

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“No Direction Home: Down a Peg or Two”

Dr. Jay Howell

March 20, 2022

We continue in our series “No Direction Home,” a journey through the Old Testament book of Judges. As we’ve shared, this is a book that’s not often explored in-depth, probably because it’s not entirely encouraging. It’s gory. The characters that maybe we think we should think of heroes often don’t actually come off looking like heroes. The whole thing is cycle after cycle of Israel forsaking God, being subdued by its enemies, crying out, then being delivered by a “judge” sent from the Lord, only to forsake the Lord again. But we’re looking at it, because this book is a story that over and over points out just how corrupted the human heart can become against our Maker—not just the Israelites, not just them, but us. And that’s a point that perhaps we need to hear especially in this season of Lent, when we consider just how much in need of a Savior we are, because on our own, we’re not capable of very much at all.

That in fact is a big part of the story we explore today, the story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

*“Awake, awake, Deborah;
Awake, awake, sing a song!
Arise, Barak, and lead away your captives, son of Abinoam.
Then survivors came down to the nobles;
The people of the Lord came down to me as warriors.
From Ephraim those whose root is in Amalek came down,
Following you, Benjamin, with your peoples;
From Machir commanders came down,
And from Zebulun those who wield the staff of office.
And the princes of Issachar were with Deborah;
As was Issachar, so was Barak;
Into the valley they rushed at his heels;
Among the divisions of Reuben
There were great determinations of heart.
Why did you sit among the sheepfolds,
To hear the piping for the flocks?
Among the divisions of Reuben
There were great searchings of heart.
Gilead remained across the Jordan;
And why did Dan stay on ships?
Asher sat at the seashore,
And remained by its landings.
Zebulun was a people who risked their lives,
And Naphtali too, on the high places of the field.*

*“The kings came and fought;
Then the kings of Canaan fought
At Taanach near the waters of Megiddo;
They took no plunder in silver.
The stars fought from heaven,
From their paths they fought against Sisera.
The torrent of Kishon swept them away,
The ancient torrent, the torrent Kishon.
My soul, march on with strength!
Then the horses’ hoofs beat
From the galloping, the galloping of his mighty stallions.
‘Curse Meroz,’ said the angel of the Lord,
‘Utterly curse its inhabitants,*

*Because they did not come to the help of the Lord,
To the help of the Lord against the warriors.'*

*"Most blessed of women is Jael,
The wife of Heber the Kenite;
Most blessed is she of women in the tent.
He asked for water, she gave him milk;
In a magnificent bowl she brought him curds.
She reached out her hand for the tent peg,
And her right hand for the workmen's hammer.
Then she struck Sisera, she smashed his head;
And she shattered and pierced his temple.
Between her feet he bowed, he fell, he lay;
Between her feet he bowed, he fell;
Where he bowed, there he fell dead.*

*"Out of the window she looked and wailed,
The mother of Sisera through the lattice,
'Why does his chariot delay in coming?
Why do the hoofbeats of his chariots delay?'
Her wise princesses would answer her,
Indeed she repeats her words to herself,
'Are they not finding, are they not dividing the spoils?
A concubine, two concubines for every warrior;
To Sisera a spoil of dyed cloth,
A spoil of dyed cloth embroidered,
Dyed cloth of double embroidery on the neck of the plunderer?'
May all Your enemies perish in this way, Lord;
But may those who love Him be like the rising of the sun in its might."
And the land was at rest for forty years. **Judges 5:12-31***

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Sometimes it's hard to know who to root for, especially if you feel the options aren't quite so clear cut. You come across this every so often. Two teams you dislike, or two players you're not so fond of, and they end up playing each other. Who do you root for? Well, you end up saying something like, "Well can they both lose?"

Or maybe not necessarily two teams or players you don't especially like. Maybe just two teams or players whose flaws you're pretty familiar with, not just flaws in their game, but flaws in their character, in their personality, in their motives. Makes you feel not so confident or comfortable in hoping for their victory, or not so celebratory should they actually win. It's not like there was necessarily a clear-cut alternative, but it still doesn't make you feel so great.

Well, y'all, I'm afraid this may be that sort of story, one in which, when you think about it, it's not quite so easy to know who to root for, or at least not so sure how celebratory you should be for them. This is the story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael. The passage we read in chapter five of the Book of Judges is actually part of a song, a song that retells the story of what happened in the chapter prior. So this whole thing is a song from two people named Deborah and Barak, after all the major things happened in their story.

Here's what happened. Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, so as it happens over and over in the Book of Judges, God gives them up to a rival king, and in this case it was a king named Jabin of the land of Canaan, situated just to the north of Israel, so this was a neighbor. And Israel languished under Jabin for twenty years. Jabin's really not that big a factor in the story. The one who is is the commander of Jabin's army is a man named Sisera. A big thing to know about Sisera is that he's leading an army featuring nine hundred chariots of iron. And not that we have to be experts of ancient warfare to understand this, but if you're coming to a fight with some rusty, dull blades and the others are coming with metal chariots, to some degree it doesn't matter how brave you are if you don't account for chariots coming at you, bringing a knife to a gunfight, so to speak. So Israel languished under their rule. They cried out, so God raised up someone to deliver them.

Here's where it starts to get a bit muddled though. Normally when Israel cries out to God, the book will say something like, "God raised up as a deliverer *so-and-so*." But we don't get that kind of clarity here. The clearest candidate is the next person we hear about when the story is told in chapter four and is the same as one of the singers whose words we read here in chapter 5: a prophetess named Deborah. Apparently, Deborah had been settling minor disputes among the Israelites during this time, as she would "judge" between them. But it's not so clear that she was specifically the one that God raised up to deliver Israel. Never says she was.

Deborah summons a man named Barak, who seems to be the closest thing Israel had to a military leader at the time. Deborah tells him to gather 10,000 soldiers to him and that God would deliver Sisera, the enemy commander with his 900 iron chariots, into his hands. So now it seems maybe Barak is the one that God is raising up. He's got the army. He's leading them into battle. He seems to fit the bill. But then Barak kind of shrinks away from it. He says in chapter 4 that he would only go if Deborah went with him. Not exactly the sort of bravery or trust in the Lord you would hope to see out of God's chosen deliverer. But Deborah goes with him, and Barak does summon 10,000 soldiers from the tribes of Israel. However, even then Barak doesn't seem to be so inspiring. One part of the song that we read talks about how only half the tribes actually answer the call. The other half refuse the call or just aren't heard from at all. Not exactly a stirring scene of an oppressed people rising up as one to throw off the shackles of their oppressors.

Nevertheless, Barak summons his army, as Deborah instructed him to do. And Sisera, with his army and his 900 chariots, comes to the fight. Must have been quite the scene. You have the Israelite army, half-gathered in faith but woefully unprepared, since they're still facing off against an army with advanced technology, like bringing a bunch of muskets against tanks and machine guns. And I don't think we're led to believe this was some kind of "Braveheart" moment either. You know, where the Scottish rebels, led by William Wallace, are facing off against the English army, in particular their cavalry. Completely outmatched. But taking advantage of English arrogance, when the cavalry charge, the Scots reveal they've made hundreds of sharp wooden pikes to stop the horses' charge. There's no indication that anything like that has happened, some kind of clever tactic. Instead, it seems like Deborah and Barak have brought a knife to a gunfight, and oh to be in the shoes of those soldiers once the chariots start coming toward them.

But then God shows up. Starting in v. 19: "The stars fought from heaven, from their courses they fought against Sisera. The torrent Kishon swept them away, the onrushing torrent, the torrent Kishon. March on, my soul, with might! Then loud beat the horses' hoofs with the galloping, galloping of his steeds." What seems to have happened is that God sent a sudden rainstorm, the heavens fighting against Sisera, as it puts it, causing a flash flood of the small river flowing through the battlefield. This threw the horses into a panic, at which point Sisera doesn't have so much of an advantage anymore, and Deborah, Barak, and the Israelite army win the day.

Except Sisera gets away. That'd be the moment of glory for an army's leader like Barak: capturing or killing the enemy commander, but he doesn't get him. Sisera gets away from the battle and is running for his life. And he comes to the home of a man named Heber the Kenite. Heber isn't there, but his wife Jael is. Heber was likely a metalworker, and he and his wife weren't even Israelites. They're not even fully a part of their own clan. It turns out that they had left their homeland in the south to come north to this area, probably so that he could profit from Sisera's army. Heber was a metalworker. Sisera needed lots of iron chariots. Definitely some profit to be made. So it's like Sisera was coming to the home of his arms dealer. Reason to think he'd be safe there. So Jael beckons him in and hides him from the pursuing Israelites. Sisera asks for water, but Jael instead gives him milk, which puts him to sleep. And once he's asleep, Jael goes up to him, takes a tent peg and a mallet, and drives the tent peg through Sisera's temple until it comes out the other side, killing him. It catches you off guard, because why on earth would she do this? She's not an Israelite, and in fact it would seem that her household has profited greatly from Sisera. Maybe she was going with the winning hand, and Israel had just won. Or maybe she was one who maintained faith in God, even though she wasn't an Israelite.

We have no idea, because it doesn't tell us. What we do know is that she invited this man in, under the protection of her home, offering him her household's hospitality and protection—and that's a big deal in this culture—but then she breaks that hospitality, killing him in his sleep in graphic, gory fashion. And *she's* the one who finally defeats this enemy commander. Not Deborah. Not Barak. Not the army. Instead this woman coming out of nowhere into the story. The song ends with an abrupt shift to the perspective of someone we might not

expect. It goes to the window of Sisera's mother, yes the mother of the commander who had just been killed. It's kind of heartbreaking. She's looking out her window, wondering why it has taken so long for her son and his army to come back. Her attendants tell her it's surely because they're so busy raping and pillaging that it's taking them a bit longer than anticipated, so they're not exactly innocents here. But nevertheless, the song seems to relish in the fact that this mother and these women will soon receive the news that the army would not be coming back and that Sisera himself had been killed.

"And the land had rest forty years," it says in v. 31, wrapping up the story. And now you have no idea what to make of all this. Because think about it. Who's supposed to be the hero in all of this? The Israelites? Heck, only half the tribes even bothered to show up to the fight. Barak, their leader? He didn't exactly show a deep trust in God from the get-go, and it wasn't like he was some brilliant tactician either. Nothing he did won the battle for them, and it wasn't him who caught Sisera either. Was it Jael? Sure she was the one who actually killed Sisera, ending the threat of his army for good, but she did so by deceiving him and breaking the somewhat sacred pact of hospitality, inviting this man into her home, promising him protection, giving him milk to make him sleep, and then driving a tent peg through his skull. Or was it Deborah? The prophetess who got this whole thing started. She's the one who summoned Barak, the one who called upon him to gather the army, the one who went with him when he insisted, the one who rallied him to action when the day of battle had come. But then she's also the one singing this song, which means she's the one celebrating that Sisera's mother was looking out the window anxiously, wondering why her son hadn't come home yet. I mean, I get celebrating a victory, but relishing the fact that the general's mother would be devastated when she learned of her son's gruesome death? That's just cruel. That's Deborah. That's her song.

So who are you supposed to root for here? Who's the one that God has raised up to deliver his people? It's not entirely clear. But maybe that's the point. It's not a groundbreaking statement to make to say that the gears of the world turn by the actions and decisions of deeply flawed, even at times despicable people. Sometimes you can sense a clarity of right and wrong, like Russia's aggression against Ukraine. But often the lines aren't so clear. Or even if the lines are clear, those on what you sense to be the right side may not be ones you're eager to root for either. Think about World War II. It seems pretty clear now that Germany's actions of aggression and brutality needed to be resisted, but do you think Roosevelt and Churchill felt all that great rooting for Josef Stalin against him on the Eastern Front? It's not like Roosevelt and Churchill were a couple of saints either. And even in arenas perhaps a bit less intense than global geopolitics. How many times have you gone into a voting booth, seeing the options in front of you, for whatever office it might be, and sometimes there might be someone you feel strongly about, but how many times has a choice felt like choosing the lesser of who cares?

Sometimes it's hard to know who you're supposed to root for. I think this story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael puts that front and center. Just as Israel continues its downward spiral, so too does the quality of its judges, of those whom God raises up to deliver the people. It gets harder and harder to really admire them as heroes. But still, the message seems to be that though it's not so easy to identify Deborah or Barak or Jael as the human hero of the story, the true architect of Israel's deliverance is never in question. For it is the Lord who sends the storm and the torrent to throw the enemy into a panic. It is the Lord who hears Israel's cry. And it is the Lord who is able to use even the flawed motives, the deception, the tricks, the cowardice, the dishonor of a less-than-admirable crew to bring about the restoration of his people.

As it turns out, God's still at work that way. It remains a great mystery why God, after Christ's sacrifice on the cross and the glory of his resurrection, chose to make that witness known throughout the world not through further displays of miraculous power or of Jesus going on a never-ending tour around the world sharing the good news, but instead through the flawed, compromised work of a just as flawed and compromised group known as the church.

So even now, as you see across the headlines or social media or whatever scene you might look out on, and as you may feel discouraged about the assortment of flawed even despicable characters at work in the world, you might wonder, "Just who am I supposed to root for here? What good could come from a crew this messed up?" Know that that is how God has been at work for a long time and continues to use the broken pieces of a broken world to bring about something better.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

SEQUOYAH HILLS

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“No Direction Home: Down a Peg or Two”

Dr. Jay Howell

March 20, 2022

We continue in our series “No Direction Home,” a journey through the Old Testament book of Judges. As we’ve shared, this is a book that’s not often explored in-depth, probably because it’s not entirely encouraging. It’s gory. The characters that maybe we think we should think of heroes often don’t actually come off looking like heroes. The whole thing is cycle after cycle of Israel forsaking God, being subdued by its enemies, crying out, then being delivered by a “judge” sent from the Lord, only to forsake the Lord again. But we’re looking at it, because this book is a story that over and over points out just how corrupted the human heart can become against our Maker—not just the Israelites, not just them, but us. And that’s a point that perhaps we need to hear especially in this season of Lent, when we consider just how much in need of a Savior we are, because on our own, we’re not capable of very much at all.

That in fact is a big part of the story we explore today, the story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

*“Awake, awake, Deborah;
Awake, awake, sing a song!
Arise, Barak, and lead away your captives, son of Abinoam.
Then survivors came down to the nobles;
The people of the Lord came down to me as warriors.
From Ephraim those whose root is in Amalek came down,
Following you, Benjamin, with your peoples;
From Machir commanders came down,
And from Zebulun those who wield the staff of office.
And the princes of Issachar were with Deborah;
As was Issachar, so was Barak;
Into the valley they rushed at his heels;
Among the divisions of Reuben
There were great determinations of heart.
Why did you sit among the sheepfolds,
To hear the piping for the flocks?
Among the divisions of Reuben
There were great searchings of heart.
Gilead remained across the Jordan;
And why did Dan stay on ships?
Asher sat at the seashore,
And remained by its landings.
Zebulun was a people who risked their lives,
And Naphtali too, on the high places of the field.*

*“The kings came and fought;
Then the kings of Canaan fought
At Taanach near the waters of Megiddo;
They took no plunder in silver.
The stars fought from heaven,
From their paths they fought against Sisera.
The torrent of Kishon swept them away,
The ancient torrent, the torrent Kishon.
My soul, march on with strength!
Then the horses’ hoofs beat
From the galloping, the galloping of his mighty stallions.
‘Curse Meroz,’ said the angel of the Lord,
‘Utterly curse its inhabitants,*

*Because they did not come to the help of the Lord,
To the help of the Lord against the warriors.'*

*"Most blessed of women is Jael,
The wife of Heber the Kenite;
Most blessed is she of women in the tent.
He asked for water, she gave him milk;
In a magnificent bowl she brought him curds.
She reached out her hand for the tent peg,
And her right hand for the workmen's hammer.
Then she struck Sisera, she smashed his head;
And she shattered and pierced his temple.
Between her feet he bowed, he fell, he lay;
Between her feet he bowed, he fell;
Where he bowed, there he fell dead.*

*"Out of the window she looked and wailed,
The mother of Sisera through the lattice,
'Why does his chariot delay in coming?
Why do the hoofbeats of his chariots delay?'
Her wise princesses would answer her,
Indeed she repeats her words to herself,
'Are they not finding, are they not dividing the spoils?
A concubine, two concubines for every warrior;
To Sisera a spoil of dyed cloth,
A spoil of dyed cloth embroidered,
Dyed cloth of double embroidery on the neck of the plunderer?'
May all Your enemies perish in this way, Lord;
But may those who love Him be like the rising of the sun in its might."
And the land was at rest for forty years. **Judges 5:12-31***

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Sometimes it's hard to know who to root for, especially if you feel the options aren't quite so clear cut. You come across this every so often. Two teams you dislike, or two players you're not so fond of, and they end up playing each other. Who do you root for? Well, you end up saying something like, "Well can they both lose?"

Or maybe not necessarily two teams or players you don't especially like. Maybe just two teams or players whose flaws you're pretty familiar with, not just flaws in their game, but flaws in their character, in their personality, in their motives. Makes you feel not so confident or comfortable in hoping for their victory, or not so celebratory should they actually win. It's not like there was necessarily a clear-cut alternative, but it still doesn't make you feel so great.

Well, y'all, I'm afraid this may be that sort of story, one in which, when you think about it, it's not quite so easy to know who to root for, or at least not so sure how celebratory you should be for them. This is the story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael. The passage we read in chapter five of the Book of Judges is actually part of a song, a song that retells the story of what happened in the chapter prior. So this whole thing is a song from two people named Deborah and Barak, after all the major things happened in their story.

Here's what happened. Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, so as it happens over and over in the Book of Judges, God gives them up to a rival king, and in this case it was a king named Jabin of the land of Canaan, situated just to the north of Israel, so this was a neighbor. And Israel languished under Jabin for twenty years. Jabin's really not that big a factor in the story. The one who is is the commander of Jabin's army is a man named Sisera. A big thing to know about Sisera is that he's leading an army featuring nine hundred chariots of iron. And not that we have to be experts of ancient warfare to understand this, but if you're coming to a fight with some rusty, dull blades and the others are coming with metal chariots, to some degree it doesn't matter how brave you are if you don't account for chariots coming at you, bringing a knife to a gunfight, so to speak. So Israel languished under their rule. They cried out, so God raised up someone to deliver them.

Here's where it starts to get a bit muddled though. Normally when Israel cries out to God, the book will say something like, "God raised up as a deliverer *so-and-so*." But we don't get that kind of clarity here. The clearest candidate is the next person we hear about when the story is told in chapter four and is the same as one of the singers whose words we read here in chapter 5: a prophetess named Deborah. Apparently, Deborah had been settling minor disputes among the Israelites during this time, as she would "judge" between them. But it's not so clear that she was specifically the one that God raised up to deliver Israel. Never says she was.

Deborah summons a man named Barak, who seems to be the closest thing Israel had to a military leader at the time. Deborah tells him to gather 10,000 soldiers to him and that God would deliver Sisera, the enemy commander with his 900 iron chariots, into his hands. So now it seems maybe Barak is the one that God is raising up. He's got the army. He's leading them into battle. He seems to fit the bill. But then Barak kind of shrinks away from it. He says in chapter 4 that he would only go if Deborah went with him. Not exactly the sort of bravery or trust in the Lord you would hope to see out of God's chosen deliverer. But Deborah goes with him, and Barak does summon 10,000 soldiers from the tribes of Israel. However, even then Barak doesn't seem to be so inspiring. One part of the song that we read talks about how only half the tribes actually answer the call. The other half refuse the call or just aren't heard from at all. Not exactly a stirring scene of an oppressed people rising up as one to throw off the shackles of their oppressors.

Nevertheless, Barak summons his army, as Deborah instructed him to do. And Sisera, with his army and his 900 chariots, comes to the fight. Must have been quite the scene. You have the Israelite army, half-gathered in faith but woefully unprepared, since they're still facing off against an army with advanced technology, like bringing a bunch of muskets against tanks and machine guns. And I don't think we're led to believe this was some kind of "Braveheart" moment either. You know, where the Scottish rebels, led by William Wallace, are facing off against the English army, in particular their cavalry. Completely outmatched. But taking advantage of English arrogance, when the cavalry charge, the Scots reveal they've made hundreds of sharp wooden pikes to stop the horses' charge. There's no indication that anything like that has happened, some kind of clever tactic. Instead, it seems like Deborah and Barak have brought a knife to a gunfight, and oh to be in the shoes of those soldiers once the chariots start coming toward them.

But then God shows up. Starting in v. 19: "The stars fought from heaven, from their courses they fought against Sisera. The torrent Kishon swept them away, the onrushing torrent, the torrent Kishon. March on, my soul, with might! Then loud beat the horses' hoofs with the galloping, galloping of his steeds." What seems to have happened is that God sent a sudden rainstorm, the heavens fighting against Sisera, as it puts it, causing a flash flood of the small river flowing through the battlefield. This threw the horses into a panic, at which point Sisera doesn't have so much of an advantage anymore, and Deborah, Barak, and the Israelite army win the day.

Except Sisera gets away. That'd be the moment of glory for an army's leader like Barak: capturing or killing the enemy commander, but he doesn't get him. Sisera gets away from the battle and is running for his life. And he comes to the home of a man named Heber the Kenite. Heber isn't there, but his wife Jael is. Heber was likely a metalworker, and he and his wife weren't even Israelites. They're not even fully a part of their own clan. It turns out that they had left their homeland in the south to come north to this area, probably so that he could profit from Sisera's army. Heber was a metalworker. Sisera needed lots of iron chariots. Definitely some profit to be made. So it's like Sisera was coming to the home of his arms dealer. Reason to think he'd be safe there. So Jael beckons him in and hides him from the pursuing Israelites. Sisera asks for water, but Jael instead gives him milk, which puts him to sleep. And once he's asleep, Jael goes up to him, takes a tent peg and a mallet, and drives the tent peg through Sisera's temple until it comes out the other side, killing him. It catches you off guard, because why on earth would she do this? She's not an Israelite, and in fact it would seem that her household has profited greatly from Sisera. Maybe she was going with the winning hand, and Israel had just won. Or maybe she was one who maintained faith in God, even though she wasn't an Israelite.

We have no idea, because it doesn't tell us. What we do know is that she invited this man in, under the protection of her home, offering him her household's hospitality and protection—and that's a big deal in this culture—but then she breaks that hospitality, killing him in his sleep in graphic, gory fashion. And *she's* the one who finally defeats this enemy commander. Not Deborah. Not Barak. Not the army. Instead this woman coming out of nowhere into the story. The song ends with an abrupt shift to the perspective of someone we might not

expect. It goes to the window of Sisera's mother, yes the mother of the commander who had just been killed. It's kind of heartbreaking. She's looking out her window, wondering why it has taken so long for her son and his army to come back. Her attendants tell her it's surely because they're so busy raping and pillaging that it's taking them a bit longer than anticipated, so they're not exactly innocents here. But nevertheless, the song seems to relish in the fact that this mother and these women will soon receive the news that the army would not be coming back and that Sisera himself had been killed.

"And the land had rest forty years," it says in v. 31, wrapping up the story. And now you have no idea what to make of all this. Because think about it. Who's supposed to be the hero in all of this? The Israelites? Heck, only half the tribes even bothered to show up to the fight. Barak, their leader? He didn't exactly show a deep trust in God from the get-go, and it wasn't like he was some brilliant tactician either. Nothing he did won the battle for them, and it wasn't him who caught Sisera either. Was it Jael? Sure she was the one who actually killed Sisera, ending the threat of his army for good, but she did so by deceiving him and breaking the somewhat sacred pact of hospitality, inviting this man into her home, promising him protection, giving him milk to make him sleep, and then driving a tent peg through his skull. Or was it Deborah? The prophetess who got this whole thing started. She's the one who summoned Barak, the one who called upon him to gather the army, the one who went with him when he insisted, the one who rallied him to action when the day of battle had come. But then she's also the one singing this song, which means she's the one celebrating that Sisera's mother was looking out the window anxiously, wondering why her son hadn't come home yet. I mean, I get celebrating a victory, but relishing the fact that the general's mother would be devastated when she learned of her son's gruesome death? That's just cruel. That's Deborah. That's her song.

So who are you supposed to root for here? Who's the one that God has raised up to deliver his people? It's not entirely clear. But maybe that's the point. It's not a groundbreaking statement to make to say that the gears of the world turn by the actions and decisions of deeply flawed, even at times despicable people. Sometimes you can sense a clarity of right and wrong, like Russia's aggression against Ukraine. But often the lines aren't so clear. Or even if the lines are clear, those on what you sense to be the right side may not be ones you're eager to root for either. Think about World War II. It seems pretty clear now that Germany's actions of aggression and brutality needed to be resisted, but do you think Roosevelt and Churchill felt all that great rooting for Josef Stalin against him on the Eastern Front? It's not like Roosevelt and Churchill were a couple of saints either. And even in arenas perhaps a bit less intense than global geopolitics. How many times have you gone into a voting booth, seeing the options in front of you, for whatever office it might be, and sometimes there might be someone you feel strongly about, but how many times has a choice felt like choosing the lesser of who cares?

