

Bible Study
Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 28, Year A
November 19, 2017

[RCL]: Judges 4:1-7; Psalm 123 ; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11; Matthew 25:14-30

Judges 4:1-7

The Israelites are seeking to take the land of Canaan and this chapter of Judges discusses the events that took place leading up to the capture of this land. Deborah is one of the major “Judges” or “charismatic leaders” of the Israelite people; she is also the only female prophet, or prophetess, in the book of Judges. In this passage, Deborah is summoning a general for the army, General Barak, who will lead the Israelite army against the Canaanite leader, Jabin, and his army. Jabin’s army is led by a general, a man named Sisera. Sisera, upon being defeated by Deborah’s army, flees and seeks refuge in the home of a woman named Jael. Jael, in the night, kills Sisera with a tent peg (Judges 4:17-22). Jael’s killing of Sisera completes Deborah’s prophecy that Sisera “will be given into your hand.”

In this passage from Judges, especially as it connects to the story of Sisera and Jael later in chapter 4, depicts two very strong and courageous women. These women in Judges are leading and conquering for Israel in surprising ways. We do not often see women in Scripture performing actions to honor God outside of their ability to bear children or be decent wives to men. But in Judges, we have both a female prophet who leads an Israelite army and an unsuspecting woman working undercover for the Israelite army, who is willing to kill the Canaanite general.

Outside of the violence of this chapter, it is important to uphold and name the impact of these female characters and what it says about women’s gifts for ministry. Women, like men, are capable of anything. Women, created in the image of God, have spiritual gifts that go far beyond biology and the societal definitions and expectations we have attached to that biology. Women have gifts to share in leadership within our congregations and within the larger tent of the Christian tradition.

- How do you see the spiritual gifts of women being used and utilized in your parish? How are they honored for their gifts?
- Where is God working within those around you in surprising and unprecedented ways, whether those people be male, female, trans, gay, straight, black, white?

Psalm 123

This psalm is a prayer for help or a *psalm of lament*. It begins as a personal lamentation, but then goes into a communal plea for help. This psalm describes God as being high above all of creation; you can almost imagine the speaker of this psalm looking up to the sky as he or she cries out to God.

The psalmist conjures images of God, describing God as both Master and Mistress, male and female. The psalmist also talks to God directly, “To *you* I lift up my eyes.” This psalm is short but rich in imagery, displaying a personal relationship with a dynamic God. Most importantly, the psalmist is demonstrating how honest and transparent we can be with God, individually and in community. God hears all our cries and sorrows, all our fears and worries. There is nothing God will not hear, there is nothing we must hide from our God.

- Do you cry out to God in prayer? How?
- Do you feel like you must hide your feelings from God? How come?

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

While Paul believed that Jesus would be coming “any day now,” stressing at times that God might catch anyone, at any time, in the act of morally questionable behavior, this letter also suggests that Paul may have been advocating the living of faithful lives for *the long haul*.

Let’s give Paul the benefit of the doubt; Paul’s metaphor of a woman in labor, for example, articulates the work of *transformation* that lasts a lifetime. When a woman grows a child and then goes into labor, she and that new life are going through transformation: the woman is going into motherhood, the child is beginning his or her life. This transformation has its pains, but on the other side of the pain is a new life for all involved. This new life is not completely new; the woman is still the woman she was before. However, there’s a shift that has occurred and her life is now full of newness, a newness she is now responsible for nurturing and growing. The woman is now full of the new life that has begun and full of the new ways she now sees and interacts with the world around her, as a result of the transformation.

- How has becoming a Christian or claiming your faith transformed you?
- What labor pains have you been through in your faith journey? What does your faith look like on the other side of those labor pains? And where is God in the midst of the pains, the journey, the transformation?

Matthew 25:14-30

If we try to understand this passage as one where the “talents” are the actual talents, or spiritual gifts and skills we each possess, then we may begin to understand this passage differently. Let’s frame it this way: God is the master, and God has written into our individual lives our specific talents and spiritual gifts. God has given us these gifts and talents to be used, to be shared, in order to help make this world a better place. God is asking us to use our gifts, to follow Jesus and help make God’s kingdom manifest on this Earth. But if we are the last servant, the one who goes and hides his gifts and talents for fear of using them, then we are ignoring the gifts we have been given by God and are therefore not helping in the work of making God’s Kingdom manifest.

In this frame, the parable articulates how the relationship between master and servant, God and us, can be broken or at least put “on the rocks”. When we are not in right relationship with God, we are in our own version of despair. When we are not able to live out our individual calls, using our talents and skills for the betterment of God’s creation, then we are suffering. Surely in this place of brokenness, fear, and solitude, there is much “weeping and gnashing of teeth”. If we cannot live fully into our relationship with God by living out those gifts, callings, and skills we have been given, it can surely lead to a state of darkness and confusion.

- What are the skills, gifts, and talents you have been hiding or have been afraid to share?
- Heaven and Hell can be states of existence we pass in and out of in this life. Have you ever experienced moments of Heaven and Hell? Where was God in those moments?

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