

God's Qualifications

Judges 4:1-7

By

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

When I think of great women of the Bible; Sarah, Rebecca, Miriam, Esther, Ruth, Elizabeth, Mary (the mother of Jesus), Martha, and Mary Magdalene (among others) immediately come to mind. Deborah is not on the top of the list. But like the story of David and Goliath, this brave woman Deborah, long ago faced overwhelming odds in a male-dominated society and yet she believed God and had the courage to act on her beliefs. Because of her faith and courage the salvation of the Lord became a reality in her world to the benefit of all present and those who followed.

I don't know about you, but many of the women in my life have predictive powers that just elude me. They seem to have a sixth sense, an intuition that allows them to protect those they love. For example, I remember one day when our family had relatives visiting us on the east coast, and we decided to take them to the Philadelphia for the day to visit the Liberty Bell and the location of the First Continental Congress. As we were leaving the parked car, our son decided he didn't need to wear his coat. His mother warned him, "You're going to freeze." He protested that he was just fine. Sixth graders think they know everything. She explained further, "The city is windy and much colder than it is here. You're going to want your jacket in an hour." He vehemently protested that he could take care of himself and wasn't going to wear his jacket, so there it remained in the car. Sure enough, within the hour he was huddling under his mother's coat trying to steal any body heat he could find.

As many of you know, our daughter Molly and her husband Matt recently lost a baby in the thirty-fourth week of pregnancy. It was not unexpected. But knowing there were problems did not make the loss or grief any easier. The first to know something was wrong was Molly. From the beginning of the pregnancy, she sensed that something was amiss, not right. At about her 20th week the doctors determined that there was a genetic malady; three chromosomes rather than two - a condition called "triploidy" that happens in about one in ten thousand pregnancies. Their son (our

second grandson) did not make it to full term. Molly sensed something was wrong before anyone else had any idea. Women sometimes have intuitive and predictive powers.

So it is perhaps no surprise that Deborah was called a “prophetess” and a “judge.” Long before Sandra Day O'Connor was appointed the first woman to the U.S. Supreme Court, women were respected judges in their communities, sorting out problems and resolving tensions between people to restore the peace. Of course, they have been doing that in their own homes with their husbands and between their children since the beginning of time. Deborah was well-respected in her community, as a woman with good judgment. It was a time when things had deteriorated, the economy was bad and people felt like slaves. There were wars and a constant threat of armed conflict from more technologically advanced nations, and faith was no longer being taken seriously by people, which led to all sorts of problems and oppression, some clearly self-imposed. (Sound like another time in history to you?)

Deborah was at her best when the society around her was at its worst. Her confidence was in God and what God would yet do, not in armaments or technological advances. Against all odds, she believed in the minority opinion that what matters is what you believe. She trusted the Lord and lived according to the covenant, following the commandments and believing the future belonged to God.

Deborah summoned the military leader, Barak, telling him to take 10,000 foot soldiers up on Mount Tabor to draw out the cavalry of Sisera. Mere foot soldiers against “900 chariots of iron” and an army waiting at the Wadi Kishon - not good odds by any measure. So Barak wisely replied to Deborah, “I’m not going unless you go with me!” And Deborah got out of her chair, (where she would sit under the palm tree in the hill country) gave up a passive role, and became actively involved in bringing about the future she predicted. Armed with a new sense of her own agency, she learned that God’s future comes through our involvement in the unfolding drama of salvation.

The story continues with insufficient details but allegedly the chariots were all stuck in the mud, allowing the much more agile and fleet of foot soldiers to win the day. A Wadi is a valley which, during the rainy season, becomes filled with water. Our English word wading, probably comes from the noun wadi. It sounds like a storyline that will one day be made into film, if it hasn't already. It's actually a pretty gruesome story, but then life gets pretty gruesome. The Bible describes it as it is.

This may be an obscure passage from a little known book that tells the story of a minor character, Deborah, but once upon a time she played a central role in God's unfolding drama of salvation. Minor characters, like you and me, can play major roles in God's redemption for the world. And women have always, and will always, play the role of midwives, giving birth to a new way of living and a new world order.

A month ago, the Nobel Committee awarded the Nobel Peace Prize to three women for their efforts to bring peace in their war torn nations. Two of the three women are from Liberia in Africa. Leymah Gbowee is a 39 year old woman who, according to the Nobel Committee, "mobilized and organized women across ethnic and religious dividing lines to bring an end to the long war in Liberia, and to ensure women's participation in elections. She has since worked to enhance the influence of women in West Africa during and after the war."¹ Gbowee has written a book since the war ended in 2003 entitled, *Mighty Be Our Powers*. Deborah might have written a book by that title.

Gbowee helped bring down the brutal reign of President Charles Taylor (who is on trial now at The Hague for war crimes) after 14 years of Civil War in Liberia. She did it through non-violent protest, picketing, prayer, and fasting. Leymah worked as a trauma counselor, working among girls and women raped by the militiamen. (I told you life can be pretty gruesome!) Deeply affected by the violence she thrust herself into political activism. She brought thousands of women together in 2003 to protest in the capital Monrovia, and for prayer. She is the central character in the award-winning documentary "Pray the Devil Back to Hell," urging women around Africa to campaign for peace.

¹ www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-15215312

Like Deborah, Leymah also found her own sense of agency in the world. When her society was at its worst, she was at her best, and that is why she is receiving the Nobel Peace Prize. Do you think faith makes a difference? In every way! Do you think people of faith have a role to play in God's unfolding drama of salvation? Without any doubt! Maybe it's time for us to get up from our chairs, from our passive seats of observation (as if the Lord has asked us to judge those on the field of play) and get into the action. I feel a little like Barak must have felt this morning. I'm ready to take on the challenges of engaging in the Lord's unfolding drama but I'm not going unless you go with me!

The San Marino Community Church has accomplished a great deal in our 70th Anniversary Capital Campaign. Our renovation is well underway because we all made a contribution. We all became involved and just look what we were able to do. What else needs doing? I'm not interested in predicting the future but I am interested in changing it! I'm not interested in describing history but I am interested in making it! We may be up against some incredible odds, a society that is uninterested in matters of faith, or at least not interested enough to attend worship, or attend to the disciplines of our faith. But then when have the people of God ever not been up against overwhelming odds?

Now is the time to find our own sense of agency. Now is the time to get off of our seats and join in the effort to birth a better world, joining in creating a future with hope, praying in a better life for our children and grandchildren. Join me in that effort! Find your Mount Tabor and begin climbing. We have our part to play. No matter how minor the role, you are needed in the struggle of our time. Don't turn a blind eye to violence or remain passive in your families, church, neighborhoods, communities, schools, and cities. God's salvation is intended to unfold with you and through you. Don't miss it! Amen