Sometimes it's hard to know who you're supposed to root for. I think this story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael puts that front and center. Just as Israel continues its downward spiral, so too does the quality of its judges, of those whom God raises up to deliver the people. It gets harder and harder to really admire them as heroes. But still, the message seems to be that though it's not so easy to identify Deborah or Barak or Jael as the human hero of the story, the true architect of Israel's deliverance is never in question. For it is the Lord who sends the storm and the torrent to throw the enemy into a panic. It is the Lord who hears Israel's cry. And it is the Lord who is able to use even the flawed motives, the deception, the tricks, the cowardice, the dishonor of a less-than-admirable crew to bring about the restoration of his people.

As it turns out, God's still at work that way. It remains a great mystery why God, after Christ's sacrifice on the cross and the glory of his resurrection, chose to make that witness known throughout the world not through further displays of miraculous power or of Jesus going on a never-ending tour around the world sharing the good news, but instead through the flawed, compromised work of a just as flawed and compromised group known as the church.

So even now, as you see across the headlines or social media or whatever scene you might look out on, and as you may feel discouraged about the assortment of flawed even despicable characters at work in the world, you might wonder, "Just who am I supposed to root for here? What good could come from a crew this messed up?" Know that that is how God has been at work for a long time and continues to use the broken pieces of a broken world to bring about something better.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

SEQUOYAH HILLS

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“No Direction Home: Down a Peg or Two”

Dr. Jay Howell

March 20, 2022

We continue in our series “No Direction Home,” a journey through the Old Testament book of Judges. As we’ve shared, this is a book that’s not often explored in-depth, probably because it’s not entirely encouraging. It’s gory. The characters that maybe we think we should think of heroes often don’t actually come off looking like heroes. The whole thing is cycle after cycle of Israel forsaking God, being subdued by its enemies, crying out, then being delivered by a “judge” sent from the Lord, only to forsake the Lord again. But we’re looking at it, because this book is a story that over and over points out just how corrupted the human heart can become against our Maker—not just the Israelites, not just them, but us. And that’s a point that perhaps we need to hear especially in this season of Lent, when we consider just how much in need of a Savior we are, because on our own, we’re not capable of very much at all.

That in fact is a big part of the story we explore today, the story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

*“Awake, awake, Deborah;
Awake, awake, sing a song!
Arise, Barak, and lead away your captives, son of Abinoam.
Then survivors came down to the nobles;
The people of the Lord came down to me as warriors.
From Ephraim those whose root is in Amalek came down,
Following you, Benjamin, with your peoples;
From Machir commanders came down,
And from Zebulun those who wield the staff of office.
And the princes of Issachar were with Deborah;
As was Issachar, so was Barak;
Into the valley they rushed at his heels;
Among the divisions of Reuben
There were great determinations of heart.
Why did you sit among the sheepfolds,
To hear the piping for the flocks?
Among the divisions of Reuben
There were great searchings of heart.
Gilead remained across the Jordan;
And why did Dan stay on ships?
Asher sat at the seashore,
And remained by its landings.
Zebulun was a people who risked their lives,
And Naphtali too, on the high places of the field.*

*“The kings came and fought;
Then the kings of Canaan fought
At Taanach near the waters of Megiddo;
They took no plunder in silver.
The stars fought from heaven,
From their paths they fought against Sisera.
The torrent of Kishon swept them away,
The ancient torrent, the torrent Kishon.
My soul, march on with strength!
Then the horses’ hoofs beat
From the galloping, the galloping of his mighty stallions.
‘Curse Meroz,’ said the angel of the Lord,
‘Utterly curse its inhabitants,*

*Because they did not come to the help of the Lord,
To the help of the Lord against the warriors.'*

*"Most blessed of women is Jael,
The wife of Heber the Kenite;
Most blessed is she of women in the tent.
He asked for water, she gave him milk;
In a magnificent bowl she brought him curds.
She reached out her hand for the tent peg,
And her right hand for the workmen's hammer.
Then she struck Sisera, she smashed his head;
And she shattered and pierced his temple.
Between her feet he bowed, he fell, he lay;
Between her feet he bowed, he fell;
Where he bowed, there he fell dead.*

*"Out of the window she looked and wailed,
The mother of Sisera through the lattice,
'Why does his chariot delay in coming?
Why do the hoofbeats of his chariots delay?'
Her wise princesses would answer her,
Indeed she repeats her words to herself,
'Are they not finding, are they not dividing the spoils?
A concubine, two concubines for every warrior;
To Sisera a spoil of dyed cloth,
A spoil of dyed cloth embroidered,
Dyed cloth of double embroidery on the neck of the plunderer?'
May all Your enemies perish in this way, Lord;
But may those who love Him be like the rising of the sun in its might."
And the land was at rest for forty years. **Judges 5:12-31***

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Sometimes it's hard to know who to root for, especially if you feel the options aren't quite so clear cut. You come across this every so often. Two teams you dislike, or two players you're not so fond of, and they end up playing each other. Who do you root for? Well, you end up saying something like, "Well can they both lose?"

Or maybe not necessarily two teams or players you don't especially like. Maybe just two teams or players whose flaws you're pretty familiar with, not just flaws in their game, but flaws in their character, in their personality, in their motives. Makes you feel not so confident or comfortable in hoping for their victory, or not so celebratory should they actually win. It's not like there was necessarily a clear-cut alternative, but it still doesn't make you feel so great.

Well, y'all, I'm afraid this may be that sort of story, one in which, when you think about it, it's not quite so easy to know who to root for, or at least not so sure how celebratory you should be for them. This is the story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael. The passage we read in chapter five of the Book of Judges is actually part of a song, a song that retells the story of what happened in the chapter prior. So this whole thing is a song from two people named Deborah and Barak, after all the major things happened in their story.

Here's what happened. Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, so as it happens over and over in the Book of Judges, God gives them up to a rival king, and in this case it was a king named Jabin of the land of Canaan, situated just to the north of Israel, so this was a neighbor. And Israel languished under Jabin for twenty years. Jabin's really not that big a factor in the story. The one who is is the commander of Jabin's army is a man named Sisera. A big thing to know about Sisera is that he's leading an army featuring nine hundred chariots of iron. And not that we have to be experts of ancient warfare to understand this, but if you're coming to a fight with some rusty, dull blades and the others are coming with metal chariots, to some degree it doesn't matter how brave you are if you don't account for chariots coming at you, bringing a knife to a gunfight, so to speak. So Israel languished under their rule. They cried out, so God raised up someone to deliver them.

Here's where it starts to get a bit muddled though. Normally when Israel cries out to God, the book will say something like, "God raised up as a deliverer *so-and-so*." But we don't get that kind of clarity here. The clearest candidate is the next person we hear about when the story is told in chapter four and is the same as one of the singers whose words we read here in chapter 5: a prophetess named Deborah. Apparently, Deborah had been settling minor disputes among the Israelites during this time, as she would "judge" between them. But it's not so clear that she was specifically the one that God raised up to deliver Israel. Never says she was.

Deborah summons a man named Barak, who seems to be the closest thing Israel had to a military leader at the time. Deborah tells him to gather 10,000 soldiers to him and that God would deliver Sisera, the enemy commander with his 900 iron chariots, into his hands. So now it seems maybe Barak is the one that God is raising up. He's got the army. He's leading them into battle. He seems to fit the bill. But then Barak kind of shrinks away from it. He says in chapter 4 that he would only go if Deborah went with him. Not exactly the sort of bravery or trust in the Lord you would hope to see out of God's chosen deliverer. But Deborah goes with him, and Barak does summon 10,000 soldiers from the tribes of Israel. However, even then Barak doesn't seem to be so inspiring. One part of the song that we read talks about how only half the tribes actually answer the call. The other half refuse the call or just aren't heard from at all. Not exactly a stirring scene of an oppressed people rising up as one to throw off the shackles of their oppressors.

Nevertheless, Barak summons his army, as Deborah instructed him to do. And Sisera, with his army and his 900 chariots, comes to the fight. Must have been quite the scene. You have the Israelite army, half-gathered in faith but woefully unprepared, since they're still facing off against an army with advanced technology, like bringing a bunch of muskets against tanks and machine guns. And I don't think we're led to believe this was some kind of "Braveheart" moment either. You know, where the Scottish rebels, led by William Wallace, are facing off against the English army, in particular their cavalry. Completely outmatched. But taking advantage of English arrogance, when the cavalry charge, the Scots reveal they've made hundreds of sharp wooden pikes to stop the horses' charge. There's no indication that anything like that has happened, some kind of clever tactic. Instead, it seems like Deborah and Barak have brought a knife to a gunfight, and oh to be in the shoes of those soldiers once the chariots start coming toward them.

But then God shows up. Starting in v. 19: "The stars fought from heaven, from their courses they fought against Sisera. The torrent Kishon swept them away, the onrushing torrent, the torrent Kishon. March on, my soul, with might! Then loud beat the horses' hoofs with the galloping, galloping of his steeds." What seems to have happened is that God sent a sudden rainstorm, the heavens fighting against Sisera, as it puts it, causing a flash flood of the small river flowing through the battlefield. This threw the horses into a panic, at which point Sisera doesn't have so much of an advantage anymore, and Deborah, Barak, and the Israelite army win the day.

Except Sisera gets away. That'd be the moment of glory for an army's leader like Barak: capturing or killing the enemy commander, but he doesn't get him. Sisera gets away from the battle and is running for his life. And he comes to the home of a man named Heber the Kenite. Heber isn't there, but his wife Jael is. Heber was likely a metalworker, and he and his wife weren't even Israelites. They're not even fully a part of their own clan. It turns out that they had left their homeland in the south to come north to this area, probably so that he could profit from Sisera's army. Heber was a metalworker. Sisera needed lots of iron chariots. Definitely some profit to be made. So it's like Sisera was coming to the home of his arms dealer. Reason to think he'd be safe there. So Jael beckons him in and hides him from the pursuing Israelites. Sisera asks for water, but Jael instead gives him milk, which puts him to sleep. And once he's asleep, Jael goes up to him, takes a tent peg and a mallet, and drives the tent peg through Sisera's temple until it comes out the other side, killing him. It catches you off guard, because why on earth would she do this? She's not an Israelite, and in fact it would seem that her household has profited greatly from Sisera. Maybe she was going with the winning hand, and Israel had just won. Or maybe she was one who maintained faith in God, even though she wasn't an Israelite.

We have no idea, because it doesn't tell us. What we do know is that she invited this man in, under the protection of her home, offering him her household's hospitality and protection—and that's a big deal in this culture—but then she breaks that hospitality, killing him in his sleep in graphic, gory fashion. And *she's* the one who finally defeats this enemy commander. Not Deborah. Not Barak. Not the army. Instead this woman coming out of nowhere into the story. The song ends with an abrupt shift to the perspective of someone we might not

expect. It goes to the window of Sisera's mother, yes the mother of the commander who had just been killed. It's kind of heartbreaking. She's looking out her window, wondering why it has taken so long for her son and his army to come back. Her attendants tell her it's surely because they're so busy raping and pillaging that it's taking them a bit longer than anticipated, so they're not exactly innocents here. But nevertheless, the song seems to relish in the fact that this mother and these women will soon receive the news that the army would not be coming back and that Sisera himself had been killed.

"And the land had rest forty years," it says in v. 31, wrapping up the story. And now you have no idea what to make of all this. Because think about it. Who's supposed to be the hero in all of this? The Israelites? Heck, only half the tribes even bothered to show up to the fight. Barak, their leader? He didn't exactly show a deep trust in God from the get-go, and it wasn't like he was some brilliant tactician either. Nothing he did won the battle for them, and it wasn't him who caught Sisera either. Was it Jael? Sure she was the one who actually killed Sisera, ending the threat of his army for good, but she did so by deceiving him and breaking the somewhat sacred pact of hospitality, inviting this man into her home, promising him protection, giving him milk to make him sleep, and then driving a tent peg through his skull. Or was it Deborah? The prophetess who got this whole thing started. She's the one who summoned Barak, the one who called upon him to gather the army, the one who went with him when he insisted, the one who rallied him to action when the day of battle had come. But then she's also the one singing this song, which means she's the one celebrating that Sisera's mother was looking out the window anxiously, wondering why her son hadn't come home yet. I mean, I get celebrating a victory, but relishing the fact that the general's mother would be devastated when she learned of her son's gruesome death? That's just cruel. That's Deborah. That's her song.

So who are you supposed to root for here? Who's the one that God has raised up to deliver his people? It's not entirely clear. But maybe that's the point. It's not a groundbreaking statement to make to say that the gears of the world turn by the actions and decisions of deeply flawed, even at times despicable people. Sometimes you can sense a clarity of right and wrong, like Russia's aggression against Ukraine. But often the lines aren't so clear. Or even if the lines are clear, those on what you sense to be the right side may not be ones you're eager to root for either. Think about World War II. It seems pretty clear now that Germany's actions of aggression and brutality needed to be resisted, but do you think Roosevelt and Churchill felt all that great rooting for Josef Stalin against him on the Eastern Front? It's not like Roosevelt and Churchill were a couple of saints either. And even in arenas perhaps a bit less intense than global geopolitics. How many times have you gone into a voting booth, seeing the options in front of you, for whatever office it might be, and sometimes there might be someone you feel strongly about, but how many times has a choice felt like choosing the lesser of who cares?

Sometimes it's hard to know who you're supposed to root for. I think this story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael puts that front and center. Just as Israel continues its downward spiral, so too does the quality of its judges, of those whom God raises up to deliver the people. It gets harder and harder to really admire them as heroes. But still, the message seems to be that though it's not so easy to identify Deborah or Barak or Jael as the human hero of the story, the true architect of Israel's deliverance is never in question. For it is the Lord who sends the storm and the torrent to throw the enemy into a panic. It is the Lord who hears Israel's cry. And it is the Lord who is able to use even the flawed motives, the deception, the tricks, the cowardice, the dishonor of a less-than-admirable crew to bring about the restoration of his people.

As it turns out, God's still at work that way. It remains a great mystery why God, after Christ's sacrifice on the cross and the glory of his resurrection, chose to make that witness known throughout the world not through further displays of miraculous power or of Jesus going on a never-ending tour around the world sharing the good news, but instead through the flawed, compromised work of a just as flawed and compromised group known as the church.

So even now, as you see across the headlines or social media or whatever scene you might look out on, and as you may feel discouraged about the assortment of flawed even despicable characters at work in the world, you might wonder, "Just who am I supposed to root for here? What good could come from a crew this messed up?" Know that that is how God has been at work for a long time and continues to use the broken pieces of a broken world to bring about something better.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“No Direction Home: Down a Peg or Two”

Dr. Jay Howell

March 20, 2022

We continue in our series “No Direction Home,” a journey through the Old Testament book of Judges. As we’ve shared, this is a book that’s not often explored in-depth, probably because it’s not entirely encouraging. It’s gory. The characters that maybe we think we should think of heroes often don’t actually come off looking like heroes. The whole thing is cycle after cycle of Israel forsaking God, being subdued by its enemies, crying out, then being delivered by a “judge” sent from the Lord, only to forsake the Lord again. But we’re looking at it, because this book is a story that over and over points out just how corrupted the human heart can become against our Maker—not just the Israelites, not just them, but us. And that’s a point that perhaps we need to hear especially in this season of Lent, when we consider just how much in need of a Savior we are, because on our own, we’re not capable of very much at all.

That in fact is a big part of the story we explore today, the story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

*“Awake, awake, Deborah;
Awake, awake, sing a song!
Arise, Barak, and lead away your captives, son of Abinoam.
Then survivors came down to the nobles;
The people of the Lord came down to me as warriors.
From Ephraim those whose root is in Amalek came down,
Following you, Benjamin, with your peoples;
From Machir commanders came down,
And from Zebulun those who wield the staff of office.
And the princes of Issachar were with Deborah;
As was Issachar, so was Barak;
Into the valley they rushed at his heels;
Among the divisions of Reuben
There were great determinations of heart.
Why did you sit among the sheepfolds,
To hear the piping for the flocks?
Among the divisions of Reuben
There were great searchings of heart.
Gilead remained across the Jordan;
And why did Dan stay on ships?
Asher sat at the seashore,
And remained by its landings.
Zebulun was a people who risked their lives,
And Naphtali too, on the high places of the field.*

*“The kings came and fought;
Then the kings of Canaan fought
At Taanach near the waters of Megiddo;
They took no plunder in silver.
The stars fought from heaven,
From their paths they fought against Sisera.
The torrent of Kishon swept them away,
The ancient torrent, the torrent Kishon.
My soul, march on with strength!
Then the horses’ hoofs beat
From the galloping, the galloping of his mighty stallions.
‘Curse Meroz,’ said the angel of the Lord,
‘Utterly curse its inhabitants,*

*Because they did not come to the help of the Lord,
To the help of the Lord against the warriors.'*

*"Most blessed of women is Jael,
The wife of Heber the Kenite;
Most blessed is she of women in the tent.
He asked for water, she gave him milk;
In a magnificent bowl she brought him curds.
She reached out her hand for the tent peg,
And her right hand for the workmen's hammer.
Then she struck Sisera, she smashed his head;
And she shattered and pierced his temple.
Between her feet he bowed, he fell, he lay;
Between her feet he bowed, he fell;
Where he bowed, there he fell dead.*

*"Out of the window she looked and wailed,
The mother of Sisera through the lattice,
'Why does his chariot delay in coming?
Why do the hoofbeats of his chariots delay?'
Her wise princesses would answer her,
Indeed she repeats her words to herself,
'Are they not finding, are they not dividing the spoils?
A concubine, two concubines for every warrior;
To Sisera a spoil of dyed cloth,
A spoil of dyed cloth embroidered,
Dyed cloth of double embroidery on the neck of the plunderer?'
May all Your enemies perish in this way, Lord;
But may those who love Him be like the rising of the sun in its might."
And the land was at rest for forty years. **Judges 5:12-31***

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Sometimes it's hard to know who to root for, especially if you feel the options aren't quite so clear cut. You come across this every so often. Two teams you dislike, or two players you're not so fond of, and they end up playing each other. Who do you root for? Well, you end up saying something like, "Well can they both lose?"

Or maybe not necessarily two teams or players you don't especially like. Maybe just two teams or players whose flaws you're pretty familiar with, not just flaws in their game, but flaws in their character, in their personality, in their motives. Makes you feel not so confident or comfortable in hoping for their victory, or not so celebratory should they actually win. It's not like there was necessarily a clear-cut alternative, but it still doesn't make you feel so great.

Well, y'all, I'm afraid this may be that sort of story, one in which, when you think about it, it's not quite so easy to know who to root for, or at least not so sure how celebratory you should be for them. This is the story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael. The passage we read in chapter five of the Book of Judges is actually part of a song, a song that retells the story of what happened in the chapter prior. So this whole thing is a song from two people named Deborah and Barak, after all the major things happened in their story.

Here's what happened. Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, so as it happens over and over in the Book of Judges, God gives them up to a rival king, and in this case it was a king named Jabin of the land of Canaan, situated just to the north of Israel, so this was a neighbor. And Israel languished under Jabin for twenty years. Jabin's really not that big a factor in the story. The one who is is the commander of Jabin's army is a man named Sisera. A big thing to know about Sisera is that he's leading an army featuring nine hundred chariots of iron. And not that we have to be experts of ancient warfare to understand this, but if you're coming to a fight with some rusty, dull blades and the others are coming with metal chariots, to some degree it doesn't matter how brave you are if you don't account for chariots coming at you, bringing a knife to a gunfight, so to speak. So Israel languished under their rule. They cried out, so God raised up someone to deliver them.

Here's where it starts to get a bit muddled though. Normally when Israel cries out to God, the book will say something like, "God raised up as a deliverer *so-and-so*." But we don't get that kind of clarity here. The clearest candidate is the next person we hear about when the story is told in chapter four and is the same as one of the singers whose words we read here in chapter 5: a prophetess named Deborah. Apparently, Deborah had been settling minor disputes among the Israelites during this time, as she would "judge" between them. But it's not so clear that she was specifically the one that God raised up to deliver Israel. Never says she was.

Deborah summons a man named Barak, who seems to be the closest thing Israel had to a military leader at the time. Deborah tells him to gather 10,000 soldiers to him and that God would deliver Sisera, the enemy commander with his 900 iron chariots, into his hands. So now it seems maybe Barak is the one that God is raising up. He's got the army. He's leading them into battle. He seems to fit the bill. But then Barak kind of shrinks away from it. He says in chapter 4 that he would only go if Deborah went with him. Not exactly the sort of bravery or trust in the Lord you would hope to see out of God's chosen deliverer. But Deborah goes with him, and Barak does summon 10,000 soldiers from the tribes of Israel. However, even then Barak doesn't seem to be so inspiring. One part of the song that we read talks about how only half the tribes actually answer the call. The other half refuse the call or just aren't heard from at all. Not exactly a stirring scene of an oppressed people rising up as one to throw off the shackles of their oppressors.

Nevertheless, Barak summons his army, as Deborah instructed him to do. And Sisera, with his army and his 900 chariots, comes to the fight. Must have been quite the scene. You have the Israelite army, half-gathered in faith but woefully unprepared, since they're still facing off against an army with advanced technology, like bringing a bunch of muskets against tanks and machine guns. And I don't think we're led to believe this was some kind of "Braveheart" moment either. You know, where the Scottish rebels, led by William Wallace, are facing off against the English army, in particular their cavalry. Completely outmatched. But taking advantage of English arrogance, when the cavalry charge, the Scots reveal they've made hundreds of sharp wooden pikes to stop the horses' charge. There's no indication that anything like that has happened, some kind of clever tactic. Instead, it seems like Deborah and Barak have brought a knife to a gunfight, and oh to be in the shoes of those soldiers once the chariots start coming toward them.

But then God shows up. Starting in v. 19: "The stars fought from heaven, from their courses they fought against Sisera. The torrent Kishon swept them away, the onrushing torrent, the torrent Kishon. March on, my soul, with might! Then loud beat the horses' hoofs with the galloping, galloping of his steeds." What seems to have happened is that God sent a sudden rainstorm, the heavens fighting against Sisera, as it puts it, causing a flash flood of the small river flowing through the battlefield. This threw the horses into a panic, at which point Sisera doesn't have so much of an advantage anymore, and Deborah, Barak, and the Israelite army win the day.

Except Sisera gets away. That'd be the moment of glory for an army's leader like Barak: capturing or killing the enemy commander, but he doesn't get him. Sisera gets away from the battle and is running for his life. And he comes to the home of a man named Heber the Kenite. Heber isn't there, but his wife Jael is. Heber was likely a metalworker, and he and his wife weren't even Israelites. They're not even fully a part of their own clan. It turns out that they had left their homeland in the south to come north to this area, probably so that he could profit from Sisera's army. Heber was a metalworker. Sisera needed lots of iron chariots. Definitely some profit to be made. So it's like Sisera was coming to the home of his arms dealer. Reason to think he'd be safe there. So Jael beckons him in and hides him from the pursuing Israelites. Sisera asks for water, but Jael instead gives him milk, which puts him to sleep. And once he's asleep, Jael goes up to him, takes a tent peg and a mallet, and drives the tent peg through Sisera's temple until it comes out the other side, killing him. It catches you off guard, because why on earth would she do this? She's not an Israelite, and in fact it would seem that her household has profited greatly from Sisera. Maybe she was going with the winning hand, and Israel had just won. Or maybe she was one who maintained faith in God, even though she wasn't an Israelite.

We have no idea, because it doesn't tell us. What we do know is that she invited this man in, under the protection of her home, offering him her household's hospitality and protection—and that's a big deal in this culture—but then she breaks that hospitality, killing him in his sleep in graphic, gory fashion. And *she's* the one who finally defeats this enemy commander. Not Deborah. Not Barak. Not the army. Instead this woman coming out of nowhere into the story. The song ends with an abrupt shift to the perspective of someone we might not

expect. It goes to the window of Sisera's mother, yes the mother of the commander who had just been killed. It's kind of heartbreaking. She's looking out her window, wondering why it has taken so long for her son and his army to come back. Her attendants tell her it's surely because they're so busy raping and pillaging that it's taking them a bit longer than anticipated, so they're not exactly innocents here. But nevertheless, the song seems to relish in the fact that this mother and these women will soon receive the news that the army would not be coming back and that Sisera himself had been killed.

"And the land had rest forty years," it says in v. 31, wrapping up the story. And now you have no idea what to make of all this. Because think about it. Who's supposed to be the hero in all of this? The Israelites? Heck, only half the tribes even bothered to show up to the fight. Barak, their leader? He didn't exactly show a deep trust in God from the get-go, and it wasn't like he was some brilliant tactician either. Nothing he did won the battle for them, and it wasn't him who caught Sisera either. Was it Jael? Sure she was the one who actually killed Sisera, ending the threat of his army for good, but she did so by deceiving him and breaking the somewhat sacred pact of hospitality, inviting this man into her home, promising him protection, giving him milk to make him sleep, and then driving a tent peg through his skull. Or was it Deborah? The prophetess who got this whole thing started. She's the one who summoned Barak, the one who called upon him to gather the army, the one who went with him when he insisted, the one who rallied him to action when the day of battle had come. But then she's also the one singing this song, which means she's the one celebrating that Sisera's mother was looking out the window anxiously, wondering why her son hadn't come home yet. I mean, I get celebrating a victory, but relishing the fact that the general's mother would be devastated when she learned of her son's gruesome death? That's just cruel. That's Deborah. That's her song.

