wise woman. In our society, we might list doctor, senator, CEO, movie star, Super Bowl MVP, and so on. Then there are what is called “ascribed roles,” which are roles that are assigned to people based on the circumstances of their birth. In the old Hindu culture, people were assigned their jobs and status based on which caste they were born in. In many cultures, some of the most rigid ascribed roles have been gender roles. Now, every culture does gender roles differently. In some societies, such as those of Western Samoa or the Hopi people, women have strong leadership roles. But in the cultures that we find in the Bible – as in our own cultural history – men ruled and women had clear and limited subsidiary roles.

Now this does not mean that there are no strong women in the Bible. All it means is that, denied any official leadership roles, strong women had to work behind the scenes. We see this all the way through Genesis. Both Sarah and Rebekah were stronger than their husbands. (That's R-E-B-E-K-A-H, wife of Isaac.) These women were the true leaders in their homes, but dominant social roles don't bend easily, so they had to work within tight cultural constraints. That's what makes the story of Judges 4 so amazing. Ancient Near Eastern society had no place for women leaders. But here is Deborah, judge and prophet and ruler in Israel. What happened? Here's what happened: judges and prophets were not assigned their roles by society. They were appointed by God. Nobody became a judge or prophet by birth or achievement. Hebrew judges and prophets received those roles when they were filled with the Spirit of God. *And the Spirit of God evidently doesn't give a flip about society's idea of what role is appropriate for whom.*

So we have the story of Deborah. God speaks to Deborah, telling her to summon a man named Barak – evidently a recognized soldier – to command him to lead Israel's armies against their enemies. So there's God using an “achieved role,” but make no mistake: God's representative here is Deborah. Even Barak recognizes that. He won't go to war unless Deborah goes with him. She agrees, but – in a curious ironic twist – tells him that because he hesitated, he won't get all the glory for the victory. Instead, a

woman will be the hero. And so it happens, as the story continues in Judges 4. Barak's armies win the day and scatter the enemy, but the enemy general, Sisera, escapes – only to be done in in a gruesome way by a woman named Jael. I'll let you read the gory details yourself. My point today is that while God is perfectly happy to work with people in their established social roles – like using Barak as a general – God is not bound by those roles. *God works through whomever will listen, without regard for anyone else's expectations.*

I've been preaching this month about how the church is supposed to relate to the larger society. Last week was simple: in any and every society, from the beginning and still today, God is on the side of the poor and the oppressed. Today, though, we deal with a more difficult issue – the ranking of people and roles in society. Every society has its norms. So did Israel, and often those norms are reflected in the Bible. But just because society in Bible times had a certain shape does not mean that is God's eternal plan. For example, both Testaments were written in societies where slavery was normal, and the Bible never says that slavery is wrong. Now both Old and New Testaments give some fairly strong rules about humane treatment of slaves, and both set out some conditions under which slaves should be set free, but they never say slavery itself is a sin. Well, it is. It's a sin. But it's as if God had to wait a while for society to catch up before we could understand that.

In the same way, women in the Bible are often described as being of lesser importance than men, almost as if they weren't real people. Some Old Testament social roles – like priest, an inherited role – were forbidden to women. Over in the New Testament, Paul tells the women of Corinth not to speak in church, but to wait and ask their husbands later. In these texts, you can just *feel* the weight of the rigid and limited roles permitted for women in those ancient cultures. But that does not mean that women are restricted in their roles in the eyes of God, any more than the Bible's acceptance of slavery means that that's all right. How do we know? Because every now and then in the Bible God breaks through and speaks over the voice of culture. Deborah was God's chosen leader in Judges 4. And the long list of female prophets and teachers that appear in the Bible – Miriam, Huldah, Priscilla, Mary, Mary, maybe another Mary, Philip's daughters – is more than enough to remind us that while God is able to work through the peculiarities of human culture, God is not bound to it. *God works through whomever will listen, and the Spirit of God doesn't give a flip about society's idea of gender expectations.*

Today, as we celebrate United Methodist Women, we cannot help but remember that. In 1869, when women in the United States were still not legally classified as people but rather as “chattel,” a group of Methodist women in Boston heard God speaking to them about beginning medical mission work in India. I've heard that they tried approaching the men who ran things in the Methodist church in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, looking for support. If so, they didn't get it. Either way, they just did it themselves, in the face of their culture. *God works through whomever will listen.* These women were listening to God, not to the patriarchal norms of their society.

I suspect they made the men nervous. Strong women often do – still do, in fact. This past week, Cardinal Raymond Burke announced, basically, that the decline of the church was the fault of uppity women who wouldn't stay in their place. Bless his little heart. The poor man is watching the world that he once knew, the world where he was once important, change all around him, and he's terrified. I can almost feel sorry for him. Not quite, but you know, almost. Change *can* be scary. But here's my message for us today. Remember that the norms and established roles of our society are a matter of utter indifference to God. So, when society changes, when our norms seem to be falling apart, that does not hurt God. That doesn't even bother God. In fact, sometimes – as in the case of Deborah and the United Methodist Women – God is the one behind the changes.