So who are you supposed to root for here? Who's the one that God has raised up to deliver his people? It's not entirely clear. But maybe that's the point. It's not a groundbreaking statement to make to say that the gears of the world turn by the actions and decisions of deeply flawed, even at times despicable people. Sometimes you can sense a clarity of right and wrong, like Russia's aggression against Ukraine. But often the lines aren't so clear. Or even if the lines are clear, those on what you sense to be the right side may not be ones you're eager to root for either. Think about World War II. It seems pretty clear now that Germany's actions of aggression and brutality needed to be resisted, but do you think Roosevelt and Churchill felt all that great rooting for Josef Stalin against him on the Eastern Front? It's not like Roosevelt and Churchill were a couple of saints either. And even in arenas perhaps a bit less intense than global geopolitics. How many times have you gone into a voting booth, seeing the options in front of you, for whatever office it might be, and sometimes there might be someone you feel strongly about, but how many times has a choice felt like choosing the lesser of who cares?

Sometimes it's hard to know who you're supposed to root for. I think this story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael puts that front and center. Just as Israel continues its downward spiral, so too does the quality of its judges, of those whom God raises up to deliver the people. It gets harder and harder to really admire them as heroes. But still, the message seems to be that though it's not so easy to identify Deborah or Barak or Jael as the human hero of the story, the true architect of Israel's deliverance is never in question. For it is the Lord who sends the storm and the torrent to throw the enemy into a panic. It is the Lord who hears Israel's cry. And it is the Lord who is able to use even the flawed motives, the deception, the tricks, the cowardice, the dishonor of a less-than-admirable crew to bring about the restoration of his people.

As it turns out, God's still at work that way. It remains a great mystery why God, after Christ's sacrifice on the cross and the glory of his resurrection, chose to make that witness known throughout the world not through further displays of miraculous power or of Jesus going on a never-ending tour around the world sharing the good news, but instead through the flawed, compromised work of a just as flawed and compromised group known as the church.

So even now, as you see across the headlines or social media or whatever scene you might look out on, and as you may feel discouraged about the assortment of flawed even despicable characters at work in the world, you might wonder, "Just who am I supposed to root for here? What good could come from a crew this messed up?" Know that that is how God has been at work for a long time and continues to use the broken pieces of a broken world to bring about something better.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“No Direction Home: Down a Peg or Two”

Dr. Jay Howell

March 20, 2022

We continue in our series “No Direction Home,” a journey through the Old Testament book of Judges. As we’ve shared, this is a book that’s not often explored in-depth, probably because it’s not entirely encouraging. It’s gory. The characters that maybe we think we should think of heroes often don’t actually come off looking like heroes. The whole thing is cycle after cycle of Israel forsaking God, being subdued by its enemies, crying out, then being delivered by a “judge” sent from the Lord, only to forsake the Lord again. But we’re looking at it, because this book is a story that over and over points out just how corrupted the human heart can become against our Maker—not just the Israelites, not just them, but us. And that’s a point that perhaps we need to hear especially in this season of Lent, when we consider just how much in need of a Savior we are, because on our own, we’re not capable of very much at all.

That in fact is a big part of the story we explore today, the story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

*“Awake, awake, Deborah;
Awake, awake, sing a song!
Arise, Barak, and lead away your captives, son of Abinoam.
Then survivors came down to the nobles;
The people of the Lord came down to me as warriors.
From Ephraim those whose root is in Amalek came down,
Following you, Benjamin, with your peoples;
From Machir commanders came down,
And from Zebulun those who wield the staff of office.
And the princes of Issachar were with Deborah;
As was Issachar, so was Barak;
Into the valley they rushed at his heels;
Among the divisions of Reuben
There were great determinations of heart.
Why did you sit among the sheepfolds,
To hear the piping for the flocks?
Among the divisions of Reuben
There were great searchings of heart.
Gilead remained across the Jordan;
And why did Dan stay on ships?
Asher sat at the seashore,
And remained by its landings.
Zebulun was a people who risked their lives,
And Naphtali too, on the high places of the field.*

*“The kings came and fought;
Then the kings of Canaan fought
At Taanach near the waters of Megiddo;
They took no plunder in silver.
The stars fought from heaven,
From their paths they fought against Sisera.
The torrent of Kishon swept them away,
The ancient torrent, the torrent Kishon.
My soul, march on with strength!
Then the horses’ hoofs beat
From the galloping, the galloping of his mighty stallions.
‘Curse Meroz,’ said the angel of the Lord,
‘Utterly curse its inhabitants,*

*Because they did not come to the help of the Lord,
To the help of the Lord against the warriors.'*

*"Most blessed of women is Jael,
The wife of Heber the Kenite;
Most blessed is she of women in the tent.
He asked for water, she gave him milk;
In a magnificent bowl she brought him curds.
She reached out her hand for the tent peg,
And her right hand for the workmen's hammer.
Then she struck Sisera, she smashed his head;
And she shattered and pierced his temple.
Between her feet he bowed, he fell, he lay;
Between her feet he bowed, he fell;
Where he bowed, there he fell dead.*

*"Out of the window she looked and wailed,
The mother of Sisera through the lattice,
'Why does his chariot delay in coming?
Why do the hoofbeats of his chariots delay?'
Her wise princesses would answer her,
Indeed she repeats her words to herself,
'Are they not finding, are they not dividing the spoils?
A concubine, two concubines for every warrior;
To Sisera a spoil of dyed cloth,
A spoil of dyed cloth embroidered,
Dyed cloth of double embroidery on the neck of the plunderer?'
May all Your enemies perish in this way, Lord;
But may those who love Him be like the rising of the sun in its might."
And the land was at rest for forty years. **Judges 5:12-31***

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Sometimes it's hard to know who to root for, especially if you feel the options aren't quite so clear cut. You come across this every so often. Two teams you dislike, or two players you're not so fond of, and they end up playing each other. Who do you root for? Well, you end up saying something like, "Well can they both lose?"

Or maybe not necessarily two teams or players you don't especially like. Maybe just two teams or players whose flaws you're pretty familiar with, not just flaws in their game, but flaws in their character, in their personality, in their motives. Makes you feel not so confident or comfortable in hoping for their victory, or not so celebratory should they actually win. It's not like there was necessarily a clear-cut alternative, but it still doesn't make you feel so great.

Well, y'all, I'm afraid this may be that sort of story, one in which, when you think about it, it's not quite so easy to know who to root for, or at least not so sure how celebratory you should be for them. This is the story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael. The passage we read in chapter five of the Book of Judges is actually part of a song, a song that retells the story of what happened in the chapter prior. So this whole thing is a song from two people named Deborah and Barak, after all the major things happened in their story.

Here's what happened. Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, so as it happens over and over in the Book of Judges, God gives them up to a rival king, and in this case it was a king named Jabin of the land of Canaan, situated just to the north of Israel, so this was a neighbor. And Israel languished under Jabin for twenty years. Jabin's really not that big a factor in the story. The one who is is the commander of Jabin's army is a man named Sisera. A big thing to know about Sisera is that he's leading an army featuring nine hundred chariots of iron. And not that we have to be experts of ancient warfare to understand this, but if you're coming to a fight with some rusty, dull blades and the others are coming with metal chariots, to some degree it doesn't matter how brave you are if you don't account for chariots coming at you, bringing a knife to a gunfight, so to speak. So Israel languished under their rule. They cried out, so God raised up someone to deliver them.

Here's where it starts to get a bit muddled though. Normally when Israel cries out to God, the book will say something like, "God raised up as a deliverer *so-and-so*." But we don't get that kind of clarity here. The clearest candidate is the next person we hear about when the story is told in chapter four and is the same as one of the singers whose words we read here in chapter 5: a prophetess named Deborah. Apparently, Deborah had been settling minor disputes among the Israelites during this time, as she would "judge" between them. But it's not so clear that she was specifically the one that God raised up to deliver Israel. Never says she was.

Deborah summons a man named Barak, who seems to be the closest thing Israel had to a military leader at the time. Deborah tells him to gather 10,000 soldiers to him and that God would deliver Sisera, the enemy commander with his 900 iron chariots, into his hands. So now it seems maybe Barak is the one that God is raising up. He's got the army. He's leading them into battle. He seems to fit the bill. But then Barak kind of shrinks away from it. He says in chapter 4 that he would only go if Deborah went with him. Not exactly the sort of bravery or trust in the Lord you would hope to see out of God's chosen deliverer. But Deborah goes with him, and Barak does summon 10,000 soldiers from the tribes of Israel. However, even then Barak doesn't seem to be so inspiring. One part of the song that we read talks about how only half the tribes actually answer the call. The other half refuse the call or just aren't heard from at all. Not exactly a stirring scene of an oppressed people rising up as one to throw off the shackles of their oppressors.

Nevertheless, Barak summons his army, as Deborah instructed him to do. And Sisera, with his army and his 900 chariots, comes to the fight. Must have been quite the scene. You have the Israelite army, half-gathered in faith but woefully unprepared, since they're still facing off against an army with advanced technology, like bringing a bunch of muskets against tanks and machine guns. And I don't think we're led to believe this was some kind of "Braveheart" moment either. You know, where the Scottish rebels, led by William Wallace, are facing off against the English army, in particular their cavalry. Completely outmatched. But taking advantage of English arrogance, when the cavalry charge, the Scots reveal they've made hundreds of sharp wooden pikes to stop the horses' charge. There's no indication that anything like that has happened, some kind of clever tactic. Instead, it seems like Deborah and Barak have brought a knife to a gunfight, and oh to be in the shoes of those soldiers once the chariots start coming toward them.

But then God shows up. Starting in v. 19: "The stars fought from heaven, from their courses they fought against Sisera. The torrent Kishon swept them away, the onrushing torrent, the torrent Kishon. March on, my soul, with might! Then loud beat the horses' hoofs with the galloping, galloping of his steeds." What seems to have happened is that God sent a sudden rainstorm, the heavens fighting against Sisera, as it puts it, causing a flash flood of the small river flowing through the battlefield. This threw the horses into a panic, at which point Sisera doesn't have so much of an advantage anymore, and Deborah, Barak, and the Israelite army win the day.

Except Sisera gets away. That'd be the moment of glory for an army's leader like Barak: capturing or killing the enemy commander, but he doesn't get him. Sisera gets away from the battle and is running for his life. And he comes to the home of a man named Heber the Kenite. Heber isn't there, but his wife Jael is. Heber was likely a metalworker, and he and his wife weren't even Israelites. They're not even fully a part of their own clan. It turns out that they had left their homeland in the south to come north to this area, probably so that he could profit from Sisera's army. Heber was a metalworker. Sisera needed lots of iron chariots. Definitely some profit to be made. So it's like Sisera was coming to the home of his arms dealer. Reason to think he'd be safe there. So Jael beckons him in and hides him from the pursuing Israelites. Sisera asks for water, but Jael instead gives him milk, which puts him to sleep. And once he's asleep, Jael goes up to him, takes a tent peg and a mallet, and drives the tent peg through Sisera's temple until it comes out the other side, killing him. It catches you off guard, because why on earth would she do this? She's not an Israelite, and in fact it would seem that her household has profited greatly from Sisera. Maybe she was going with the winning hand, and Israel had just won. Or maybe she was one who maintained faith in God, even though she wasn't an Israelite.

We have no idea, because it doesn't tell us. What we do know is that she invited this man in, under the protection of her home, offering him her household's hospitality and protection—and that's a big deal in this culture—but then she breaks that hospitality, killing him in his sleep in graphic, gory fashion. And *she's* the one who finally defeats this enemy commander. Not Deborah. Not Barak. Not the army. Instead this woman coming out of nowhere into the story. The song ends with an abrupt shift to the perspective of someone we might not

expect. It goes to the window of Sisera's mother, yes the mother of the commander who had just been killed. It's kind of heartbreaking. She's looking out her window, wondering why it has taken so long for her son and his army to come back. Her attendants tell her it's surely because they're so busy raping and pillaging that it's taking them a bit longer than anticipated, so they're not exactly innocents here. But nevertheless, the song seems to relish in the fact that this mother and these women will soon receive the news that the army would not be coming back and that Sisera himself had been killed.

"And the land had rest forty years," it says in v. 31, wrapping up the story. And now you have no idea what to make of all this. Because think about it. Who's supposed to be the hero in all of this? The Israelites? Heck, only half the tribes even bothered to show up to the fight. Barak, their leader? He didn't exactly show a deep trust in God from the get-go, and it wasn't like he was some brilliant tactician either. Nothing he did won the battle for them, and it wasn't him who caught Sisera either. Was it Jael? Sure she was the one who actually killed Sisera, ending the threat of his army for good, but she did so by deceiving him and breaking the somewhat sacred pact of hospitality, inviting this man into her home, promising him protection, giving him milk to make him sleep, and then driving a tent peg through his skull. Or was it Deborah? The prophetess who got this whole thing started. She's the one who summoned Barak, the one who called upon him to gather the army, the one who went with him when he insisted, the one who rallied him to action when the day of battle had come. But then she's also the one singing this song, which means she's the one celebrating that Sisera's mother was looking out the window anxiously, wondering why her son hadn't come home yet. I mean, I get celebrating a victory, but relishing the fact that the general's mother would be devastated when she learned of her son's gruesome death? That's just cruel. That's Deborah. That's her song.

So who are you supposed to root for here? Who's the one that God has raised up to deliver his people? It's not entirely clear. But maybe that's the point. It's not a groundbreaking statement to make to say that the gears of the world turn by the actions and decisions of deeply flawed, even at times despicable people. Sometimes you can sense a clarity of right and wrong, like Russia's aggression against Ukraine. But often the lines aren't so clear. Or even if the lines are clear, those on what you sense to be the right side may not be ones you're eager to root for either. Think about World War II. It seems pretty clear now that Germany's actions of aggression and brutality needed to be resisted, but do you think Roosevelt and Churchill felt all that great rooting for Josef Stalin against him on the Eastern Front? It's not like Roosevelt and Churchill were a couple of saints either. And even in arenas perhaps a bit less intense than global geopolitics. How many times have you gone into a voting booth, seeing the options in front of you, for whatever office it might be, and sometimes there might be someone you feel strongly about, but how many times has a choice felt like choosing the lesser of who cares?

Sometimes it's hard to know who you're supposed to root for. I think this story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael puts that front and center. Just as Israel continues its downward spiral, so too does the quality of its judges, of those whom God raises up to deliver the people. It gets harder and harder to really admire them as heroes. But still, the message seems to be that though it's not so easy to identify Deborah or Barak or Jael as the human hero of the story, the true architect of Israel's deliverance is never in question. For it is the Lord who sends the storm and the torrent to throw the enemy into a panic. It is the Lord who hears Israel's cry. And it is the Lord who is able to use even the flawed motives, the deception, the tricks, the cowardice, the dishonor of a less-than-admirable crew to bring about the restoration of his people.

As it turns out, God's still at work that way. It remains a great mystery why God, after Christ's sacrifice on the cross and the glory of his resurrection, chose to make that witness known throughout the world not through further displays of miraculous power or of Jesus going on a never-ending tour around the world sharing the good news, but instead through the flawed, compromised work of a just as flawed and compromised group known as the church.

So even now, as you see across the headlines or social media or whatever scene you might look out on, and as you may feel discouraged about the assortment of flawed even despicable characters at work in the world, you might wonder, "Just who am I supposed to root for here? What good could come from a crew this messed up?" Know that that is how God has been at work for a long time and continues to use the broken pieces of a broken world to bring about something better.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“No Direction Home: Down a Peg or Two”

Dr. Jay Howell

March 20, 2022

We continue in our series “No Direction Home,” a journey through the Old Testament book of Judges. As we’ve shared, this is a book that’s not often explored in-depth, probably because it’s not entirely encouraging. It’s gory. The characters that maybe we think we should think of heroes often don’t actually come off looking like heroes. The whole thing is cycle after cycle of Israel forsaking God, being subdued by its enemies, crying out, then being delivered by a “judge” sent from the Lord, only to forsake the Lord again. But we’re looking at it, because this book is a story that over and over points out just how corrupted the human heart can become against our Maker—not just the Israelites, not just them, but us. And that’s a point that perhaps we need to hear especially in this season of Lent, when we consider just how much in need of a Savior we are, because on our own, we’re not capable of very much at all.

That in fact is a big part of the story we explore today, the story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

*“Awake, awake, Deborah;
Awake, awake, sing a song!
Arise, Barak, and lead away your captives, son of Abinoam.
Then survivors came down to the nobles;
The people of the Lord came down to me as warriors.
From Ephraim those whose root is in Amalek came down,
Following you, Benjamin, with your peoples;
From Machir commanders came down,
And from Zebulun those who wield the staff of office.
And the princes of Issachar were with Deborah;
As was Issachar, so was Barak;
Into the valley they rushed at his heels;
Among the divisions of Reuben
There were great determinations of heart.
Why did you sit among the sheepfolds,
To hear the piping for the flocks?
Among the divisions of Reuben
There were great searchings of heart.
Gilead remained across the Jordan;
And why did Dan stay on ships?
Asher sat at the seashore,
And remained by its landings.
Zebulun was a people who risked their lives,
And Naphtali too, on the high places of the field.*

*“The kings came and fought;
Then the kings of Canaan fought
At Taanach near the waters of Megiddo;
They took no plunder in silver.
The stars fought from heaven,
From their paths they fought against Sisera.
The torrent of Kishon swept them away,
The ancient torrent, the torrent Kishon.
My soul, march on with strength!
Then the horses’ hoofs beat
From the galloping, the galloping of his mighty stallions.
‘Curse Meroz,’ said the angel of the Lord,
‘Utterly curse its inhabitants,*

*Because they did not come to the help of the Lord,
To the help of the Lord against the warriors.'*

*"Most blessed of women is Jael,
The wife of Heber the Kenite;
Most blessed is she of women in the tent.
He asked for water, she gave him milk;
In a magnificent bowl she brought him curds.
She reached out her hand for the tent peg,
And her right hand for the workmen's hammer.
Then she struck Sisera, she smashed his head;
And she shattered and pierced his temple.
Between her feet he bowed, he fell, he lay;
Between her feet he bowed, he fell;
Where he bowed, there he fell dead.*

*"Out of the window she looked and wailed,
The mother of Sisera through the lattice,
'Why does his chariot delay in coming?
Why do the hoofbeats of his chariots delay?'
Her wise princesses would answer her,
Indeed she repeats her words to herself,
'Are they not finding, are they not dividing the spoils?
A concubine, two concubines for every warrior;
To Sisera a spoil of dyed cloth,
A spoil of dyed cloth embroidered,
Dyed cloth of double embroidery on the neck of the plunderer?'
May all Your enemies perish in this way, Lord;
But may those who love Him be like the rising of the sun in its might."
And the land was at rest for forty years. **Judges 5:12-31***

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Sometimes it's hard to know who to root for, especially if you feel the options aren't quite so clear cut. You come across this every so often. Two teams you dislike, or two players you're not so fond of, and they end up playing each other. Who do you root for? Well, you end up saying something like, "Well can they both lose?"

Or maybe not necessarily two teams or players you don't especially like. Maybe just two teams or players whose flaws you're pretty familiar with, not just flaws in their game, but flaws in their character, in their personality, in their motives. Makes you feel not so confident or comfortable in hoping for their victory, or not so celebratory should they actually win. It's not like there was necessarily a clear-cut alternative, but it still doesn't make you feel so great.

Well, y'all, I'm afraid this may be that sort of story, one in which, when you think about it, it's not quite so easy to know who to root for, or at least not so sure how celebratory you should be for them. This is the story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael. The passage we read in chapter five of the Book of Judges is actually part of a song, a song that retells the story of what happened in the chapter prior. So this whole thing is a song from two people named Deborah and Barak, after all the major things happened in their story.

Here's what happened. Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, so as it happens over and over in the Book of Judges, God gives them up to a rival king, and in this case it was a king named Jabin of the land of Canaan, situated just to the north of Israel, so this was a neighbor. And Israel languished under Jabin for twenty years. Jabin's really not that big a factor in the story. The one who is is the commander of Jabin's army is a man named Sisera. A big thing to know about Sisera is that he's leading an army featuring nine hundred chariots of iron. And not that we have to be experts of ancient warfare to understand this, but if you're coming to a fight with some rusty, dull blades and the others are coming with metal chariots, to some degree it doesn't matter how brave you are if you don't account for chariots coming at you, bringing a knife to a gunfight, so to speak. So Israel languished under their rule. They cried out, so God raised up someone to deliver them.

Here's where it starts to get a bit muddled though. Normally when Israel cries out to God, the book will say something like, "God raised up as a deliverer *so-and-so*." But we don't get that kind of clarity here. The clearest candidate is the next person we hear about when the story is told in chapter four and is the same as one of the singers whose words we read here in chapter 5: a prophetess named Deborah. Apparently, Deborah had been settling minor disputes among the Israelites during this time, as she would "judge" between them. But it's not so clear that she was specifically the one that God raised up to deliver Israel. Never says she was.

Deborah summons a man named Barak, who seems to be the closest thing Israel had to a military leader at the time. Deborah tells him to gather 10,000 soldiers to him and that God would deliver Sisera, the enemy commander with his 900 iron chariots, into his hands. So now it seems maybe Barak is the one that God is raising up. He's got the army. He's leading them into battle. He seems to fit the bill. But then Barak kind of shrinks away from it. He says in chapter 4 that he would only go if Deborah went with him. Not exactly the sort of bravery or trust in the Lord you would hope to see out of God's chosen deliverer. But Deborah goes with him, and Barak does summon 10,000 soldiers from the tribes of Israel. However, even then Barak doesn't seem to be so inspiring. One part of the song that we read talks about how only half the tribes actually answer the call. The other half refuse the call or just aren't heard from at all. Not exactly a stirring scene of an oppressed people rising up as one to throw off the shackles of their oppressors.

Nevertheless, Barak summons his army, as Deborah instructed him to do. And Sisera, with his army and his 900 chariots, comes to the fight. Must have been quite the scene. You have the Israelite army, half-gathered in faith but woefully unprepared, since they're still facing off against an army with advanced technology, like bringing a bunch of muskets against tanks and machine guns. And I don't think we're led to believe this was some kind of "Braveheart" moment either. You know, where the Scottish rebels, led by William Wallace, are facing off against the English army, in particular their cavalry. Completely outmatched. But taking advantage of English arrogance, when the cavalry charge, the Scots reveal they've made hundreds of sharp wooden pikes to stop the horses' charge. There's no indication that anything like that has happened, some kind of clever tactic. Instead, it seems like Deborah and Barak have brought a knife to a gunfight, and oh to be in the shoes of those soldiers once the chariots start coming toward them.

But then God shows up. Starting in v. 19: "The stars fought from heaven, from their courses they fought against Sisera. The torrent Kishon swept them away, the onrushing torrent, the torrent Kishon. March on, my soul, with might! Then loud beat the horses' hoofs with the galloping, galloping of his steeds." What seems to have happened is that God sent a sudden rainstorm, the heavens fighting against Sisera, as it puts it, causing a flash flood of the small river flowing through the battlefield. This threw the horses into a panic, at which point Sisera doesn't have so much of an advantage anymore, and Deborah, Barak, and the Israelite army win the day.

Except Sisera gets away. That'd be the moment of glory for an army's leader like Barak: capturing or killing the enemy commander, but he doesn't get him. Sisera gets away from the battle and is running for his life. And he comes to the home of a man named Heber the Kenite. Heber isn't there, but his wife Jael is. Heber was likely a metalworker, and he and his wife weren't even Israelites. They're not even fully a part of their own clan. It turns out that they had left their homeland in the south to come north to this area, probably so that he could profit from Sisera's army. Heber was a metalworker. Sisera needed lots of iron chariots. Definitely some profit to be made. So it's like Sisera was coming to the home of his arms dealer. Reason to think he'd be safe there. So Jael beckons him in and hides him from the pursuing Israelites. Sisera asks for water, but Jael instead gives him milk, which puts him to sleep. And once he's asleep, Jael goes up to him, takes a tent peg and a mallet, and drives the tent peg through Sisera's temple until it comes out the other side, killing him. It catches you off guard, because why on earth would she do this? She's not an Israelite, and in fact it would seem that her household has profited greatly from Sisera. Maybe she was going with the winning hand, and Israel had just won. Or maybe she was one who maintained faith in God, even though she wasn't an Israelite.

We have no idea, because it doesn't tell us. What we do know is that she invited this man in, under the protection of her home, offering him her household's hospitality and protection—and that's a big deal in this culture—but then she breaks that hospitality, killing him in his sleep in graphic, gory fashion. And *she's* the one who finally defeats this enemy commander. Not Deborah. Not Barak. Not the army. Instead this woman coming out of nowhere into the story. The song ends with an abrupt shift to the perspective of someone we might not

expect. It goes to the window of Sisera's mother, yes the mother of the commander who had just been killed. It's kind of heartbreaking. She's looking out her window, wondering why it has taken so long for her son and his army to come back. Her attendants tell her it's surely because they're so busy raping and pillaging that it's taking them a bit longer than anticipated, so they're not exactly innocents here. But nevertheless, the song seems to relish in the fact that this mother and these women will soon receive the news that the army would not be coming back and that Sisera himself had been killed.

"And the land had rest forty years," it says in v. 31, wrapping up the story. And now you have no idea what to make of all this. Because think about it. Who's supposed to be the hero in all of this? The Israelites? Heck, only half the tribes even bothered to show up to the fight. Barak, their leader? He didn't exactly show a deep trust in God from the get-go, and it wasn't like he was some brilliant tactician either. Nothing he did won the battle for them, and it wasn't him who caught Sisera either. Was it Jael? Sure she was the one who actually killed Sisera, ending the threat of his army for good, but she did so by deceiving him and breaking the somewhat sacred pact of hospitality, inviting this man into her home, promising him protection, giving him milk to make him sleep, and then driving a tent peg through his skull. Or was it Deborah? The prophetess who got this whole thing started. She's the one who summoned Barak, the one who called upon him to gather the army, the one who went with him when he insisted, the one who rallied him to action when the day of battle had come. But then she's also the one singing this song, which means she's the one celebrating that Sisera's mother was looking out the window anxiously, wondering why her son hadn't come home yet. I mean, I get celebrating a victory, but relishing the fact that the general's mother would be devastated when she learned of her son's gruesome death? That's just cruel. That's Deborah. That's her song.

So who are you supposed to root for here? Who's the one that God has raised up to deliver his people? It's not entirely clear. But maybe that's the point. It's not a groundbreaking statement to make to say that the gears of the world turn by the actions and decisions of deeply flawed, even at times despicable people. Sometimes you can sense a clarity of right and wrong, like Russia's aggression against Ukraine. But often the lines aren't so clear. Or even if the lines are clear, those on what you sense to be the right side may not be ones you're eager to root for either. Think about World War II. It seems pretty clear now that Germany's actions of aggression and brutality needed to be resisted, but do you think Roosevelt and Churchill felt all that great rooting for Josef Stalin against him on the Eastern Front? It's not like Roosevelt and Churchill were a couple of saints either. And even in arenas perhaps a bit less intense than global geopolitics. How many times have you gone into a voting booth, seeing the options in front of you, for whatever office it might be, and sometimes there might be someone you feel strongly about, but how many times has a choice felt like choosing the lesser of who cares?

Sometimes it's hard to know who you're supposed to root for. I think this story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael puts that front and center. Just as Israel continues its downward spiral, so too does the quality of its judges, of those whom God raises up to deliver the people. It gets harder and harder to really admire them as heroes. But still, the message seems to be that though it's not so easy to identify Deborah or Barak or Jael as the human hero of the story, the true architect of Israel's deliverance is never in question. For it is the Lord who sends the storm and the torrent to throw the enemy into a panic. It is the Lord who hears Israel's cry. And it is the Lord who is able to use even the flawed motives, the deception, the tricks, the cowardice, the dishonor of a less-than-admirable crew to bring about the restoration of his people.

As it turns out, God's still at work that way. It remains a great mystery why God, after Christ's sacrifice on the cross and the glory of his resurrection, chose to make that witness known throughout the world not through further displays of miraculous power or of Jesus going on a never-ending tour around the world sharing the good news, but instead through the flawed, compromised work of a just as flawed and compromised group known as the church.

So even now, as you see across the headlines or social media or whatever scene you might look out on, and as you may feel discouraged about the assortment of flawed even despicable characters at work in the world, you might wonder, "Just who am I supposed to root for here? What good could come from a crew this messed up?" Know that that is how God has been at work for a long time and continues to use the broken pieces of a broken world to bring about something better.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“No Direction Home: Down a Peg or Two”

Dr. Jay Howell

March 20, 2022

We continue in our series “No Direction Home,” a journey through the Old Testament book of Judges. As we’ve shared, this is a book that’s not often explored in-depth, probably because it’s not entirely encouraging. It’s gory. The characters that maybe we think we should think of heroes often don’t actually come off looking like heroes. The whole thing is cycle after cycle of Israel forsaking God, being subdued by its enemies, crying out, then being delivered by a “judge” sent from the Lord, only to forsake the Lord again. But we’re looking at it, because this book is a story that over and over points out just how corrupted the human heart can become against our Maker—not just the Israelites, not just them, but us. And that’s a point that perhaps we need to hear especially in this season of Lent, when we consider just how much in need of a Savior we are, because on our own, we’re not capable of very much at all.

That in fact is a big part of the story we explore today, the story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

*“Awake, awake, Deborah;
Awake, awake, sing a song!
Arise, Barak, and lead away your captives, son of Abinoam.
Then survivors came down to the nobles;
The people of the Lord came down to me as warriors.
From Ephraim those whose root is in Amalek came down,
Following you, Benjamin, with your peoples;
From Machir commanders came down,
And from Zebulun those who wield the staff of office.
And the princes of Issachar were with Deborah;
As was Issachar, so was Barak;
Into the valley they rushed at his heels;
Among the divisions of Reuben
There were great determinations of heart.
Why did you sit among the sheepfolds,
To hear the piping for the flocks?
Among the divisions of Reuben
There were great searchings of heart.
Gilead remained across the Jordan;
And why did Dan stay on ships?
Asher sat at the seashore,
And remained by its landings.
Zebulun was a people who risked their lives,
And Naphtali too, on the high places of the field.*

*“The kings came and fought;
Then the kings of Canaan fought
At Taanach near the waters of Megiddo;
They took no plunder in silver.
The stars fought from heaven,
From their paths they fought against Sisera.
The torrent of Kishon swept them away,
The ancient torrent, the torrent Kishon.
My soul, march on with strength!
Then the horses’ hoofs beat
From the galloping, the galloping of his mighty stallions.
‘Curse Meroz,’ said the angel of the Lord,
‘Utterly curse its inhabitants,*

*Because they did not come to the help of the Lord,
To the help of the Lord against the warriors.'*

*"Most blessed of women is Jael,
The wife of Heber the Kenite;
Most blessed is she of women in the tent.
He asked for water, she gave him milk;
In a magnificent bowl she brought him curds.
She reached out her hand for the tent peg,
And her right hand for the workmen's hammer.
Then she struck Sisera, she smashed his head;
And she shattered and pierced his temple.
Between her feet he bowed, he fell, he lay;
Between her feet he bowed, he fell;
Where he bowed, there he fell dead.*

*"Out of the window she looked and wailed,
The mother of Sisera through the lattice,
'Why does his chariot delay in coming?
Why do the hoofbeats of his chariots delay?'
Her wise princesses would answer her,
Indeed she repeats her words to herself,
'Are they not finding, are they not dividing the spoils?
A concubine, two concubines for every warrior;
To Sisera a spoil of dyed cloth,
A spoil of dyed cloth embroidered,
Dyed cloth of double embroidery on the neck of the plunderer?'
May all Your enemies perish in this way, Lord;
But may those who love Him be like the rising of the sun in its might."
And the land was at rest for forty years. **Judges 5:12-31***

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Sometimes it's hard to know who to root for, especially if you feel the options aren't quite so clear cut. You come across this every so often. Two teams you dislike, or two players you're not so fond of, and they end up playing each other. Who do you root for? Well, you end up saying something like, "Well can they both lose?"

Or maybe not necessarily two teams or players you don't especially like. Maybe just two teams or players whose flaws you're pretty familiar with, not just flaws in their game, but flaws in their character, in their personality, in their motives. Makes you feel not so confident or comfortable in hoping for their victory, or not so celebratory should they actually win. It's not like there was necessarily a clear-cut alternative, but it still doesn't make you feel so great.

Well, y'all, I'm afraid this may be that sort of story, one in which, when you think about it, it's not quite so easy to know who to root for, or at least not so sure how celebratory you should be for them. This is the story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael. The passage we read in chapter five of the Book of Judges is actually part of a song, a song that retells the story of what happened in the chapter prior. So this whole thing is a song from two people named Deborah and Barak, after all the major things happened in their story.

Here's what happened. Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, so as it happens over and over in the Book of Judges, God gives them up to a rival king, and in this case it was a king named Jabin of the land of Canaan, situated just to the north of Israel, so this was a neighbor. And Israel languished under Jabin for twenty years. Jabin's really not that big a factor in the story. The one who is is the commander of Jabin's army is a man named Sisera. A big thing to know about Sisera is that he's leading an army featuring nine hundred chariots of iron. And not that we have to be experts of ancient warfare to understand this, but if you're coming to a fight with some rusty, dull blades and the others are coming with metal chariots, to some degree it doesn't matter how brave you are if you don't account for chariots coming at you, bringing a knife to a gunfight, so to speak. So Israel languished under their rule. They cried out, so God raised up someone to deliver them.

Here's where it starts to get a bit muddled though. Normally when Israel cries out to God, the book will say something like, "God raised up as a deliverer *so-and-so*." But we don't get that kind of clarity here. The clearest candidate is the next person we hear about when the story is told in chapter four and is the same as one of the singers whose words we read here in chapter 5: a prophetess named Deborah. Apparently, Deborah had been settling minor disputes among the Israelites during this time, as she would "judge" between them. But it's not so clear that she was specifically the one that God raised up to deliver Israel. Never says she was.

Deborah summons a man named Barak, who seems to be the closest thing Israel had to a military leader at the time. Deborah tells him to gather 10,000 soldiers to him and that God would deliver Sisera, the enemy commander with his 900 iron chariots, into his hands. So now it seems maybe Barak is the one that God is raising up. He's got the army. He's leading them into battle. He seems to fit the bill. But then Barak kind of shrinks away from it. He says in chapter 4 that he would only go if Deborah went with him. Not exactly the sort of bravery or trust in the Lord you would hope to see out of God's chosen deliverer. But Deborah goes with him, and Barak does summon 10,000 soldiers from the tribes of Israel. However, even then Barak doesn't seem to be so inspiring. One part of the song that we read talks about how only half the tribes actually answer the call. The other half refuse the call or just aren't heard from at all. Not exactly a stirring scene of an oppressed people rising up as one to throw off the shackles of their oppressors.

Nevertheless, Barak summons his army, as Deborah instructed him to do. And Sisera, with his army and his 900 chariots, comes to the fight. Must have been quite the scene. You have the Israelite army, half-gathered in faith but woefully unprepared, since they're still facing off against an army with advanced technology, like bringing a bunch of muskets against tanks and machine guns. And I don't think we're led to believe this was some kind of "Braveheart" moment either. You know, where the Scottish rebels, led by William Wallace, are facing off against the English army, in particular their cavalry. Completely outmatched. But taking advantage of English arrogance, when the cavalry charge, the Scots reveal they've made hundreds of sharp wooden pikes to stop the horses' charge. There's no indication that anything like that has happened, some kind of clever tactic. Instead, it seems like Deborah and Barak have brought a knife to a gunfight, and oh to be in the shoes of those soldiers once the chariots start coming toward them.

But then God shows up. Starting in v. 19: "The stars fought from heaven, from their courses they fought against Sisera. The torrent Kishon swept them away, the onrushing torrent, the torrent Kishon. March on, my soul, with might! Then loud beat the horses' hoofs with the galloping, galloping of his steeds." What seems to have happened is that God sent a sudden rainstorm, the heavens fighting against Sisera, as it puts it, causing a flash flood of the small river flowing through the battlefield. This threw the horses into a panic, at which point Sisera doesn't have so much of an advantage anymore, and Deborah, Barak, and the Israelite army win the day.

Except Sisera gets away. That'd be the moment of glory for an army's leader like Barak: capturing or killing the enemy commander, but he doesn't get him. Sisera gets away from the battle and is running for his life. And he comes to the home of a man named Heber the Kenite. Heber isn't there, but his wife Jael is. Heber was likely a metalworker, and he and his wife weren't even Israelites. They're not even fully a part of their own clan. It turns out that they had left their homeland in the south to come north to this area, probably so that he could profit from Sisera's army. Heber was a metalworker. Sisera needed lots of iron chariots. Definitely some profit to be made. So it's like Sisera was coming to the home of his arms dealer. Reason to think he'd be safe there. So Jael beckons him in and hides him from the pursuing Israelites. Sisera asks for water, but Jael instead gives him milk, which puts him to sleep. And once he's asleep, Jael goes up to him, takes a tent peg and a mallet, and drives the tent peg through Sisera's temple until it comes out the other side, killing him. It catches you off guard, because why on earth would she do this? She's not an Israelite, and in fact it would seem that her household has profited greatly from Sisera. Maybe she was going with the winning hand, and Israel had just won. Or maybe she was one who maintained faith in God, even though she wasn't an Israelite.

We have no idea, because it doesn't tell us. What we do know is that she invited this man in, under the protection of her home, offering him her household's hospitality and protection—and that's a big deal in this culture—but then she breaks that hospitality, killing him in his sleep in graphic, gory fashion. And *she's* the one who finally defeats this enemy commander. Not Deborah. Not Barak. Not the army. Instead this woman coming out of nowhere into the story. The song ends with an abrupt shift to the perspective of someone we might not

expect. It goes to the window of Sisera's mother, yes the mother of the commander who had just been killed. It's kind of heartbreaking. She's looking out her window, wondering why it has taken so long for her son and his army to come back. Her attendants tell her it's surely because they're so busy raping and pillaging that it's taking them a bit longer than anticipated, so they're not exactly innocents here. But nevertheless, the song seems to relish in the fact that this mother and these women will soon receive the news that the army would not be coming back and that Sisera himself had been killed.

"And the land had rest forty years," it says in v. 31, wrapping up the story. And now you have no idea what to make of all this. Because think about it. Who's supposed to be the hero in all of this? The Israelites? Heck, only half the tribes even bothered to show up to the fight. Barak, their leader? He didn't exactly show a deep trust in God from the get-go, and it wasn't like he was some brilliant tactician either. Nothing he did won the battle for them, and it wasn't him who caught Sisera either. Was it Jael? Sure she was the one who actually killed Sisera, ending the threat of his army for good, but she did so by deceiving him and breaking the somewhat sacred pact of hospitality, inviting this man into her home, promising him protection, giving him milk to make him sleep, and then driving a tent peg through his skull. Or was it Deborah? The prophetess who got this whole thing started. She's the one who summoned Barak, the one who called upon him to gather the army, the one who went with him when he insisted, the one who rallied him to action when the day of battle had come. But then she's also the one singing this song, which means she's the one celebrating that Sisera's mother was looking out the window anxiously, wondering why her son hadn't come home yet. I mean, I get celebrating a victory, but relishing the fact that the general's mother would be devastated when she learned of her son's gruesome death? That's just cruel. That's Deborah. That's her song.

So who are you supposed to root for here? Who's the one that God has raised up to deliver his people? It's not entirely clear. But maybe that's the point. It's not a groundbreaking statement to make to say that the gears of the world turn by the actions and decisions of deeply flawed, even at times despicable people. Sometimes you can sense a clarity of right and wrong, like Russia's aggression against Ukraine. But often the lines aren't so clear. Or even if the lines are clear, those on what you sense to be the right side may not be ones you're eager to root for either. Think about World War II. It seems pretty clear now that Germany's actions of aggression and brutality needed to be resisted, but do you think Roosevelt and Churchill felt all that great rooting for Josef Stalin against him on the Eastern Front? It's not like Roosevelt and Churchill were a couple of saints either. And even in arenas perhaps a bit less intense than global geopolitics. How many times have you gone into a voting booth, seeing the options in front of you, for whatever office it might be, and sometimes there might be someone you feel strongly about, but how many times has a choice felt like choosing the lesser of who cares?

Sometimes it's hard to know who you're supposed to root for. I think this story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael puts that front and center. Just as Israel continues its downward spiral, so too does the quality of its judges, of those whom God raises up to deliver the people. It gets harder and harder to really admire them as heroes. But still, the message seems to be that though it's not so easy to identify Deborah or Barak or Jael as the human hero of the story, the true architect of Israel's deliverance is never in question. For it is the Lord who sends the storm and the torrent to throw the enemy into a panic. It is the Lord who hears Israel's cry. And it is the Lord who is able to use even the flawed motives, the deception, the tricks, the cowardice, the dishonor of a less-than-admirable crew to bring about the restoration of his people.

As it turns out, God's still at work that way. It remains a great mystery why God, after Christ's sacrifice on the cross and the glory of his resurrection, chose to make that witness known throughout the world not through further displays of miraculous power or of Jesus going on a never-ending tour around the world sharing the good news, but instead through the flawed, compromised work of a just as flawed and compromised group known as the church.

So even now, as you see across the headlines or social media or whatever scene you might look out on, and as you may feel discouraged about the assortment of flawed even despicable characters at work in the world, you might wonder, "Just who am I supposed to root for here? What good could come from a crew this messed up?" Know that that is how God has been at work for a long time and continues to use the broken pieces of a broken world to bring about something better.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“No Direction Home: Down a Peg or Two”

Dr. Jay Howell

March 20, 2022

We continue in our series “No Direction Home,” a journey through the Old Testament book of Judges. As we’ve shared, this is a book that’s not often explored in-depth, probably because it’s not entirely encouraging. It’s gory. The characters that maybe we think we should think of heroes often don’t actually come off looking like heroes. The whole thing is cycle after cycle of Israel forsaking God, being subdued by its enemies, crying out, then being delivered by a “judge” sent from the Lord, only to forsake the Lord again. But we’re looking at it, because this book is a story that over and over points out just how corrupted the human heart can become against our Maker—not just the Israelites, not just them, but us. And that’s a point that perhaps we need to hear especially in this season of Lent, when we consider just how much in need of a Savior we are, because on our own, we’re not capable of very much at all.

That in fact is a big part of the story we explore today, the story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

*“Awake, awake, Deborah;
Awake, awake, sing a song!
Arise, Barak, and lead away your captives, son of Abinoam.
Then survivors came down to the nobles;
The people of the Lord came down to me as warriors.
From Ephraim those whose root is in Amalek came down,
Following you, Benjamin, with your peoples;
From Machir commanders came down,
And from Zebulun those who wield the staff of office.
And the princes of Issachar were with Deborah;
As was Issachar, so was Barak;
Into the valley they rushed at his heels;
Among the divisions of Reuben
There were great determinations of heart.
Why did you sit among the sheepfolds,
To hear the piping for the flocks?
Among the divisions of Reuben
There were great searchings of heart.
Gilead remained across the Jordan;
And why did Dan stay on ships?
Asher sat at the seashore,
And remained by its landings.
Zebulun was a people who risked their lives,
And Naphtali too, on the high places of the field.*

*“The kings came and fought;
Then the kings of Canaan fought
At Taanach near the waters of Megiddo;
They took no plunder in silver.
The stars fought from heaven,
From their paths they fought against Sisera.
The torrent of Kishon swept them away,
The ancient torrent, the torrent Kishon.
My soul, march on with strength!
Then the horses’ hoofs beat
From the galloping, the galloping of his mighty stallions.
‘Curse Meroz,’ said the angel of the Lord,
‘Utterly curse its inhabitants,*

*Because they did not come to the help of the Lord,
To the help of the Lord against the warriors.'*

*"Most blessed of women is Jael,
The wife of Heber the Kenite;
Most blessed is she of women in the tent.
He asked for water, she gave him milk;
In a magnificent bowl she brought him curds.
She reached out her hand for the tent peg,
And her right hand for the workmen's hammer.
Then she struck Sisera, she smashed his head;
And she shattered and pierced his temple.
Between her feet he bowed, he fell, he lay;
Between her feet he bowed, he fell;
Where he bowed, there he fell dead.*

*"Out of the window she looked and wailed,
The mother of Sisera through the lattice,
'Why does his chariot delay in coming?
Why do the hoofbeats of his chariots delay?'
Her wise princesses would answer her,
Indeed she repeats her words to herself,
'Are they not finding, are they not dividing the spoils?
A concubine, two concubines for every warrior;
To Sisera a spoil of dyed cloth,
A spoil of dyed cloth embroidered,
Dyed cloth of double embroidery on the neck of the plunderer?'
May all Your enemies perish in this way, Lord;
But may those who love Him be like the rising of the sun in its might."
And the land was at rest for forty years. **Judges 5:12-31***

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Sometimes it's hard to know who to root for, especially if you feel the options aren't quite so clear cut. You come across this every so often. Two teams you dislike, or two players you're not so fond of, and they end up playing each other. Who do you root for? Well, you end up saying something like, "Well can they both lose?"

Or maybe not necessarily two teams or players you don't especially like. Maybe just two teams or players whose flaws you're pretty familiar with, not just flaws in their game, but flaws in their character, in their personality, in their motives. Makes you feel not so confident or comfortable in hoping for their victory, or not so celebratory should they actually win. It's not like there was necessarily a clear-cut alternative, but it still doesn't make you feel so great.

Well, y'all, I'm afraid this may be that sort of story, one in which, when you think about it, it's not quite so easy to know who to root for, or at least not so sure how celebratory you should be for them. This is the story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael. The passage we read in chapter five of the Book of Judges is actually part of a song, a song that retells the story of what happened in the chapter prior. So this whole thing is a song from two people named Deborah and Barak, after all the major things happened in their story.

Here's what happened. Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, so as it happens over and over in the Book of Judges, God gives them up to a rival king, and in this case it was a king named Jabin of the land of Canaan, situated just to the north of Israel, so this was a neighbor. And Israel languished under Jabin for twenty years. Jabin's really not that big a factor in the story. The one who is is the commander of Jabin's army is a man named Sisera. A big thing to know about Sisera is that he's leading an army featuring nine hundred chariots of iron. And not that we have to be experts of ancient warfare to understand this, but if you're coming to a fight with some rusty, dull blades and the others are coming with metal chariots, to some degree it doesn't matter how brave you are if you don't account for chariots coming at you, bringing a knife to a gunfight, so to speak. So Israel languished under their rule. They cried out, so God raised up someone to deliver them.

Here's where it starts to get a bit muddled though. Normally when Israel cries out to God, the book will say something like, "God raised up as a deliverer *so-and-so*." But we don't get that kind of clarity here. The clearest candidate is the next person we hear about when the story is told in chapter four and is the same as one of the singers whose words we read here in chapter 5: a prophetess named Deborah. Apparently, Deborah had been settling minor disputes among the Israelites during this time, as she would "judge" between them. But it's not so clear that she was specifically the one that God raised up to deliver Israel. Never says she was.

Deborah summons a man named Barak, who seems to be the closest thing Israel had to a military leader at the time. Deborah tells him to gather 10,000 soldiers to him and that God would deliver Sisera, the enemy commander with his 900 iron chariots, into his hands. So now it seems maybe Barak is the one that God is raising up. He's got the army. He's leading them into battle. He seems to fit the bill. But then Barak kind of shrinks away from it. He says in chapter 4 that he would only go if Deborah went with him. Not exactly the sort of bravery or trust in the Lord you would hope to see out of God's chosen deliverer. But Deborah goes with him, and Barak does summon 10,000 soldiers from the tribes of Israel. However, even then Barak doesn't seem to be so inspiring. One part of the song that we read talks about how only half the tribes actually answer the call. The other half refuse the call or just aren't heard from at all. Not exactly a stirring scene of an oppressed people rising up as one to throw off the shackles of their oppressors.

Nevertheless, Barak summons his army, as Deborah instructed him to do. And Sisera, with his army and his 900 chariots, comes to the fight. Must have been quite the scene. You have the Israelite army, half-gathered in faith but woefully unprepared, since they're still facing off against an army with advanced technology, like bringing a bunch of muskets against tanks and machine guns. And I don't think we're led to believe this was some kind of "Braveheart" moment either. You know, where the Scottish rebels, led by William Wallace, are facing off against the English army, in particular their cavalry. Completely outmatched. But taking advantage of English arrogance, when the cavalry charge, the Scots reveal they've made hundreds of sharp wooden pikes to stop the horses' charge. There's no indication that anything like that has happened, some kind of clever tactic. Instead, it seems like Deborah and Barak have brought a knife to a gunfight, and oh to be in the shoes of those soldiers once the chariots start coming toward them.

But then God shows up. Starting in v. 19: "The stars fought from heaven, from their courses they fought against Sisera. The torrent Kishon swept them away, the onrushing torrent, the torrent Kishon. March on, my soul, with might! Then loud beat the horses' hoofs with the galloping, galloping of his steeds." What seems to have happened is that God sent a sudden rainstorm, the heavens fighting against Sisera, as it puts it, causing a flash flood of the small river flowing through the battlefield. This threw the horses into a panic, at which point Sisera doesn't have so much of an advantage anymore, and Deborah, Barak, and the Israelite army win the day.

Except Sisera gets away. That'd be the moment of glory for an army's leader like Barak: capturing or killing the enemy commander, but he doesn't get him. Sisera gets away from the battle and is running for his life. And he comes to the home of a man named Heber the Kenite. Heber isn't there, but his wife Jael is. Heber was likely a metalworker, and he and his wife weren't even Israelites. They're not even fully a part of their own clan. It turns out that they had left their homeland in the south to come north to this area, probably so that he could profit from Sisera's army. Heber was a metalworker. Sisera needed lots of iron chariots. Definitely some profit to be made. So it's like Sisera was coming to the home of his arms dealer. Reason to think he'd be safe there. So Jael beckons him in and hides him from the pursuing Israelites. Sisera asks for water, but Jael instead gives him milk, which puts him to sleep. And once he's asleep, Jael goes up to him, takes a tent peg and a mallet, and drives the tent peg through Sisera's temple until it comes out the other side, killing him. It catches you off guard, because why on earth would she do this? She's not an Israelite, and in fact it would seem that her household has profited greatly from Sisera. Maybe she was going with the winning hand, and Israel had just won. Or maybe she was one who maintained faith in God, even though she wasn't an Israelite.

We have no idea, because it doesn't tell us. What we do know is that she invited this man in, under the protection of her home, offering him her household's hospitality and protection—and that's a big deal in this culture—but then she breaks that hospitality, killing him in his sleep in graphic, gory fashion. And *she's* the one who finally defeats this enemy commander. Not Deborah. Not Barak. Not the army. Instead this woman coming out of nowhere into the story. The song ends with an abrupt shift to the perspective of someone we might not

expect. It goes to the window of Sisera's mother, yes the mother of the commander who had just been killed. It's kind of heartbreaking. She's looking out her window, wondering why it has taken so long for her son and his army to come back. Her attendants tell her it's surely because they're so busy raping and pillaging that it's taking them a bit longer than anticipated, so they're not exactly innocents here. But nevertheless, the song seems to relish in the fact that this mother and these women will soon receive the news that the army would not be coming back and that Sisera himself had been killed.

"And the land had rest forty years," it says in v. 31, wrapping up the story. And now you have no idea what to make of all this. Because think about it. Who's supposed to be the hero in all of this? The Israelites? Heck, only half the tribes even bothered to show up to the fight. Barak, their leader? He didn't exactly show a deep trust in God from the get-go, and it wasn't like he was some brilliant tactician either. Nothing he did won the battle for them, and it wasn't him who caught Sisera either. Was it Jael? Sure she was the one who actually killed Sisera, ending the threat of his army for good, but she did so by deceiving him and breaking the somewhat sacred pact of hospitality, inviting this man into her home, promising him protection, giving him milk to make him sleep, and then driving a tent peg through his skull. Or was it Deborah? The prophetess who got this whole thing started. She's the one who summoned Barak, the one who called upon him to gather the army, the one who went with him when he insisted, the one who rallied him to action when the day of battle had come. But then she's also the one singing this song, which means she's the one celebrating that Sisera's mother was looking out the window anxiously, wondering why her son hadn't come home yet. I mean, I get celebrating a victory, but relishing the fact that the general's mother would be devastated when she learned of her son's gruesome death? That's just cruel. That's Deborah. That's her song.

So who are you supposed to root for here? Who's the one that God has raised up to deliver his people? It's not entirely clear. But maybe that's the point. It's not a groundbreaking statement to make to say that the gears of the world turn by the actions and decisions of deeply flawed, even at times despicable people. Sometimes you can sense a clarity of right and wrong, like Russia's aggression against Ukraine. But often the lines aren't so clear. Or even if the lines are clear, those on what you sense to be the right side may not be ones you're eager to root for either. Think about World War II. It seems pretty clear now that Germany's actions of aggression and brutality needed to be resisted, but do you think Roosevelt and Churchill felt all that great rooting for Josef Stalin against him on the Eastern Front? It's not like Roosevelt and Churchill were a couple of saints either. And even in arenas perhaps a bit less intense than global geopolitics. How many times have you gone into a voting booth, seeing the options in front of you, for whatever office it might be, and sometimes there might be someone you feel strongly about, but how many times has a choice felt like choosing the lesser of who cares?

Sometimes it's hard to know who you're supposed to root for. I think this story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael puts that front and center. Just as Israel continues its downward spiral, so too does the quality of its judges, of those whom God raises up to deliver the people. It gets harder and harder to really admire them as heroes. But still, the message seems to be that though it's not so easy to identify Deborah or Barak or Jael as the human hero of the story, the true architect of Israel's deliverance is never in question. For it is the Lord who sends the storm and the torrent to throw the enemy into a panic. It is the Lord who hears Israel's cry. And it is the Lord who is able to use even the flawed motives, the deception, the tricks, the cowardice, the dishonor of a less-than-admirable crew to bring about the restoration of his people.

As it turns out, God's still at work that way. It remains a great mystery why God, after Christ's sacrifice on the cross and the glory of his resurrection, chose to make that witness known throughout the world not through further displays of miraculous power or of Jesus going on a never-ending tour around the world sharing the good news, but instead through the flawed, compromised work of a just as flawed and compromised group known as the church.

So even now, as you see across the headlines or social media or whatever scene you might look out on, and as you may feel discouraged about the assortment of flawed even despicable characters at work in the world, you might wonder, "Just who am I supposed to root for here? What good could come from a crew this messed up?" Know that that is how God has been at work for a long time and continues to use the broken pieces of a broken world to bring about something better.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“No Direction Home: Down a Peg or Two”

Dr. Jay Howell

March 20, 2022

We continue in our series “No Direction Home,” a journey through the Old Testament book of Judges. As we’ve shared, this is a book that’s not often explored in-depth, probably because it’s not entirely encouraging. It’s gory. The characters that maybe we think we should think of heroes often don’t actually come off looking like heroes. The whole thing is cycle after cycle of Israel forsaking God, being subdued by its enemies, crying out, then being delivered by a “judge” sent from the Lord, only to forsake the Lord again. But we’re looking at it, because this book is a story that over and over points out just how corrupted the human heart can become against our Maker—not just the Israelites, not just them, but us. And that’s a point that perhaps we need to hear especially in this season of Lent, when we consider just how much in need of a Savior we are, because on our own, we’re not capable of very much at all.

That in fact is a big part of the story we explore today, the story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

*“Awake, awake, Deborah;
Awake, awake, sing a song!
Arise, Barak, and lead away your captives, son of Abinoam.
Then survivors came down to the nobles;
The people of the Lord came down to me as warriors.
From Ephraim those whose root is in Amalek came down,
Following you, Benjamin, with your peoples;
From Machir commanders came down,
And from Zebulun those who wield the staff of office.
And the princes of Issachar were with Deborah;
As was Issachar, so was Barak;
Into the valley they rushed at his heels;
Among the divisions of Reuben
There were great determinations of heart.
Why did you sit among the sheepfolds,
To hear the piping for the flocks?
Among the divisions of Reuben
There were great searchings of heart.
Gilead remained across the Jordan;
And why did Dan stay on ships?
Asher sat at the seashore,
And remained by its landings.
Zebulun was a people who risked their lives,
And Naphtali too, on the high places of the field.*

*“The kings came and fought;
Then the kings of Canaan fought
At Taanach near the waters of Megiddo;
They took no plunder in silver.
The stars fought from heaven,
From their paths they fought against Sisera.
The torrent of Kishon swept them away,
The ancient torrent, the torrent Kishon.
My soul, march on with strength!
Then the horses’ hoofs beat
From the galloping, the galloping of his mighty stallions.
‘Curse Meroz,’ said the angel of the Lord,
‘Utterly curse its inhabitants,*

*Because they did not come to the help of the Lord,
To the help of the Lord against the warriors.'*

*"Most blessed of women is Jael,
The wife of Heber the Kenite;
Most blessed is she of women in the tent.
He asked for water, she gave him milk;
In a magnificent bowl she brought him curds.
She reached out her hand for the tent peg,
And her right hand for the workmen's hammer.
Then she struck Sisera, she smashed his head;
And she shattered and pierced his temple.
Between her feet he bowed, he fell, he lay;
Between her feet he bowed, he fell;
Where he bowed, there he fell dead.*

*"Out of the window she looked and wailed,
The mother of Sisera through the lattice,
'Why does his chariot delay in coming?
Why do the hoofbeats of his chariots delay?'
Her wise princesses would answer her,
Indeed she repeats her words to herself,
'Are they not finding, are they not dividing the spoils?
A concubine, two concubines for every warrior;
To Sisera a spoil of dyed cloth,
A spoil of dyed cloth embroidered,
Dyed cloth of double embroidery on the neck of the plunderer?'
May all Your enemies perish in this way, Lord;
But may those who love Him be like the rising of the sun in its might."
And the land was at rest for forty years. **Judges 5:12-31***

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Sometimes it's hard to know who to root for, especially if you feel the options aren't quite so clear cut. You come across this every so often. Two teams you dislike, or two players you're not so fond of, and they end up playing each other. Who do you root for? Well, you end up saying something like, "Well can they both lose?"

Or maybe not necessarily two teams or players you don't especially like. Maybe just two teams or players whose flaws you're pretty familiar with, not just flaws in their game, but flaws in their character, in their personality, in their motives. Makes you feel not so confident or comfortable in hoping for their victory, or not so celebratory should they actually win. It's not like there was necessarily a clear-cut alternative, but it still doesn't make you feel so great.

Well, y'all, I'm afraid this may be that sort of story, one in which, when you think about it, it's not quite so easy to know who to root for, or at least not so sure how celebratory you should be for them. This is the story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael. The passage we read in chapter five of the Book of Judges is actually part of a song, a song that retells the story of what happened in the chapter prior. So this whole thing is a song from two people named Deborah and Barak, after all the major things happened in their story.

Here's what happened. Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, so as it happens over and over in the Book of Judges, God gives them up to a rival king, and in this case it was a king named Jabin of the land of Canaan, situated just to the north of Israel, so this was a neighbor. And Israel languished under Jabin for twenty years. Jabin's really not that big a factor in the story. The one who is is the commander of Jabin's army is a man named Sisera. A big thing to know about Sisera is that he's leading an army featuring nine hundred chariots of iron. And not that we have to be experts of ancient warfare to understand this, but if you're coming to a fight with some rusty, dull blades and the others are coming with metal chariots, to some degree it doesn't matter how brave you are if you don't account for chariots coming at you, bringing a knife to a gunfight, so to speak. So Israel languished under their rule. They cried out, so God raised up someone to deliver them.

Here's where it starts to get a bit muddled though. Normally when Israel cries out to God, the book will say something like, "God raised up as a deliverer *so-and-so*." But we don't get that kind of clarity here. The clearest candidate is the next person we hear about when the story is told in chapter four and is the same as one of the singers whose words we read here in chapter 5: a prophetess named Deborah. Apparently, Deborah had been settling minor disputes among the Israelites during this time, as she would "judge" between them. But it's not so clear that she was specifically the one that God raised up to deliver Israel. Never says she was.

Deborah summons a man named Barak, who seems to be the closest thing Israel had to a military leader at the time. Deborah tells him to gather 10,000 soldiers to him and that God would deliver Sisera, the enemy commander with his 900 iron chariots, into his hands. So now it seems maybe Barak is the one that God is raising up. He's got the army. He's leading them into battle. He seems to fit the bill. But then Barak kind of shrinks away from it. He says in chapter 4 that he would only go if Deborah went with him. Not exactly the sort of bravery or trust in the Lord you would hope to see out of God's chosen deliverer. But Deborah goes with him, and Barak does summon 10,000 soldiers from the tribes of Israel. However, even then Barak doesn't seem to be so inspiring. One part of the song that we read talks about how only half the tribes actually answer the call. The other half refuse the call or just aren't heard from at all. Not exactly a stirring scene of an oppressed people rising up as one to throw off the shackles of their oppressors.

Nevertheless, Barak summons his army, as Deborah instructed him to do. And Sisera, with his army and his 900 chariots, comes to the fight. Must have been quite the scene. You have the Israelite army, half-gathered in faith but woefully unprepared, since they're still facing off against an army with advanced technology, like bringing a bunch of muskets against tanks and machine guns. And I don't think we're led to believe this was some kind of "Braveheart" moment either. You know, where the Scottish rebels, led by William Wallace, are facing off against the English army, in particular their cavalry. Completely outmatched. But taking advantage of English arrogance, when the cavalry charge, the Scots reveal they've made hundreds of sharp wooden pikes to stop the horses' charge. There's no indication that anything like that has happened, some kind of clever tactic. Instead, it seems like Deborah and Barak have brought a knife to a gunfight, and oh to be in the shoes of those soldiers once the chariots start coming toward them.

But then God shows up. Starting in v. 19: "The stars fought from heaven, from their courses they fought against Sisera. The torrent Kishon swept them away, the onrushing torrent, the torrent Kishon. March on, my soul, with might! Then loud beat the horses' hoofs with the galloping, galloping of his steeds." What seems to have happened is that God sent a sudden rainstorm, the heavens fighting against Sisera, as it puts it, causing a flash flood of the small river flowing through the battlefield. This threw the horses into a panic, at which point Sisera doesn't have so much of an advantage anymore, and Deborah, Barak, and the Israelite army win the day.

Except Sisera gets away. That'd be the moment of glory for an army's leader like Barak: capturing or killing the enemy commander, but he doesn't get him. Sisera gets away from the battle and is running for his life. And he comes to the home of a man named Heber the Kenite. Heber isn't there, but his wife Jael is. Heber was likely a metalworker, and he and his wife weren't even Israelites. They're not even fully a part of their own clan. It turns out that they had left their homeland in the south to come north to this area, probably so that he could profit from Sisera's army. Heber was a metalworker. Sisera needed lots of iron chariots. Definitely some profit to be made. So it's like Sisera was coming to the home of his arms dealer. Reason to think he'd be safe there. So Jael beckons him in and hides him from the pursuing Israelites. Sisera asks for water, but Jael instead gives him milk, which puts him to sleep. And once he's asleep, Jael goes up to him, takes a tent peg and a mallet, and drives the tent peg through Sisera's temple until it comes out the other side, killing him. It catches you off guard, because why on earth would she do this? She's not an Israelite, and in fact it would seem that her household has profited greatly from Sisera. Maybe she was going with the winning hand, and Israel had just won. Or maybe she was one who maintained faith in God, even though she wasn't an Israelite.

We have no idea, because it doesn't tell us. What we do know is that she invited this man in, under the protection of her home, offering him her household's hospitality and protection—and that's a big deal in this culture—but then she breaks that hospitality, killing him in his sleep in graphic, gory fashion. And *she's* the one who finally defeats this enemy commander. Not Deborah. Not Barak. Not the army. Instead this woman coming out of nowhere into the story. The song ends with an abrupt shift to the perspective of someone we might not

expect. It goes to the window of Sisera's mother, yes the mother of the commander who had just been killed. It's kind of heartbreaking. She's looking out her window, wondering why it has taken so long for her son and his army to come back. Her attendants tell her it's surely because they're so busy raping and pillaging that it's taking them a bit longer than anticipated, so they're not exactly innocents here. But nevertheless, the song seems to relish in the fact that this mother and these women will soon receive the news that the army would not be coming back and that Sisera himself had been killed.

"And the land had rest forty years," it says in v. 31, wrapping up the story. And now you have no idea what to make of all this. Because think about it. Who's supposed to be the hero in all of this? The Israelites? Heck, only half the tribes even bothered to show up to the fight. Barak, their leader? He didn't exactly show a deep trust in God from the get-go, and it wasn't like he was some brilliant tactician either. Nothing he did won the battle for them, and it wasn't him who caught Sisera either. Was it Jael? Sure she was the one who actually killed Sisera, ending the threat of his army for good, but she did so by deceiving him and breaking the somewhat sacred pact of hospitality, inviting this man into her home, promising him protection, giving him milk to make him sleep, and then driving a tent peg through his skull. Or was it Deborah? The prophetess who got this whole thing started. She's the one who summoned Barak, the one who called upon him to gather the army, the one who went with him when he insisted, the one who rallied him to action when the day of battle had come. But then she's also the one singing this song, which means she's the one celebrating that Sisera's mother was looking out the window anxiously, wondering why her son hadn't come home yet. I mean, I get celebrating a victory, but relishing the fact that the general's mother would be devastated when she learned of her son's gruesome death? That's just cruel. That's Deborah. That's her song.

So who are you supposed to root for here? Who's the one that God has raised up to deliver his people? It's not entirely clear. But maybe that's the point. It's not a groundbreaking statement to make to say that the gears of the world turn by the actions and decisions of deeply flawed, even at times despicable people. Sometimes you can sense a clarity of right and wrong, like Russia's aggression against Ukraine. But often the lines aren't so clear. Or even if the lines are clear, those on what you sense to be the right side may not be ones you're eager to root for either. Think about World War II. It seems pretty clear now that Germany's actions of aggression and brutality needed to be resisted, but do you think Roosevelt and Churchill felt all that great rooting for Josef Stalin against him on the Eastern Front? It's not like Roosevelt and Churchill were a couple of saints either. And even in arenas perhaps a bit less intense than global geopolitics. How many times have you gone into a voting booth, seeing the options in front of you, for whatever office it might be, and sometimes there might be someone you feel strongly about, but how many times has a choice felt like choosing the lesser of who cares?

Sometimes it's hard to know who you're supposed to root for. I think this story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael puts that front and center. Just as Israel continues its downward spiral, so too does the quality of its judges, of those whom God raises up to deliver the people. It gets harder and harder to really admire them as heroes. But still, the message seems to be that though it's not so easy to identify Deborah or Barak or Jael as the human hero of the story, the true architect of Israel's deliverance is never in question. For it is the Lord who sends the storm and the torrent to throw the enemy into a panic. It is the Lord who hears Israel's cry. And it is the Lord who is able to use even the flawed motives, the deception, the tricks, the cowardice, the dishonor of a less-than-admirable crew to bring about the restoration of his people.

As it turns out, God's still at work that way. It remains a great mystery why God, after Christ's sacrifice on the cross and the glory of his resurrection, chose to make that witness known throughout the world not through further displays of miraculous power or of Jesus going on a never-ending tour around the world sharing the good news, but instead through the flawed, compromised work of a just as flawed and compromised group known as the church.

So even now, as you see across the headlines or social media or whatever scene you might look out on, and as you may feel discouraged about the assortment of flawed even despicable characters at work in the world, you might wonder, "Just who am I supposed to root for here? What good could come from a crew this messed up?" Know that that is how God has been at work for a long time and continues to use the broken pieces of a broken world to bring about something better.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“No Direction Home: Down a Peg or Two”

Dr. Jay Howell

March 20, 2022

We continue in our series “No Direction Home,” a journey through the Old Testament book of Judges. As we’ve shared, this is a book that’s not often explored in-depth, probably because it’s not entirely encouraging. It’s gory. The characters that maybe we think we should think of heroes often don’t actually come off looking like heroes. The whole thing is cycle after cycle of Israel forsaking God, being subdued by its enemies, crying out, then being delivered by a “judge” sent from the Lord, only to forsake the Lord again. But we’re looking at it, because this book is a story that over and over points out just how corrupted the human heart can become against our Maker—not just the Israelites, not just them, but us. And that’s a point that perhaps we need to hear especially in this season of Lent, when we consider just how much in need of a Savior we are, because on our own, we’re not capable of very much at all.

That in fact is a big part of the story we explore today, the story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

*“Awake, awake, Deborah;
Awake, awake, sing a song!
Arise, Barak, and lead away your captives, son of Abinoam.
Then survivors came down to the nobles;
The people of the Lord came down to me as warriors.
From Ephraim those whose root is in Amalek came down,
Following you, Benjamin, with your peoples;
From Machir commanders came down,
And from Zebulun those who wield the staff of office.
And the princes of Issachar were with Deborah;
As was Issachar, so was Barak;
Into the valley they rushed at his heels;
Among the divisions of Reuben
There were great determinations of heart.
Why did you sit among the sheepfolds,
To hear the piping for the flocks?
Among the divisions of Reuben
There were great searchings of heart.
Gilead remained across the Jordan;
And why did Dan stay on ships?
Asher sat at the seashore,
And remained by its landings.
Zebulun was a people who risked their lives,
And Naphtali too, on the high places of the field.*

*“The kings came and fought;
Then the kings of Canaan fought
At Taanach near the waters of Megiddo;
They took no plunder in silver.
The stars fought from heaven,
From their paths they fought against Sisera.
The torrent of Kishon swept them away,
The ancient torrent, the torrent Kishon.
My soul, march on with strength!
Then the horses’ hoofs beat
From the galloping, the galloping of his mighty stallions.
‘Curse Meroz,’ said the angel of the Lord,
‘Utterly curse its inhabitants,*

*Because they did not come to the help of the Lord,
To the help of the Lord against the warriors.'*

*"Most blessed of women is Jael,
The wife of Heber the Kenite;
Most blessed is she of women in the tent.
He asked for water, she gave him milk;
In a magnificent bowl she brought him curds.
She reached out her hand for the tent peg,
And her right hand for the workmen's hammer.
Then she struck Sisera, she smashed his head;
And she shattered and pierced his temple.
Between her feet he bowed, he fell, he lay;
Between her feet he bowed, he fell;
Where he bowed, there he fell dead.*

*"Out of the window she looked and wailed,
The mother of Sisera through the lattice,
'Why does his chariot delay in coming?
Why do the hoofbeats of his chariots delay?'
Her wise princesses would answer her,
Indeed she repeats her words to herself,
'Are they not finding, are they not dividing the spoils?
A concubine, two concubines for every warrior;
To Sisera a spoil of dyed cloth,
A spoil of dyed cloth embroidered,
Dyed cloth of double embroidery on the neck of the plunderer?'
May all Your enemies perish in this way, Lord;
But may those who love Him be like the rising of the sun in its might."
And the land was at rest for forty years. **Judges 5:12-31***

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Sometimes it's hard to know who to root for, especially if you feel the options aren't quite so clear cut. You come across this every so often. Two teams you dislike, or two players you're not so fond of, and they end up playing each other. Who do you root for? Well, you end up saying something like, "Well can they both lose?"

Or maybe not necessarily two teams or players you don't especially like. Maybe just two teams or players whose flaws you're pretty familiar with, not just flaws in their game, but flaws in their character, in their personality, in their motives. Makes you feel not so confident or comfortable in hoping for their victory, or not so celebratory should they actually win. It's not like there was necessarily a clear-cut alternative, but it still doesn't make you feel so great.

Well, y'all, I'm afraid this may be that sort of story, one in which, when you think about it, it's not quite so easy to know who to root for, or at least not so sure how celebratory you should be for them. This is the story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael. The passage we read in chapter five of the Book of Judges is actually part of a song, a song that retells the story of what happened in the chapter prior. So this whole thing is a song from two people named Deborah and Barak, after all the major things happened in their story.

Here's what happened. Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, so as it happens over and over in the Book of Judges, God gives them up to a rival king, and in this case it was a king named Jabin of the land of Canaan, situated just to the north of Israel, so this was a neighbor. And Israel languished under Jabin for twenty years. Jabin's really not that big a factor in the story. The one who is is the commander of Jabin's army is a man named Sisera. A big thing to know about Sisera is that he's leading an army featuring nine hundred chariots of iron. And not that we have to be experts of ancient warfare to understand this, but if you're coming to a fight with some rusty, dull blades and the others are coming with metal chariots, to some degree it doesn't matter how brave you are if you don't account for chariots coming at you, bringing a knife to a gunfight, so to speak. So Israel languished under their rule. They cried out, so God raised up someone to deliver them.

Here's where it starts to get a bit muddled though. Normally when Israel cries out to God, the book will say something like, "God raised up as a deliverer *so-and-so*." But we don't get that kind of clarity here. The clearest candidate is the next person we hear about when the story is told in chapter four and is the same as one of the singers whose words we read here in chapter 5: a prophetess named Deborah. Apparently, Deborah had been settling minor disputes among the Israelites during this time, as she would "judge" between them. But it's not so clear that she was specifically the one that God raised up to deliver Israel. Never says she was.

Deborah summons a man named Barak, who seems to be the closest thing Israel had to a military leader at the time. Deborah tells him to gather 10,000 soldiers to him and that God would deliver Sisera, the enemy commander with his 900 iron chariots, into his hands. So now it seems maybe Barak is the one that God is raising up. He's got the army. He's leading them into battle. He seems to fit the bill. But then Barak kind of shrinks away from it. He says in chapter 4 that he would only go if Deborah went with him. Not exactly the sort of bravery or trust in the Lord you would hope to see out of God's chosen deliverer. But Deborah goes with him, and Barak does summon 10,000 soldiers from the tribes of Israel. However, even then Barak doesn't seem to be so inspiring. One part of the song that we read talks about how only half the tribes actually answer the call. The other half refuse the call or just aren't heard from at all. Not exactly a stirring scene of an oppressed people rising up as one to throw off the shackles of their oppressors.

Nevertheless, Barak summons his army, as Deborah instructed him to do. And Sisera, with his army and his 900 chariots, comes to the fight. Must have been quite the scene. You have the Israelite army, half-gathered in faith but woefully unprepared, since they're still facing off against an army with advanced technology, like bringing a bunch of muskets against tanks and machine guns. And I don't think we're led to believe this was some kind of "Braveheart" moment either. You know, where the Scottish rebels, led by William Wallace, are facing off against the English army, in particular their cavalry. Completely outmatched. But taking advantage of English arrogance, when the cavalry charge, the Scots reveal they've made hundreds of sharp wooden pikes to stop the horses' charge. There's no indication that anything like that has happened, some kind of clever tactic. Instead, it seems like Deborah and Barak have brought a knife to a gunfight, and oh to be in the shoes of those soldiers once the chariots start coming toward them.

But then God shows up. Starting in v. 19: "The stars fought from heaven, from their courses they fought against Sisera. The torrent Kishon swept them away, the onrushing torrent, the torrent Kishon. March on, my soul, with might! Then loud beat the horses' hoofs with the galloping, galloping of his steeds." What seems to have happened is that God sent a sudden rainstorm, the heavens fighting against Sisera, as it puts it, causing a flash flood of the small river flowing through the battlefield. This threw the horses into a panic, at which point Sisera doesn't have so much of an advantage anymore, and Deborah, Barak, and the Israelite army win the day.

Except Sisera gets away. That'd be the moment of glory for an army's leader like Barak: capturing or killing the enemy commander, but he doesn't get him. Sisera gets away from the battle and is running for his life. And he comes to the home of a man named Heber the Kenite. Heber isn't there, but his wife Jael is. Heber was likely a metalworker, and he and his wife weren't even Israelites. They're not even fully a part of their own clan. It turns out that they had left their homeland in the south to come north to this area, probably so that he could profit from Sisera's army. Heber was a metalworker. Sisera needed lots of iron chariots. Definitely some profit to be made. So it's like Sisera was coming to the home of his arms dealer. Reason to think he'd be safe there. So Jael beckons him in and hides him from the pursuing Israelites. Sisera asks for water, but Jael instead gives him milk, which puts him to sleep. And once he's asleep, Jael goes up to him, takes a tent peg and a mallet, and drives the tent peg through Sisera's temple until it comes out the other side, killing him. It catches you off guard, because why on earth would she do this? She's not an Israelite, and in fact it would seem that her household has profited greatly from Sisera. Maybe she was going with the winning hand, and Israel had just won. Or maybe she was one who maintained faith in God, even though she wasn't an Israelite.

We have no idea, because it doesn't tell us. What we do know is that she invited this man in, under the protection of her home, offering him her household's hospitality and protection—and that's a big deal in this culture—but then she breaks that hospitality, killing him in his sleep in graphic, gory fashion. And *she's* the one who finally defeats this enemy commander. Not Deborah. Not Barak. Not the army. Instead this woman coming out of nowhere into the story. The song ends with an abrupt shift to the perspective of someone we might not

expect. It goes to the window of Sisera's mother, yes the mother of the commander who had just been killed. It's kind of heartbreaking. She's looking out her window, wondering why it has taken so long for her son and his army to come back. Her attendants tell her it's surely because they're so busy raping and pillaging that it's taking them a bit longer than anticipated, so they're not exactly innocents here. But nevertheless, the song seems to relish in the fact that this mother and these women will soon receive the news that the army would not be coming back and that Sisera himself had been killed.

"And the land had rest forty years," it says in v. 31, wrapping up the story. And now you have no idea what to make of all this. Because think about it. Who's supposed to be the hero in all of this? The Israelites? Heck, only half the tribes even bothered to show up to the fight. Barak, their leader? He didn't exactly show a deep trust in God from the get-go, and it wasn't like he was some brilliant tactician either. Nothing he did won the battle for them, and it wasn't him who caught Sisera either. Was it Jael? Sure she was the one who actually killed Sisera, ending the threat of his army for good, but she did so by deceiving him and breaking the somewhat sacred pact of hospitality, inviting this man into her home, promising him protection, giving him milk to make him sleep, and then driving a tent peg through his skull. Or was it Deborah? The prophetess who got this whole thing started. She's the one who summoned Barak, the one who called upon him to gather the army, the one who went with him when he insisted, the one who rallied him to action when the day of battle had come. But then she's also the one singing this song, which means she's the one celebrating that Sisera's mother was looking out the window anxiously, wondering why her son hadn't come home yet. I mean, I get celebrating a victory, but relishing the fact that the general's mother would be devastated when she learned of her son's gruesome death? That's just cruel. That's Deborah. That's her song.

So who are you supposed to root for here? Who's the one that God has raised up to deliver his people? It's not entirely clear. But maybe that's the point. It's not a groundbreaking statement to make to say that the gears of the world turn by the actions and decisions of deeply flawed, even at times despicable people. Sometimes you can sense a clarity of right and wrong, like Russia's aggression against Ukraine. But often the lines aren't so clear. Or even if the lines are clear, those on what you sense to be the right side may not be ones you're eager to root for either. Think about World War II. It seems pretty clear now that Germany's actions of aggression and brutality needed to be resisted, but do you think Roosevelt and Churchill felt all that great rooting for Josef Stalin against him on the Eastern Front? It's not like Roosevelt and Churchill were a couple of saints either. And even in arenas perhaps a bit less intense than global geopolitics. How many times have you gone into a voting booth, seeing the options in front of you, for whatever office it might be, and sometimes there might be someone you feel strongly about, but how many times has a choice felt like choosing the lesser of who cares?

Sometimes it's hard to know who you're supposed to root for. I think this story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael puts that front and center. Just as Israel continues its downward spiral, so too does the quality of its judges, of those whom God raises up to deliver the people. It gets harder and harder to really admire them as heroes. But still, the message seems to be that though it's not so easy to identify Deborah or Barak or Jael as the human hero of the story, the true architect of Israel's deliverance is never in question. For it is the Lord who sends the storm and the torrent to throw the enemy into a panic. It is the Lord who hears Israel's cry. And it is the Lord who is able to use even the flawed motives, the deception, the tricks, the cowardice, the dishonor of a less-than-admirable crew to bring about the restoration of his people.

As it turns out, God's still at work that way. It remains a great mystery why God, after Christ's sacrifice on the cross and the glory of his resurrection, chose to make that witness known throughout the world not through further displays of miraculous power or of Jesus going on a never-ending tour around the world sharing the good news, but instead through the flawed, compromised work of a just as flawed and compromised group known as the church.

So even now, as you see across the headlines or social media or whatever scene you might look out on, and as you may feel discouraged about the assortment of flawed even despicable characters at work in the world, you might wonder, "Just who am I supposed to root for here? What good could come from a crew this messed up?" Know that that is how God has been at work for a long time and continues to use the broken pieces of a broken world to bring about something better.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“No Direction Home: Down a Peg or Two”

Dr. Jay Howell

March 20, 2022

We continue in our series “No Direction Home,” a journey through the Old Testament book of Judges. As we’ve shared, this is a book that’s not often explored in-depth, probably because it’s not entirely encouraging. It’s gory. The characters that maybe we think we should think of heroes often don’t actually come off looking like heroes. The whole thing is cycle after cycle of Israel forsaking God, being subdued by its enemies, crying out, then being delivered by a “judge” sent from the Lord, only to forsake the Lord again. But we’re looking at it, because this book is a story that over and over points out just how corrupted the human heart can become against our Maker—not just the Israelites, not just them, but us. And that’s a point that perhaps we need to hear especially in this season of Lent, when we consider just how much in need of a Savior we are, because on our own, we’re not capable of very much at all.

That in fact is a big part of the story we explore today, the story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

*“Awake, awake, Deborah;
Awake, awake, sing a song!
Arise, Barak, and lead away your captives, son of Abinoam.
Then survivors came down to the nobles;
The people of the Lord came down to me as warriors.
From Ephraim those whose root is in Amalek came down,
Following you, Benjamin, with your peoples;
From Machir commanders came down,
And from Zebulun those who wield the staff of office.
And the princes of Issachar were with Deborah;
As was Issachar, so was Barak;
Into the valley they rushed at his heels;
Among the divisions of Reuben
There were great determinations of heart.
Why did you sit among the sheepfolds,
To hear the piping for the flocks?
Among the divisions of Reuben
There were great searchings of heart.
Gilead remained across the Jordan;
And why did Dan stay on ships?
Asher sat at the seashore,
And remained by its landings.
Zebulun was a people who risked their lives,
And Naphtali too, on the high places of the field.*

*“The kings came and fought;
Then the kings of Canaan fought
At Taanach near the waters of Megiddo;
They took no plunder in silver.
The stars fought from heaven,
From their paths they fought against Sisera.
The torrent of Kishon swept them away,
The ancient torrent, the torrent Kishon.
My soul, march on with strength!
Then the horses’ hoofs beat
From the galloping, the galloping of his mighty stallions.
‘Curse Meroz,’ said the angel of the Lord,
‘Utterly curse its inhabitants,*

*Because they did not come to the help of the Lord,
To the help of the Lord against the warriors.'*

*"Most blessed of women is Jael,
The wife of Heber the Kenite;
Most blessed is she of women in the tent.
He asked for water, she gave him milk;
In a magnificent bowl she brought him curds.
She reached out her hand for the tent peg,
And her right hand for the workmen's hammer.
Then she struck Sisera, she smashed his head;
And she shattered and pierced his temple.
Between her feet he bowed, he fell, he lay;
Between her feet he bowed, he fell;
Where he bowed, there he fell dead.*

*"Out of the window she looked and wailed,
The mother of Sisera through the lattice,
'Why does his chariot delay in coming?
Why do the hoofbeats of his chariots delay?'
Her wise princesses would answer her,
Indeed she repeats her words to herself,
'Are they not finding, are they not dividing the spoils?
A concubine, two concubines for every warrior;
To Sisera a spoil of dyed cloth,
A spoil of dyed cloth embroidered,
Dyed cloth of double embroidery on the neck of the plunderer?'
May all Your enemies perish in this way, Lord;
But may those who love Him be like the rising of the sun in its might."
And the land was at rest for forty years. **Judges 5:12-31***

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Sometimes it's hard to know who to root for, especially if you feel the options aren't quite so clear cut. You come across this every so often. Two teams you dislike, or two players you're not so fond of, and they end up playing each other. Who do you root for? Well, you end up saying something like, "Well can they both lose?"

Or maybe not necessarily two teams or players you don't especially like. Maybe just two teams or players whose flaws you're pretty familiar with, not just flaws in their game, but flaws in their character, in their personality, in their motives. Makes you feel not so confident or comfortable in hoping for their victory, or not so celebratory should they actually win. It's not like there was necessarily a clear-cut alternative, but it still doesn't make you feel so great.

Well, y'all, I'm afraid this may be that sort of story, one in which, when you think about it, it's not quite so easy to know who to root for, or at least not so sure how celebratory you should be for them. This is the story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael. The passage we read in chapter five of the Book of Judges is actually part of a song, a song that retells the story of what happened in the chapter prior. So this whole thing is a song from two people named Deborah and Barak, after all the major things happened in their story.

Here's what happened. Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, so as it happens over and over in the Book of Judges, God gives them up to a rival king, and in this case it was a king named Jabin of the land of Canaan, situated just to the north of Israel, so this was a neighbor. And Israel languished under Jabin for twenty years. Jabin's really not that big a factor in the story. The one who is is the commander of Jabin's army is a man named Sisera. A big thing to know about Sisera is that he's leading an army featuring nine hundred chariots of iron. And not that we have to be experts of ancient warfare to understand this, but if you're coming to a fight with some rusty, dull blades and the others are coming with metal chariots, to some degree it doesn't matter how brave you are if you don't account for chariots coming at you, bringing a knife to a gunfight, so to speak. So Israel languished under their rule. They cried out, so God raised up someone to deliver them.

Here's where it starts to get a bit muddled though. Normally when Israel cries out to God, the book will say something like, "God raised up as a deliverer *so-and-so*." But we don't get that kind of clarity here. The clearest candidate is the next person we hear about when the story is told in chapter four and is the same as one of the singers whose words we read here in chapter 5: a prophetess named Deborah. Apparently, Deborah had been settling minor disputes among the Israelites during this time, as she would "judge" between them. But it's not so clear that she was specifically the one that God raised up to deliver Israel. Never says she was.

Deborah summons a man named Barak, who seems to be the closest thing Israel had to a military leader at the time. Deborah tells him to gather 10,000 soldiers to him and that God would deliver Sisera, the enemy commander with his 900 iron chariots, into his hands. So now it seems maybe Barak is the one that God is raising up. He's got the army. He's leading them into battle. He seems to fit the bill. But then Barak kind of shrinks away from it. He says in chapter 4 that he would only go if Deborah went with him. Not exactly the sort of bravery or trust in the Lord you would hope to see out of God's chosen deliverer. But Deborah goes with him, and Barak does summon 10,000 soldiers from the tribes of Israel. However, even then Barak doesn't seem to be so inspiring. One part of the song that we read talks about how only half the tribes actually answer the call. The other half refuse the call or just aren't heard from at all. Not exactly a stirring scene of an oppressed people rising up as one to throw off the shackles of their oppressors.

Nevertheless, Barak summons his army, as Deborah instructed him to do. And Sisera, with his army and his 900 chariots, comes to the fight. Must have been quite the scene. You have the Israelite army, half-gathered in faith but woefully unprepared, since they're still facing off against an army with advanced technology, like bringing a bunch of muskets against tanks and machine guns. And I don't think we're led to believe this was some kind of "Braveheart" moment either. You know, where the Scottish rebels, led by William Wallace, are facing off against the English army, in particular their cavalry. Completely outmatched. But taking advantage of English arrogance, when the cavalry charge, the Scots reveal they've made hundreds of sharp wooden pikes to stop the horses' charge. There's no indication that anything like that has happened, some kind of clever tactic. Instead, it seems like Deborah and Barak have brought a knife to a gunfight, and oh to be in the shoes of those soldiers once the chariots start coming toward them.

But then God shows up. Starting in v. 19: "The stars fought from heaven, from their courses they fought against Sisera. The torrent Kishon swept them away, the onrushing torrent, the torrent Kishon. March on, my soul, with might! Then loud beat the horses' hoofs with the galloping, galloping of his steeds." What seems to have happened is that God sent a sudden rainstorm, the heavens fighting against Sisera, as it puts it, causing a flash flood of the small river flowing through the battlefield. This threw the horses into a panic, at which point Sisera doesn't have so much of an advantage anymore, and Deborah, Barak, and the Israelite army win the day.

Except Sisera gets away. That'd be the moment of glory for an army's leader like Barak: capturing or killing the enemy commander, but he doesn't get him. Sisera gets away from the battle and is running for his life. And he comes to the home of a man named Heber the Kenite. Heber isn't there, but his wife Jael is. Heber was likely a metalworker, and he and his wife weren't even Israelites. They're not even fully a part of their own clan. It turns out that they had left their homeland in the south to come north to this area, probably so that he could profit from Sisera's army. Heber was a metalworker. Sisera needed lots of iron chariots. Definitely some profit to be made. So it's like Sisera was coming to the home of his arms dealer. Reason to think he'd be safe there. So Jael beckons him in and hides him from the pursuing Israelites. Sisera asks for water, but Jael instead gives him milk, which puts him to sleep. And once he's asleep, Jael goes up to him, takes a tent peg and a mallet, and drives the tent peg through Sisera's temple until it comes out the other side, killing him. It catches you off guard, because why on earth would she do this? She's not an Israelite, and in fact it would seem that her household has profited greatly from Sisera. Maybe she was going with the winning hand, and Israel had just won. Or maybe she was one who maintained faith in God, even though she wasn't an Israelite.

We have no idea, because it doesn't tell us. What we do know is that she invited this man in, under the protection of her home, offering him her household's hospitality and protection—and that's a big deal in this culture—but then she breaks that hospitality, killing him in his sleep in graphic, gory fashion. And *she's* the one who finally defeats this enemy commander. Not Deborah. Not Barak. Not the army. Instead this woman coming out of nowhere into the story. The song ends with an abrupt shift to the perspective of someone we might not

expect. It goes to the window of Sisera's mother, yes the mother of the commander who had just been killed. It's kind of heartbreaking. She's looking out her window, wondering why it has taken so long for her son and his army to come back. Her attendants tell her it's surely because they're so busy raping and pillaging that it's taking them a bit longer than anticipated, so they're not exactly innocents here. But nevertheless, the song seems to relish in the fact that this mother and these women will soon receive the news that the army would not be coming back and that Sisera himself had been killed.

"And the land had rest forty years," it says in v. 31, wrapping up the story. And now you have no idea what to make of all this. Because think about it. Who's supposed to be the hero in all of this? The Israelites? Heck, only half the tribes even bothered to show up to the fight. Barak, their leader? He didn't exactly show a deep trust in God from the get-go, and it wasn't like he was some brilliant tactician either. Nothing he did won the battle for them, and it wasn't him who caught Sisera either. Was it Jael? Sure she was the one who actually killed Sisera, ending the threat of his army for good, but she did so by deceiving him and breaking the somewhat sacred pact of hospitality, inviting this man into her home, promising him protection, giving him milk to make him sleep, and then driving a tent peg through his skull. Or was it Deborah? The prophetess who got this whole thing started. She's the one who summoned Barak, the one who called upon him to gather the army, the one who went with him when he insisted, the one who rallied him to action when the day of battle had come. But then she's also the one singing this song, which means she's the one celebrating that Sisera's mother was looking out the window anxiously, wondering why her son hadn't come home yet. I mean, I get celebrating a victory, but relishing the fact that the general's mother would be devastated when she learned of her son's gruesome death? That's just cruel. That's Deborah. That's her song.

So who are you supposed to root for here? Who's the one that God has raised up to deliver his people? It's not entirely clear. But maybe that's the point. It's not a groundbreaking statement to make to say that the gears of the world turn by the actions and decisions of deeply flawed, even at times despicable people. Sometimes you can sense a clarity of right and wrong, like Russia's aggression against Ukraine. But often the lines aren't so clear. Or even if the lines are clear, those on what you sense to be the right side may not be ones you're eager to root for either. Think about World War II. It seems pretty clear now that Germany's actions of aggression and brutality needed to be resisted, but do you think Roosevelt and Churchill felt all that great rooting for Josef Stalin against him on the Eastern Front? It's not like Roosevelt and Churchill were a couple of saints either. And even in arenas perhaps a bit less intense than global geopolitics. How many times have you gone into a voting booth, seeing the options in front of you, for whatever office it might be, and sometimes there might be someone you feel strongly about, but how many times has a choice felt like choosing the lesser of who cares?

Sometimes it's hard to know who you're supposed to root for. I think this story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael puts that front and center. Just as Israel continues its downward spiral, so too does the quality of its judges, of those whom God raises up to deliver the people. It gets harder and harder to really admire them as heroes. But still, the message seems to be that though it's not so easy to identify Deborah or Barak or Jael as the human hero of the story, the true architect of Israel's deliverance is never in question. For it is the Lord who sends the storm and the torrent to throw the enemy into a panic. It is the Lord who hears Israel's cry. And it is the Lord who is able to use even the flawed motives, the deception, the tricks, the cowardice, the dishonor of a less-than-admirable crew to bring about the restoration of his people.

As it turns out, God's still at work that way. It remains a great mystery why God, after Christ's sacrifice on the cross and the glory of his resurrection, chose to make that witness known throughout the world not through further displays of miraculous power or of Jesus going on a never-ending tour around the world sharing the good news, but instead through the flawed, compromised work of a just as flawed and compromised group known as the church.

So even now, as you see across the headlines or social media or whatever scene you might look out on, and as you may feel discouraged about the assortment of flawed even despicable characters at work in the world, you might wonder, "Just who am I supposed to root for here? What good could come from a crew this messed up?" Know that that is how God has been at work for a long time and continues to use the broken pieces of a broken world to bring about something better.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“No Direction Home: Down a Peg or Two”

Dr. Jay Howell

March 20, 2022

We continue in our series “No Direction Home,” a journey through the Old Testament book of Judges. As we’ve shared, this is a book that’s not often explored in-depth, probably because it’s not entirely encouraging. It’s gory. The characters that maybe we think we should think of heroes often don’t actually come off looking like heroes. The whole thing is cycle after cycle of Israel forsaking God, being subdued by its enemies, crying out, then being delivered by a “judge” sent from the Lord, only to forsake the Lord again. But we’re looking at it, because this book is a story that over and over points out just how corrupted the human heart can become against our Maker—not just the Israelites, not just them, but us. And that’s a point that perhaps we need to hear especially in this season of Lent, when we consider just how much in need of a Savior we are, because on our own, we’re not capable of very much at all.

That in fact is a big part of the story we explore today, the story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

*“Awake, awake, Deborah;
Awake, awake, sing a song!
Arise, Barak, and lead away your captives, son of Abinoam.
Then survivors came down to the nobles;
The people of the Lord came down to me as warriors.
From Ephraim those whose root is in Amalek came down,
Following you, Benjamin, with your peoples;
From Machir commanders came down,
And from Zebulun those who wield the staff of office.
And the princes of Issachar were with Deborah;
As was Issachar, so was Barak;
Into the valley they rushed at his heels;
Among the divisions of Reuben
There were great determinations of heart.
Why did you sit among the sheepfolds,
To hear the piping for the flocks?
Among the divisions of Reuben
There were great searchings of heart.
Gilead remained across the Jordan;
And why did Dan stay on ships?
Asher sat at the seashore,
And remained by its landings.
Zebulun was a people who risked their lives,
And Naphtali too, on the high places of the field.*

*“The kings came and fought;
Then the kings of Canaan fought
At Taanach near the waters of Megiddo;
They took no plunder in silver.
The stars fought from heaven,
From their paths they fought against Sisera.
The torrent of Kishon swept them away,
The ancient torrent, the torrent Kishon.
My soul, march on with strength!
Then the horses’ hoofs beat
From the galloping, the galloping of his mighty stallions.
‘Curse Meroz,’ said the angel of the Lord,
‘Utterly curse its inhabitants,*

*Because they did not come to the help of the Lord,
To the help of the Lord against the warriors.'*

*"Most blessed of women is Jael,
The wife of Heber the Kenite;
Most blessed is she of women in the tent.
He asked for water, she gave him milk;
In a magnificent bowl she brought him curds.
She reached out her hand for the tent peg,
And her right hand for the workmen's hammer.
Then she struck Sisera, she smashed his head;
And she shattered and pierced his temple.
Between her feet he bowed, he fell, he lay;
Between her feet he bowed, he fell;
Where he bowed, there he fell dead.*

*"Out of the window she looked and wailed,
The mother of Sisera through the lattice,
'Why does his chariot delay in coming?
Why do the hoofbeats of his chariots delay?'
Her wise princesses would answer her,
Indeed she repeats her words to herself,
'Are they not finding, are they not dividing the spoils?
A concubine, two concubines for every warrior;
To Sisera a spoil of dyed cloth,
A spoil of dyed cloth embroidered,
Dyed cloth of double embroidery on the neck of the plunderer?'
May all Your enemies perish in this way, Lord;
But may those who love Him be like the rising of the sun in its might."
And the land was at rest for forty years. **Judges 5:12-31***

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Sometimes it's hard to know who to root for, especially if you feel the options aren't quite so clear cut. You come across this every so often. Two teams you dislike, or two players you're not so fond of, and they end up playing each other. Who do you root for? Well, you end up saying something like, "Well can they both lose?"

Or maybe not necessarily two teams or players you don't especially like. Maybe just two teams or players whose flaws you're pretty familiar with, not just flaws in their game, but flaws in their character, in their personality, in their motives. Makes you feel not so confident or comfortable in hoping for their victory, or not so celebratory should they actually win. It's not like there was necessarily a clear-cut alternative, but it still doesn't make you feel so great.

Well, y'all, I'm afraid this may be that sort of story, one in which, when you think about it, it's not quite so easy to know who to root for, or at least not so sure how celebratory you should be for them. This is the story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael. The passage we read in chapter five of the Book of Judges is actually part of a song, a song that retells the story of what happened in the chapter prior. So this whole thing is a song from two people named Deborah and Barak, after all the major things happened in their story.

Here's what happened. Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, so as it happens over and over in the Book of Judges, God gives them up to a rival king, and in this case it was a king named Jabin of the land of Canaan, situated just to the north of Israel, so this was a neighbor. And Israel languished under Jabin for twenty years. Jabin's really not that big a factor in the story. The one who is is the commander of Jabin's army is a man named Sisera. A big thing to know about Sisera is that he's leading an army featuring nine hundred chariots of iron. And not that we have to be experts of ancient warfare to understand this, but if you're coming to a fight with some rusty, dull blades and the others are coming with metal chariots, to some degree it doesn't matter how brave you are if you don't account for chariots coming at you, bringing a knife to a gunfight, so to speak. So Israel languished under their rule. They cried out, so God raised up someone to deliver them.

Here's where it starts to get a bit muddled though. Normally when Israel cries out to God, the book will say something like, "God raised up as a deliverer *so-and-so*." But we don't get that kind of clarity here. The clearest candidate is the next person we hear about when the story is told in chapter four and is the same as one of the singers whose words we read here in chapter 5: a prophetess named Deborah. Apparently, Deborah had been settling minor disputes among the Israelites during this time, as she would "judge" between them. But it's not so clear that she was specifically the one that God raised up to deliver Israel. Never says she was.

Deborah summons a man named Barak, who seems to be the closest thing Israel had to a military leader at the time. Deborah tells him to gather 10,000 soldiers to him and that God would deliver Sisera, the enemy commander with his 900 iron chariots, into his hands. So now it seems maybe Barak is the one that God is raising up. He's got the army. He's leading them into battle. He seems to fit the bill. But then Barak kind of shrinks away from it. He says in chapter 4 that he would only go if Deborah went with him. Not exactly the sort of bravery or trust in the Lord you would hope to see out of God's chosen deliverer. But Deborah goes with him, and Barak does summon 10,000 soldiers from the tribes of Israel. However, even then Barak doesn't seem to be so inspiring. One part of the song that we read talks about how only half the tribes actually answer the call. The other half refuse the call or just aren't heard from at all. Not exactly a stirring scene of an oppressed people rising up as one to throw off the shackles of their oppressors.

Nevertheless, Barak summons his army, as Deborah instructed him to do. And Sisera, with his army and his 900 chariots, comes to the fight. Must have been quite the scene. You have the Israelite army, half-gathered in faith but woefully unprepared, since they're still facing off against an army with advanced technology, like bringing a bunch of muskets against tanks and machine guns. And I don't think we're led to believe this was some kind of "Braveheart" moment either. You know, where the Scottish rebels, led by William Wallace, are facing off against the English army, in particular their cavalry. Completely outmatched. But taking advantage of English arrogance, when the cavalry charge, the Scots reveal they've made hundreds of sharp wooden pikes to stop the horses' charge. There's no indication that anything like that has happened, some kind of clever tactic. Instead, it seems like Deborah and Barak have brought a knife to a gunfight, and oh to be in the shoes of those soldiers once the chariots start coming toward them.

But then God shows up. Starting in v. 19: "The stars fought from heaven, from their courses they fought against Sisera. The torrent Kishon swept them away, the onrushing torrent, the torrent Kishon. March on, my soul, with might! Then loud beat the horses' hoofs with the galloping, galloping of his steeds." What seems to have happened is that God sent a sudden rainstorm, the heavens fighting against Sisera, as it puts it, causing a flash flood of the small river flowing through the battlefield. This threw the horses into a panic, at which point Sisera doesn't have so much of an advantage anymore, and Deborah, Barak, and the Israelite army win the day.

Except Sisera gets away. That'd be the moment of glory for an army's leader like Barak: capturing or killing the enemy commander, but he doesn't get him. Sisera gets away from the battle and is running for his life. And he comes to the home of a man named Heber the Kenite. Heber isn't there, but his wife Jael is. Heber was likely a metalworker, and he and his wife weren't even Israelites. They're not even fully a part of their own clan. It turns out that they had left their homeland in the south to come north to this area, probably so that he could profit from Sisera's army. Heber was a metalworker. Sisera needed lots of iron chariots. Definitely some profit to be made. So it's like Sisera was coming to the home of his arms dealer. Reason to think he'd be safe there. So Jael beckons him in and hides him from the pursuing Israelites. Sisera asks for water, but Jael instead gives him milk, which puts him to sleep. And once he's asleep, Jael goes up to him, takes a tent peg and a mallet, and drives the tent peg through Sisera's temple until it comes out the other side, killing him. It catches you off guard, because why on earth would she do this? She's not an Israelite, and in fact it would seem that her household has profited greatly from Sisera. Maybe she was going with the winning hand, and Israel had just won. Or maybe she was one who maintained faith in God, even though she wasn't an Israelite.

We have no idea, because it doesn't tell us. What we do know is that she invited this man in, under the protection of her home, offering him her household's hospitality and protection—and that's a big deal in this culture—but then she breaks that hospitality, killing him in his sleep in graphic, gory fashion. And *she's* the one who finally defeats this enemy commander. Not Deborah. Not Barak. Not the army. Instead this woman coming out of nowhere into the story. The song ends with an abrupt shift to the perspective of someone we might not

expect. It goes to the window of Sisera's mother, yes the mother of the commander who had just been killed. It's kind of heartbreaking. She's looking out her window, wondering why it has taken so long for her son and his army to come back. Her attendants tell her it's surely because they're so busy raping and pillaging that it's taking them a bit longer than anticipated, so they're not exactly innocents here. But nevertheless, the song seems to relish in the fact that this mother and these women will soon receive the news that the army would not be coming back and that Sisera himself had been killed.

"And the land had rest forty years," it says in v. 31, wrapping up the story. And now you have no idea what to make of all this. Because think about it. Who's supposed to be the hero in all of this? The Israelites? Heck, only half the tribes even bothered to show up to the fight. Barak, their leader? He didn't exactly show a deep trust in God from the get-go, and it wasn't like he was some brilliant tactician either. Nothing he did won the battle for them, and it wasn't him who caught Sisera either. Was it Jael? Sure she was the one who actually killed Sisera, ending the threat of his army for good, but she did so by deceiving him and breaking the somewhat sacred pact of hospitality, inviting this man into her home, promising him protection, giving him milk to make him sleep, and then driving a tent peg through his skull. Or was it Deborah? The prophetess who got this whole thing started. She's the one who summoned Barak, the one who called upon him to gather the army, the one who went with him when he insisted, the one who rallied him to action when the day of battle had come. But then she's also the one singing this song, which means she's the one celebrating that Sisera's mother was looking out the window anxiously, wondering why her son hadn't come home yet. I mean, I get celebrating a victory, but relishing the fact that the general's mother would be devastated when she learned of her son's gruesome death? That's just cruel. That's Deborah. That's her song.

So who are you supposed to root for here? Who's the one that God has raised up to deliver his people? It's not entirely clear. But maybe that's the point. It's not a groundbreaking statement to make to say that the gears of the world turn by the actions and decisions of deeply flawed, even at times despicable people. Sometimes you can sense a clarity of right and wrong, like Russia's aggression against Ukraine. But often the lines aren't so clear. Or even if the lines are clear, those on what you sense to be the right side may not be ones you're eager to root for either. Think about World War II. It seems pretty clear now that Germany's actions of aggression and brutality needed to be resisted, but do you think Roosevelt and Churchill felt all that great rooting for Josef Stalin against him on the Eastern Front? It's not like Roosevelt and Churchill were a couple of saints either. And even in arenas perhaps a bit less intense than global geopolitics. How many times have you gone into a voting booth, seeing the options in front of you, for whatever office it might be, and sometimes there might be someone you feel strongly about, but how many times has a choice felt like choosing the lesser of who cares?

Sometimes it's hard to know who you're supposed to root for. I think this story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael puts that front and center. Just as Israel continues its downward spiral, so too does the quality of its judges, of those whom God raises up to deliver the people. It gets harder and harder to really admire them as heroes. But still, the message seems to be that though it's not so easy to identify Deborah or Barak or Jael as the human hero of the story, the true architect of Israel's deliverance is never in question. For it is the Lord who sends the storm and the torrent to throw the enemy into a panic. It is the Lord who hears Israel's cry. And it is the Lord who is able to use even the flawed motives, the deception, the tricks, the cowardice, the dishonor of a less-than-admirable crew to bring about the restoration of his people.

As it turns out, God's still at work that way. It remains a great mystery why God, after Christ's sacrifice on the cross and the glory of his resurrection, chose to make that witness known throughout the world not through further displays of miraculous power or of Jesus going on a never-ending tour around the world sharing the good news, but instead through the flawed, compromised work of a just as flawed and compromised group known as the church.

So even now, as you see across the headlines or social media or whatever scene you might look out on, and as you may feel discouraged about the assortment of flawed even despicable characters at work in the world, you might wonder, "Just who am I supposed to root for here? What good could come from a crew this messed up?" Know that that is how God has been at work for a long time and continues to use the broken pieces of a broken world to bring about something better.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“No Direction Home: Down a Peg or Two”

Dr. Jay Howell

March 20, 2022

We continue in our series “No Direction Home,” a journey through the Old Testament book of Judges. As we’ve shared, this is a book that’s not often explored in-depth, probably because it’s not entirely encouraging. It’s gory. The characters that maybe we think we should think of heroes often don’t actually come off looking like heroes. The whole thing is cycle after cycle of Israel forsaking God, being subdued by its enemies, crying out, then being delivered by a “judge” sent from the Lord, only to forsake the Lord again. But we’re looking at it, because this book is a story that over and over points out just how corrupted the human heart can become against our Maker—not just the Israelites, not just them, but us. And that’s a point that perhaps we need to hear especially in this season of Lent, when we consider just how much in need of a Savior we are, because on our own, we’re not capable of very much at all.

That in fact is a big part of the story we explore today, the story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

*“Awake, awake, Deborah;
Awake, awake, sing a song!
Arise, Barak, and lead away your captives, son of Abinoam.
Then survivors came down to the nobles;
The people of the Lord came down to me as warriors.
From Ephraim those whose root is in Amalek came down,
Following you, Benjamin, with your peoples;
From Machir commanders came down,
And from Zebulun those who wield the staff of office.
And the princes of Issachar were with Deborah;
As was Issachar, so was Barak;
Into the valley they rushed at his heels;
Among the divisions of Reuben
There were great determinations of heart.
Why did you sit among the sheepfolds,
To hear the piping for the flocks?
Among the divisions of Reuben
There were great searchings of heart.
Gilead remained across the Jordan;
And why did Dan stay on ships?
Asher sat at the seashore,
And remained by its landings.
Zebulun was a people who risked their lives,
And Naphtali too, on the high places of the field.*

*“The kings came and fought;
Then the kings of Canaan fought
At Taanach near the waters of Megiddo;
They took no plunder in silver.
The stars fought from heaven,
From their paths they fought against Sisera.
The torrent of Kishon swept them away,
The ancient torrent, the torrent Kishon.
My soul, march on with strength!
Then the horses’ hoofs beat
From the galloping, the galloping of his mighty stallions.
‘Curse Meroz,’ said the angel of the Lord,
‘Utterly curse its inhabitants,*

*Because they did not come to the help of the Lord,
To the help of the Lord against the warriors.'*

*"Most blessed of women is Jael,
The wife of Heber the Kenite;
Most blessed is she of women in the tent.
He asked for water, she gave him milk;
In a magnificent bowl she brought him curds.
She reached out her hand for the tent peg,
And her right hand for the workmen's hammer.
Then she struck Sisera, she smashed his head;
And she shattered and pierced his temple.
Between her feet he bowed, he fell, he lay;
Between her feet he bowed, he fell;
Where he bowed, there he fell dead.*

*"Out of the window she looked and wailed,
The mother of Sisera through the lattice,
'Why does his chariot delay in coming?
Why do the hoofbeats of his chariots delay?'
Her wise princesses would answer her,
Indeed she repeats her words to herself,
'Are they not finding, are they not dividing the spoils?
A concubine, two concubines for every warrior;
To Sisera a spoil of dyed cloth,
A spoil of dyed cloth embroidered,
Dyed cloth of double embroidery on the neck of the plunderer?'
May all Your enemies perish in this way, Lord;
But may those who love Him be like the rising of the sun in its might."
And the land was at rest for forty years. **Judges 5:12-31***

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Sometimes it's hard to know who to root for, especially if you feel the options aren't quite so clear cut. You come across this every so often. Two teams you dislike, or two players you're not so fond of, and they end up playing each other. Who do you root for? Well, you end up saying something like, "Well can they both lose?"

Or maybe not necessarily two teams or players you don't especially like. Maybe just two teams or players whose flaws you're pretty familiar with, not just flaws in their game, but flaws in their character, in their personality, in their motives. Makes you feel not so confident or comfortable in hoping for their victory, or not so celebratory should they actually win. It's not like there was necessarily a clear-cut alternative, but it still doesn't make you feel so great.

Well, y'all, I'm afraid this may be that sort of story, one in which, when you think about it, it's not quite so easy to know who to root for, or at least not so sure how celebratory you should be for them. This is the story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael. The passage we read in chapter five of the Book of Judges is actually part of a song, a song that retells the story of what happened in the chapter prior. So this whole thing is a song from two people named Deborah and Barak, after all the major things happened in their story.

Here's what happened. Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, so as it happens over and over in the Book of Judges, God gives them up to a rival king, and in this case it was a king named Jabin of the land of Canaan, situated just to the north of Israel, so this was a neighbor. And Israel languished under Jabin for twenty years. Jabin's really not that big a factor in the story. The one who is is the commander of Jabin's army is a man named Sisera. A big thing to know about Sisera is that he's leading an army featuring nine hundred chariots of iron. And not that we have to be experts of ancient warfare to understand this, but if you're coming to a fight with some rusty, dull blades and the others are coming with metal chariots, to some degree it doesn't matter how brave you are if you don't account for chariots coming at you, bringing a knife to a gunfight, so to speak. So Israel languished under their rule. They cried out, so God raised up someone to deliver them.

Here's where it starts to get a bit muddled though. Normally when Israel cries out to God, the book will say something like, "God raised up as a deliverer *so-and-so*." But we don't get that kind of clarity here. The clearest candidate is the next person we hear about when the story is told in chapter four and is the same as one of the singers whose words we read here in chapter 5: a prophetess named Deborah. Apparently, Deborah had been settling minor disputes among the Israelites during this time, as she would "judge" between them. But it's not so clear that she was specifically the one that God raised up to deliver Israel. Never says she was.

Deborah summons a man named Barak, who seems to be the closest thing Israel had to a military leader at the time. Deborah tells him to gather 10,000 soldiers to him and that God would deliver Sisera, the enemy commander with his 900 iron chariots, into his hands. So now it seems maybe Barak is the one that God is raising up. He's got the army. He's leading them into battle. He seems to fit the bill. But then Barak kind of shrinks away from it. He says in chapter 4 that he would only go if Deborah went with him. Not exactly the sort of bravery or trust in the Lord you would hope to see out of God's chosen deliverer. But Deborah goes with him, and Barak does summon 10,000 soldiers from the tribes of Israel. However, even then Barak doesn't seem to be so inspiring. One part of the song that we read talks about how only half the tribes actually answer the call. The other half refuse the call or just aren't heard from at all. Not exactly a stirring scene of an oppressed people rising up as one to throw off the shackles of their oppressors.

Nevertheless, Barak summons his army, as Deborah instructed him to do. And Sisera, with his army and his 900 chariots, comes to the fight. Must have been quite the scene. You have the Israelite army, half-gathered in faith but woefully unprepared, since they're still facing off against an army with advanced technology, like bringing a bunch of muskets against tanks and machine guns. And I don't think we're led to believe this was some kind of "Braveheart" moment either. You know, where the Scottish rebels, led by William Wallace, are facing off against the English army, in particular their cavalry. Completely outmatched. But taking advantage of English arrogance, when the cavalry charge, the Scots reveal they've made hundreds of sharp wooden pikes to stop the horses' charge. There's no indication that anything like that has happened, some kind of clever tactic. Instead, it seems like Deborah and Barak have brought a knife to a gunfight, and oh to be in the shoes of those soldiers once the chariots start coming toward them.

But then God shows up. Starting in v. 19: "The stars fought from heaven, from their courses they fought against Sisera. The torrent Kishon swept them away, the onrushing torrent, the torrent Kishon. March on, my soul, with might! Then loud beat the horses' hoofs with the galloping, galloping of his steeds." What seems to have happened is that God sent a sudden rainstorm, the heavens fighting against Sisera, as it puts it, causing a flash flood of the small river flowing through the battlefield. This threw the horses into a panic, at which point Sisera doesn't have so much of an advantage anymore, and Deborah, Barak, and the Israelite army win the day.

Except Sisera gets away. That'd be the moment of glory for an army's leader like Barak: capturing or killing the enemy commander, but he doesn't get him. Sisera gets away from the battle and is running for his life. And he comes to the home of a man named Heber the Kenite. Heber isn't there, but his wife Jael is. Heber was likely a metalworker, and he and his wife weren't even Israelites. They're not even fully a part of their own clan. It turns out that they had left their homeland in the south to come north to this area, probably so that he could profit from Sisera's army. Heber was a metalworker. Sisera needed lots of iron chariots. Definitely some profit to be made. So it's like Sisera was coming to the home of his arms dealer. Reason to think he'd be safe there. So Jael beckons him in and hides him from the pursuing Israelites. Sisera asks for water, but Jael instead gives him milk, which puts him to sleep. And once he's asleep, Jael goes up to him, takes a tent peg and a mallet, and drives the tent peg through Sisera's temple until it comes out the other side, killing him. It catches you off guard, because why on earth would she do this? She's not an Israelite, and in fact it would seem that her household has profited greatly from Sisera. Maybe she was going with the winning hand, and Israel had just won. Or maybe she was one who maintained faith in God, even though she wasn't an Israelite.

We have no idea, because it doesn't tell us. What we do know is that she invited this man in, under the protection of her home, offering him her household's hospitality and protection—and that's a big deal in this culture—but then she breaks that hospitality, killing him in his sleep in graphic, gory fashion. And *she's* the one who finally defeats this enemy commander. Not Deborah. Not Barak. Not the army. Instead this woman coming out of nowhere into the story. The song ends with an abrupt shift to the perspective of someone we might not

expect. It goes to the window of Sisera's mother, yes the mother of the commander who had just been killed. It's kind of heartbreaking. She's looking out her window, wondering why it has taken so long for her son and his army to come back. Her attendants tell her it's surely because they're so busy raping and pillaging that it's taking them a bit longer than anticipated, so they're not exactly innocents here. But nevertheless, the song seems to relish in the fact that this mother and these women will soon receive the news that the army would not be coming back and that Sisera himself had been killed.

"And the land had rest forty years," it says in v. 31, wrapping up the story. And now you have no idea what to make of all this. Because think about it. Who's supposed to be the hero in all of this? The Israelites? Heck, only half the tribes even bothered to show up to the fight. Barak, their leader? He didn't exactly show a deep trust in God from the get-go, and it wasn't like he was some brilliant tactician either. Nothing he did won the battle for them, and it wasn't him who caught Sisera either. Was it Jael? Sure she was the one who actually killed Sisera, ending the threat of his army for good, but she did so by deceiving him and breaking the somewhat sacred pact of hospitality, inviting this man into her home, promising him protection, giving him milk to make him sleep, and then driving a tent peg through his skull. Or was it Deborah? The prophetess who got this whole thing started. She's the one who summoned Barak, the one who called upon him to gather the army, the one who went with him when he insisted, the one who rallied him to action when the day of battle had come. But then she's also the one singing this song, which means she's the one celebrating that Sisera's mother was looking out the window anxiously, wondering why her son hadn't come home yet. I mean, I get celebrating a victory, but relishing the fact that the general's mother would be devastated when she learned of her son's gruesome death? That's just cruel. That's Deborah. That's her song.

So who are you supposed to root for here? Who's the one that God has raised up to deliver his people? It's not entirely clear. But maybe that's the point. It's not a groundbreaking statement to make to say that the gears of the world turn by the actions and decisions of deeply flawed, even at times despicable people. Sometimes you can sense a clarity of right and wrong, like Russia's aggression against Ukraine. But often the lines aren't so clear. Or even if the lines are clear, those on what you sense to be the right side may not be ones you're eager to root for either. Think about World War II. It seems pretty clear now that Germany's actions of aggression and brutality needed to be resisted, but do you think Roosevelt and Churchill felt all that great rooting for Josef Stalin against him on the Eastern Front? It's not like Roosevelt and Churchill were a couple of saints either. And even in arenas perhaps a bit less intense than global geopolitics. How many times have you gone into a voting booth, seeing the options in front of you, for whatever office it might be, and sometimes there might be someone you feel strongly about, but how many times has a choice felt like choosing the lesser of who cares?

Sometimes it's hard to know who you're supposed to root for. I think this story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael puts that front and center. Just as Israel continues its downward spiral, so too does the quality of its judges, of those whom God raises up to deliver the people. It gets harder and harder to really admire them as heroes. But still, the message seems to be that though it's not so easy to identify Deborah or Barak or Jael as the human hero of the story, the true architect of Israel's deliverance is never in question. For it is the Lord who sends the storm and the torrent to throw the enemy into a panic. It is the Lord who hears Israel's cry. And it is the Lord who is able to use even the flawed motives, the deception, the tricks, the cowardice, the dishonor of a less-than-admirable crew to bring about the restoration of his people.

As it turns out, God's still at work that way. It remains a great mystery why God, after Christ's sacrifice on the cross and the glory of his resurrection, chose to make that witness known throughout the world not through further displays of miraculous power or of Jesus going on a never-ending tour around the world sharing the good news, but instead through the flawed, compromised work of a just as flawed and compromised group known as the church.

So even now, as you see across the headlines or social media or whatever scene you might look out on, and as you may feel discouraged about the assortment of flawed even despicable characters at work in the world, you might wonder, "Just who am I supposed to root for here? What good could come from a crew this messed up?" Know that that is how God has been at work for a long time and continues to use the broken pieces of a broken world to bring about something better.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“No Direction Home: Down a Peg or Two”

Dr. Jay Howell

March 20, 2022

We continue in our series “No Direction Home,” a journey through the Old Testament book of Judges. As we’ve shared, this is a book that’s not often explored in-depth, probably because it’s not entirely encouraging. It’s gory. The characters that maybe we think we should think of heroes often don’t actually come off looking like heroes. The whole thing is cycle after cycle of Israel forsaking God, being subdued by its enemies, crying out, then being delivered by a “judge” sent from the Lord, only to forsake the Lord again. But we’re looking at it, because this book is a story that over and over points out just how corrupted the human heart can become against our Maker—not just the Israelites, not just them, but us. And that’s a point that perhaps we need to hear especially in this season of Lent, when we consider just how much in need of a Savior we are, because on our own, we’re not capable of very much at all.

That in fact is a big part of the story we explore today, the story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

*“Awake, awake, Deborah;
Awake, awake, sing a song!
Arise, Barak, and lead away your captives, son of Abinoam.
Then survivors came down to the nobles;
The people of the Lord came down to me as warriors.
From Ephraim those whose root is in Amalek came down,
Following you, Benjamin, with your peoples;
From Machir commanders came down,
And from Zebulun those who wield the staff of office.
And the princes of Issachar were with Deborah;
As was Issachar, so was Barak;
Into the valley they rushed at his heels;
Among the divisions of Reuben
There were great determinations of heart.
Why did you sit among the sheepfolds,
To hear the piping for the flocks?
Among the divisions of Reuben
There were great searchings of heart.
Gilead remained across the Jordan;
And why did Dan stay on ships?
Asher sat at the seashore,
And remained by its landings.
Zebulun was a people who risked their lives,
And Naphtali too, on the high places of the field.*

*“The kings came and fought;
Then the kings of Canaan fought
At Taanach near the waters of Megiddo;
They took no plunder in silver.
The stars fought from heaven,
From their paths they fought against Sisera.
The torrent of Kishon swept them away,
The ancient torrent, the torrent Kishon.
My soul, march on with strength!
Then the horses’ hoofs beat
From the galloping, the galloping of his mighty stallions.
‘Curse Meroz,’ said the angel of the Lord,
‘Utterly curse its inhabitants,*

*Because they did not come to the help of the Lord,
To the help of the Lord against the warriors.'*

*"Most blessed of women is Jael,
The wife of Heber the Kenite;
Most blessed is she of women in the tent.
He asked for water, she gave him milk;
In a magnificent bowl she brought him curds.
She reached out her hand for the tent peg,
And her right hand for the workmen's hammer.
Then she struck Sisera, she smashed his head;
And she shattered and pierced his temple.
Between her feet he bowed, he fell, he lay;
Between her feet he bowed, he fell;
Where he bowed, there he fell dead.*

*"Out of the window she looked and wailed,
The mother of Sisera through the lattice,
'Why does his chariot delay in coming?
Why do the hoofbeats of his chariots delay?'
Her wise princesses would answer her,
Indeed she repeats her words to herself,
'Are they not finding, are they not dividing the spoils?
A concubine, two concubines for every warrior;
To Sisera a spoil of dyed cloth,
A spoil of dyed cloth embroidered,
Dyed cloth of double embroidery on the neck of the plunderer?'
May all Your enemies perish in this way, Lord;
But may those who love Him be like the rising of the sun in its might."
And the land was at rest for forty years. **Judges 5:12-31***

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Sometimes it's hard to know who to root for, especially if you feel the options aren't quite so clear cut. You come across this every so often. Two teams you dislike, or two players you're not so fond of, and they end up playing each other. Who do you root for? Well, you end up saying something like, "Well can they both lose?"

Or maybe not necessarily two teams or players you don't especially like. Maybe just two teams or players whose flaws you're pretty familiar with, not just flaws in their game, but flaws in their character, in their personality, in their motives. Makes you feel not so confident or comfortable in hoping for their victory, or not so celebratory should they actually win. It's not like there was necessarily a clear-cut alternative, but it still doesn't make you feel so great.

Well, y'all, I'm afraid this may be that sort of story, one in which, when you think about it, it's not quite so easy to know who to root for, or at least not so sure how celebratory you should be for them. This is the story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael. The passage we read in chapter five of the Book of Judges is actually part of a song, a song that retells the story of what happened in the chapter prior. So this whole thing is a song from two people named Deborah and Barak, after all the major things happened in their story.

Here's what happened. Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, so as it happens over and over in the Book of Judges, God gives them up to a rival king, and in this case it was a king named Jabin of the land of Canaan, situated just to the north of Israel, so this was a neighbor. And Israel languished under Jabin for twenty years. Jabin's really not that big a factor in the story. The one who is is the commander of Jabin's army is a man named Sisera. A big thing to know about Sisera is that he's leading an army featuring nine hundred chariots of iron. And not that we have to be experts of ancient warfare to understand this, but if you're coming to a fight with some rusty, dull blades and the others are coming with metal chariots, to some degree it doesn't matter how brave you are if you don't account for chariots coming at you, bringing a knife to a gunfight, so to speak. So Israel languished under their rule. They cried out, so God raised up someone to deliver them.

Here's where it starts to get a bit muddled though. Normally when Israel cries out to God, the book will say something like, "God raised up as a deliverer *so-and-so*." But we don't get that kind of clarity here. The clearest candidate is the next person we hear about when the story is told in chapter four and is the same as one of the singers whose words we read here in chapter 5: a prophetess named Deborah. Apparently, Deborah had been settling minor disputes among the Israelites during this time, as she would "judge" between them. But it's not so clear that she was specifically the one that God raised up to deliver Israel. Never says she was.

Deborah summons a man named Barak, who seems to be the closest thing Israel had to a military leader at the time. Deborah tells him to gather 10,000 soldiers to him and that God would deliver Sisera, the enemy commander with his 900 iron chariots, into his hands. So now it seems maybe Barak is the one that God is raising up. He's got the army. He's leading them into battle. He seems to fit the bill. But then Barak kind of shrinks away from it. He says in chapter 4 that he would only go if Deborah went with him. Not exactly the sort of bravery or trust in the Lord you would hope to see out of God's chosen deliverer. But Deborah goes with him, and Barak does summon 10,000 soldiers from the tribes of Israel. However, even then Barak doesn't seem to be so inspiring. One part of the song that we read talks about how only half the tribes actually answer the call. The other half refuse the call or just aren't heard from at all. Not exactly a stirring scene of an oppressed people rising up as one to throw off the shackles of their oppressors.

Nevertheless, Barak summons his army, as Deborah instructed him to do. And Sisera, with his army and his 900 chariots, comes to the fight. Must have been quite the scene. You have the Israelite army, half-gathered in faith but woefully unprepared, since they're still facing off against an army with advanced technology, like bringing a bunch of muskets against tanks and machine guns. And I don't think we're led to believe this was some kind of "Braveheart" moment either. You know, where the Scottish rebels, led by William Wallace, are facing off against the English army, in particular their cavalry. Completely outmatched. But taking advantage of English arrogance, when the cavalry charge, the Scots reveal they've made hundreds of sharp wooden pikes to stop the horses' charge. There's no indication that anything like that has happened, some kind of clever tactic. Instead, it seems like Deborah and Barak have brought a knife to a gunfight, and oh to be in the shoes of those soldiers once the chariots start coming toward them.

But then God shows up. Starting in v. 19: "The stars fought from heaven, from their courses they fought against Sisera. The torrent Kishon swept them away, the onrushing torrent, the torrent Kishon. March on, my soul, with might! Then loud beat the horses' hoofs with the galloping, galloping of his steeds." What seems to have happened is that God sent a sudden rainstorm, the heavens fighting against Sisera, as it puts it, causing a flash flood of the small river flowing through the battlefield. This threw the horses into a panic, at which point Sisera doesn't have so much of an advantage anymore, and Deborah, Barak, and the Israelite army win the day.

Except Sisera gets away. That'd be the moment of glory for an army's leader like Barak: capturing or killing the enemy commander, but he doesn't get him. Sisera gets away from the battle and is running for his life. And he comes to the home of a man named Heber the Kenite. Heber isn't there, but his wife Jael is. Heber was likely a metalworker, and he and his wife weren't even Israelites. They're not even fully a part of their own clan. It turns out that they had left their homeland in the south to come north to this area, probably so that he could profit from Sisera's army. Heber was a metalworker. Sisera needed lots of iron chariots. Definitely some profit to be made. So it's like Sisera was coming to the home of his arms dealer. Reason to think he'd be safe there. So Jael beckons him in and hides him from the pursuing Israelites. Sisera asks for water, but Jael instead gives him milk, which puts him to sleep. And once he's asleep, Jael goes up to him, takes a tent peg and a mallet, and drives the tent peg through Sisera's temple until it comes out the other side, killing him. It catches you off guard, because why on earth would she do this? She's not an Israelite, and in fact it would seem that her household has profited greatly from Sisera. Maybe she was going with the winning hand, and Israel had just won. Or maybe she was one who maintained faith in God, even though she wasn't an Israelite.

We have no idea, because it doesn't tell us. What we do know is that she invited this man in, under the protection of her home, offering him her household's hospitality and protection—and that's a big deal in this culture—but then she breaks that hospitality, killing him in his sleep in graphic, gory fashion. And *she's* the one who finally defeats this enemy commander. Not Deborah. Not Barak. Not the army. Instead this woman coming out of nowhere into the story. The song ends with an abrupt shift to the perspective of someone we might not

expect. It goes to the window of Sisera's mother, yes the mother of the commander who had just been killed. It's kind of heartbreaking. She's looking out her window, wondering why it has taken so long for her son and his army to come back. Her attendants tell her it's surely because they're so busy raping and pillaging that it's taking them a bit longer than anticipated, so they're not exactly innocents here. But nevertheless, the song seems to relish in the fact that this mother and these women will soon receive the news that the army would not be coming back and that Sisera himself had been killed.

"And the land had rest forty years," it says in v. 31, wrapping up the story. And now you have no idea what to make of all this. Because think about it. Who's supposed to be the hero in all of this? The Israelites? Heck, only half the tribes even bothered to show up to the fight. Barak, their leader? He didn't exactly show a deep trust in God from the get-go, and it wasn't like he was some brilliant tactician either. Nothing he did won the battle for them, and it wasn't him who caught Sisera either. Was it Jael? Sure she was the one who actually killed Sisera, ending the threat of his army for good, but she did so by deceiving him and breaking the somewhat sacred pact of hospitality, inviting this man into her home, promising him protection, giving him milk to make him sleep, and then driving a tent peg through his skull. Or was it Deborah? The prophetess who got this whole thing started. She's the one who summoned Barak, the one who called upon him to gather the army, the one who went with him when he insisted, the one who rallied him to action when the day of battle had come. But then she's also the one singing this song, which means she's the one celebrating that Sisera's mother was looking out the window anxiously, wondering why her son hadn't come home yet. I mean, I get celebrating a victory, but relishing the fact that the general's mother would be devastated when she learned of her son's gruesome death? That's just cruel. That's Deborah. That's her song.

So who are you supposed to root for here? Who's the one that God has raised up to deliver his people? It's not entirely clear. But maybe that's the point. It's not a groundbreaking statement to make to say that the gears of the world turn by the actions and decisions of deeply flawed, even at times despicable people. Sometimes you can sense a clarity of right and wrong, like Russia's aggression against Ukraine. But often the lines aren't so clear. Or even if the lines are clear, those on what you sense to be the right side may not be ones you're eager to root for either. Think about World War II. It seems pretty clear now that Germany's actions of aggression and brutality needed to be resisted, but do you think Roosevelt and Churchill felt all that great rooting for Josef Stalin against him on the Eastern Front? It's not like Roosevelt and Churchill were a couple of saints either. And even in arenas perhaps a bit less intense than global geopolitics. How many times have you gone into a voting booth, seeing the options in front of you, for whatever office it might be, and sometimes there might be someone you feel strongly about, but how many times has a choice felt like choosing the lesser of who cares?

Sometimes it's hard to know who you're supposed to root for. I think this story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael puts that front and center. Just as Israel continues its downward spiral, so too does the quality of its judges, of those whom God raises up to deliver the people. It gets harder and harder to really admire them as heroes. But still, the message seems to be that though it's not so easy to identify Deborah or Barak or Jael as the human hero of the story, the true architect of Israel's deliverance is never in question. For it is the Lord who sends the storm and the torrent to throw the enemy into a panic. It is the Lord who hears Israel's cry. And it is the Lord who is able to use even the flawed motives, the deception, the tricks, the cowardice, the dishonor of a less-than-admirable crew to bring about the restoration of his people.

As it turns out, God's still at work that way. It remains a great mystery why God, after Christ's sacrifice on the cross and the glory of his resurrection, chose to make that witness known throughout the world not through further displays of miraculous power or of Jesus going on a never-ending tour around the world sharing the good news, but instead through the flawed, compromised work of a just as flawed and compromised group known as the church.

So even now, as you see across the headlines or social media or whatever scene you might look out on, and as you may feel discouraged about the assortment of flawed even despicable characters at work in the world, you might wonder, "Just who am I supposed to root for here? What good could come from a crew this messed up?" Know that that is how God has been at work for a long time and continues to use the broken pieces of a broken world to bring about something better.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“No Direction Home: Down a Peg or Two”

Dr. Jay Howell

March 20, 2022

We continue in our series “No Direction Home,” a journey through the Old Testament book of Judges. As we’ve shared, this is a book that’s not often explored in-depth, probably because it’s not entirely encouraging. It’s gory. The characters that maybe we think we should think of heroes often don’t actually come off looking like heroes. The whole thing is cycle after cycle of Israel forsaking God, being subdued by its enemies, crying out, then being delivered by a “judge” sent from the Lord, only to forsake the Lord again. But we’re looking at it, because this book is a story that over and over points out just how corrupted the human heart can become against our Maker—not just the Israelites, not just them, but us. And that’s a point that perhaps we need to hear especially in this season of Lent, when we consider just how much in need of a Savior we are, because on our own, we’re not capable of very much at all.

That in fact is a big part of the story we explore today, the story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

*“Awake, awake, Deborah;
Awake, awake, sing a song!
Arise, Barak, and lead away your captives, son of Abinoam.
Then survivors came down to the nobles;
The people of the Lord came down to me as warriors.
From Ephraim those whose root is in Amalek came down,
Following you, Benjamin, with your peoples;
From Machir commanders came down,
And from Zebulun those who wield the staff of office.
And the princes of Issachar were with Deborah;
As was Issachar, so was Barak;
Into the valley they rushed at his heels;
Among the divisions of Reuben
There were great determinations of heart.
Why did you sit among the sheepfolds,
To hear the piping for the flocks?
Among the divisions of Reuben
There were great searchings of heart.
Gilead remained across the Jordan;
And why did Dan stay on ships?
Asher sat at the seashore,
And remained by its landings.
Zebulun was a people who risked their lives,
And Naphtali too, on the high places of the field.*

*“The kings came and fought;
Then the kings of Canaan fought
At Taanach near the waters of Megiddo;
They took no plunder in silver.
The stars fought from heaven,
From their paths they fought against Sisera.
The torrent of Kishon swept them away,
The ancient torrent, the torrent Kishon.
My soul, march on with strength!
Then the horses’ hoofs beat
From the galloping, the galloping of his mighty stallions.
‘Curse Meroz,’ said the angel of the Lord,
‘Utterly curse its inhabitants,*

*Because they did not come to the help of the Lord,
To the help of the Lord against the warriors.'*

*"Most blessed of women is Jael,
The wife of Heber the Kenite;
Most blessed is she of women in the tent.
He asked for water, she gave him milk;
In a magnificent bowl she brought him curds.
She reached out her hand for the tent peg,
And her right hand for the workmen's hammer.
Then she struck Sisera, she smashed his head;
And she shattered and pierced his temple.
Between her feet he bowed, he fell, he lay;
Between her feet he bowed, he fell;
Where he bowed, there he fell dead.*

*"Out of the window she looked and wailed,
The mother of Sisera through the lattice,
'Why does his chariot delay in coming?
Why do the hoofbeats of his chariots delay?'
Her wise princesses would answer her,
Indeed she repeats her words to herself,
'Are they not finding, are they not dividing the spoils?
A concubine, two concubines for every warrior;
To Sisera a spoil of dyed cloth,
A spoil of dyed cloth embroidered,
Dyed cloth of double embroidery on the neck of the plunderer?'
May all Your enemies perish in this way, Lord;
But may those who love Him be like the rising of the sun in its might."
And the land was at rest for forty years. **Judges 5:12-31***

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Sometimes it's hard to know who to root for, especially if you feel the options aren't quite so clear cut. You come across this every so often. Two teams you dislike, or two players you're not so fond of, and they end up playing each other. Who do you root for? Well, you end up saying something like, "Well can they both lose?"

Or maybe not necessarily two teams or players you don't especially like. Maybe just two teams or players whose flaws you're pretty familiar with, not just flaws in their game, but flaws in their character, in their personality, in their motives. Makes you feel not so confident or comfortable in hoping for their victory, or not so celebratory should they actually win. It's not like there was necessarily a clear-cut alternative, but it still doesn't make you feel so great.

Well, y'all, I'm afraid this may be that sort of story, one in which, when you think about it, it's not quite so easy to know who to root for, or at least not so sure how celebratory you should be for them. This is the story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael. The passage we read in chapter five of the Book of Judges is actually part of a song, a song that retells the story of what happened in the chapter prior. So this whole thing is a song from two people named Deborah and Barak, after all the major things happened in their story.

Here's what happened. Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, so as it happens over and over in the Book of Judges, God gives them up to a rival king, and in this case it was a king named Jabin of the land of Canaan, situated just to the north of Israel, so this was a neighbor. And Israel languished under Jabin for twenty years. Jabin's really not that big a factor in the story. The one who is is the commander of Jabin's army is a man named Sisera. A big thing to know about Sisera is that he's leading an army featuring nine hundred chariots of iron. And not that we have to be experts of ancient warfare to understand this, but if you're coming to a fight with some rusty, dull blades and the others are coming with metal chariots, to some degree it doesn't matter how brave you are if you don't account for chariots coming at you, bringing a knife to a gunfight, so to speak. So Israel languished under their rule. They cried out, so God raised up someone to deliver them.

Here's where it starts to get a bit muddled though. Normally when Israel cries out to God, the book will say something like, "God raised up as a deliverer *so-and-so*." But we don't get that kind of clarity here. The clearest candidate is the next person we hear about when the story is told in chapter four and is the same as one of the singers whose words we read here in chapter 5: a prophetess named Deborah. Apparently, Deborah had been settling minor disputes among the Israelites during this time, as she would "judge" between them. But it's not so clear that she was specifically the one that God raised up to deliver Israel. Never says she was.

Deborah summons a man named Barak, who seems to be the closest thing Israel had to a military leader at the time. Deborah tells him to gather 10,000 soldiers to him and that God would deliver Sisera, the enemy commander with his 900 iron chariots, into his hands. So now it seems maybe Barak is the one that God is raising up. He's got the army. He's leading them into battle. He seems to fit the bill. But then Barak kind of shrinks away from it. He says in chapter 4 that he would only go if Deborah went with him. Not exactly the sort of bravery or trust in the Lord you would hope to see out of God's chosen deliverer. But Deborah goes with him, and Barak does summon 10,000 soldiers from the tribes of Israel. However, even then Barak doesn't seem to be so inspiring. One part of the song that we read talks about how only half the tribes actually answer the call. The other half refuse the call or just aren't heard from at all. Not exactly a stirring scene of an oppressed people rising up as one to throw off the shackles of their oppressors.

Nevertheless, Barak summons his army, as Deborah instructed him to do. And Sisera, with his army and his 900 chariots, comes to the fight. Must have been quite the scene. You have the Israelite army, half-gathered in faith but woefully unprepared, since they're still facing off against an army with advanced technology, like bringing a bunch of muskets against tanks and machine guns. And I don't think we're led to believe this was some kind of "Braveheart" moment either. You know, where the Scottish rebels, led by William Wallace, are facing off against the English army, in particular their cavalry. Completely outmatched. But taking advantage of English arrogance, when the cavalry charge, the Scots reveal they've made hundreds of sharp wooden pikes to stop the horses' charge. There's no indication that anything like that has happened, some kind of clever tactic. Instead, it seems like Deborah and Barak have brought a knife to a gunfight, and oh to be in the shoes of those soldiers once the chariots start coming toward them.

But then God shows up. Starting in v. 19: "The stars fought from heaven, from their courses they fought against Sisera. The torrent Kishon swept them away, the onrushing torrent, the torrent Kishon. March on, my soul, with might! Then loud beat the horses' hoofs with the galloping, galloping of his steeds." What seems to have happened is that God sent a sudden rainstorm, the heavens fighting against Sisera, as it puts it, causing a flash flood of the small river flowing through the battlefield. This threw the horses into a panic, at which point Sisera doesn't have so much of an advantage anymore, and Deborah, Barak, and the Israelite army win the day.

Except Sisera gets away. That'd be the moment of glory for an army's leader like Barak: capturing or killing the enemy commander, but he doesn't get him. Sisera gets away from the battle and is running for his life. And he comes to the home of a man named Heber the Kenite. Heber isn't there, but his wife Jael is. Heber was likely a metalworker, and he and his wife weren't even Israelites. They're not even fully a part of their own clan. It turns out that they had left their homeland in the south to come north to this area, probably so that he could profit from Sisera's army. Heber was a metalworker. Sisera needed lots of iron chariots. Definitely some profit to be made. So it's like Sisera was coming to the home of his arms dealer. Reason to think he'd be safe there. So Jael beckons him in and hides him from the pursuing Israelites. Sisera asks for water, but Jael instead gives him milk, which puts him to sleep. And once he's asleep, Jael goes up to him, takes a tent peg and a mallet, and drives the tent peg through Sisera's temple until it comes out the other side, killing him. It catches you off guard, because why on earth would she do this? She's not an Israelite, and in fact it would seem that her household has profited greatly from Sisera. Maybe she was going with the winning hand, and Israel had just won. Or maybe she was one who maintained faith in God, even though she wasn't an Israelite.

We have no idea, because it doesn't tell us. What we do know is that she invited this man in, under the protection of her home, offering him her household's hospitality and protection—and that's a big deal in this culture—but then she breaks that hospitality, killing him in his sleep in graphic, gory fashion. And *she's* the one who finally defeats this enemy commander. Not Deborah. Not Barak. Not the army. Instead this woman coming out of nowhere into the story. The song ends with an abrupt shift to the perspective of someone we might not

expect. It goes to the window of Sisera's mother, yes the mother of the commander who had just been killed. It's kind of heartbreaking. She's looking out her window, wondering why it has taken so long for her son and his army to come back. Her attendants tell her it's surely because they're so busy raping and pillaging that it's taking them a bit longer than anticipated, so they're not exactly innocents here. But nevertheless, the song seems to relish in the fact that this mother and these women will soon receive the news that the army would not be coming back and that Sisera himself had been killed.

"And the land had rest forty years," it says in v. 31, wrapping up the story. And now you have no idea what to make of all this. Because think about it. Who's supposed to be the hero in all of this? The Israelites? Heck, only half the tribes even bothered to show up to the fight. Barak, their leader? He didn't exactly show a deep trust in God from the get-go, and it wasn't like he was some brilliant tactician either. Nothing he did won the battle for them, and it wasn't him who caught Sisera either. Was it Jael? Sure she was the one who actually killed Sisera, ending the threat of his army for good, but she did so by deceiving him and breaking the somewhat sacred pact of hospitality, inviting this man into her home, promising him protection, giving him milk to make him sleep, and then driving a tent peg through his skull. Or was it Deborah? The prophetess who got this whole thing started. She's the one who summoned Barak, the one who called upon him to gather the army, the one who went with him when he insisted, the one who rallied him to action when the day of battle had come. But then she's also the one singing this song, which means she's the one celebrating that Sisera's mother was looking out the window anxiously, wondering why her son hadn't come home yet. I mean, I get celebrating a victory, but relishing the fact that the general's mother would be devastated when she learned of her son's gruesome death? That's just cruel. That's Deborah. That's her song.

So who are you supposed to root for here? Who's the one that God has raised up to deliver his people? It's not entirely clear. But maybe that's the point. It's not a groundbreaking statement to make to say that the gears of the world turn by the actions and decisions of deeply flawed, even at times despicable people. Sometimes you can sense a clarity of right and wrong, like Russia's aggression against Ukraine. But often the lines aren't so clear. Or even if the lines are clear, those on what you sense to be the right side may not be ones you're eager to root for either. Think about World War II. It seems pretty clear now that Germany's actions of aggression and brutality needed to be resisted, but do you think Roosevelt and Churchill felt all that great rooting for Josef Stalin against him on the Eastern Front? It's not like Roosevelt and Churchill were a couple of saints either. And even in arenas perhaps a bit less intense than global geopolitics. How many times have you gone into a voting booth, seeing the options in front of you, for whatever office it might be, and sometimes there might be someone you feel strongly about, but how many times has a choice felt like choosing the lesser of who cares?

Sometimes it's hard to know who you're supposed to root for. I think this story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael puts that front and center. Just as Israel continues its downward spiral, so too does the quality of its judges, of those whom God raises up to deliver the people. It gets harder and harder to really admire them as heroes. But still, the message seems to be that though it's not so easy to identify Deborah or Barak or Jael as the human hero of the story, the true architect of Israel's deliverance is never in question. For it is the Lord who sends the storm and the torrent to throw the enemy into a panic. It is the Lord who hears Israel's cry. And it is the Lord who is able to use even the flawed motives, the deception, the tricks, the cowardice, the dishonor of a less-than-admirable crew to bring about the restoration of his people.

As it turns out, God's still at work that way. It remains a great mystery why God, after Christ's sacrifice on the cross and the glory of his resurrection, chose to make that witness known throughout the world not through further displays of miraculous power or of Jesus going on a never-ending tour around the world sharing the good news, but instead through the flawed, compromised work of a just as flawed and compromised group known as the church.

So even now, as you see across the headlines or social media or whatever scene you might look out on, and as you may feel discouraged about the assortment of flawed even despicable characters at work in the world, you might wonder, "Just who am I supposed to root for here? What good could come from a crew this messed up?" Know that that is how God has been at work for a long time and continues to use the broken pieces of a broken world to bring about something better.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“No Direction Home: Down a Peg or Two”

Dr. Jay Howell

March 20, 2022

We continue in our series “No Direction Home,” a journey through the Old Testament book of Judges. As we’ve shared, this is a book that’s not often explored in-depth, probably because it’s not entirely encouraging. It’s gory. The characters that maybe we think we should think of heroes often don’t actually come off looking like heroes. The whole thing is cycle after cycle of Israel forsaking God, being subdued by its enemies, crying out, then being delivered by a “judge” sent from the Lord, only to forsake the Lord again. But we’re looking at it, because this book is a story that over and over points out just how corrupted the human heart can become against our Maker—not just the Israelites, not just them, but us. And that’s a point that perhaps we need to hear especially in this season of Lent, when we consider just how much in need of a Savior we are, because on our own, we’re not capable of very much at all.

That in fact is a big part of the story we explore today, the story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

*“Awake, awake, Deborah;
Awake, awake, sing a song!
Arise, Barak, and lead away your captives, son of Abinoam.
Then survivors came down to the nobles;
The people of the Lord came down to me as warriors.
From Ephraim those whose root is in Amalek came down,
Following you, Benjamin, with your peoples;
From Machir commanders came down,
And from Zebulun those who wield the staff of office.
And the princes of Issachar were with Deborah;
As was Issachar, so was Barak;
Into the valley they rushed at his heels;
Among the divisions of Reuben
There were great determinations of heart.
Why did you sit among the sheepfolds,
To hear the piping for the flocks?
Among the divisions of Reuben
There were great searchings of heart.
Gilead remained across the Jordan;
And why did Dan stay on ships?
Asher sat at the seashore,
And remained by its landings.
Zebulun was a people who risked their lives,
And Naphtali too, on the high places of the field.*

*“The kings came and fought;
Then the kings of Canaan fought
At Taanach near the waters of Megiddo;
They took no plunder in silver.
The stars fought from heaven,
From their paths they fought against Sisera.
The torrent of Kishon swept them away,
The ancient torrent, the torrent Kishon.
My soul, march on with strength!
Then the horses’ hoofs beat
From the galloping, the galloping of his mighty stallions.
‘Curse Meroz,’ said the angel of the Lord,
‘Utterly curse its inhabitants,*

*Because they did not come to the help of the Lord,
To the help of the Lord against the warriors.'*

*"Most blessed of women is Jael,
The wife of Heber the Kenite;
Most blessed is she of women in the tent.
He asked for water, she gave him milk;
In a magnificent bowl she brought him curds.
She reached out her hand for the tent peg,
And her right hand for the workmen's hammer.
Then she struck Sisera, she smashed his head;
And she shattered and pierced his temple.
Between her feet he bowed, he fell, he lay;
Between her feet he bowed, he fell;
Where he bowed, there he fell dead.*

*"Out of the window she looked and wailed,
The mother of Sisera through the lattice,
'Why does his chariot delay in coming?
Why do the hoofbeats of his chariots delay?'
Her wise princesses would answer her,
Indeed she repeats her words to herself,
'Are they not finding, are they not dividing the spoils?
A concubine, two concubines for every warrior;
To Sisera a spoil of dyed cloth,
A spoil of dyed cloth embroidered,
Dyed cloth of double embroidery on the neck of the plunderer?'
May all Your enemies perish in this way, Lord;
But may those who love Him be like the rising of the sun in its might."
And the land was at rest for forty years. **Judges 5:12-31***

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Sometimes it's hard to know who to root for, especially if you feel the options aren't quite so clear cut. You come across this every so often. Two teams you dislike, or two players you're not so fond of, and they end up playing each other. Who do you root for? Well, you end up saying something like, "Well can they both lose?"

Or maybe not necessarily two teams or players you don't especially like. Maybe just two teams or players whose flaws you're pretty familiar with, not just flaws in their game, but flaws in their character, in their personality, in their motives. Makes you feel not so confident or comfortable in hoping for their victory, or not so celebratory should they actually win. It's not like there was necessarily a clear-cut alternative, but it still doesn't make you feel so great.

Well, y'all, I'm afraid this may be that sort of story, one in which, when you think about it, it's not quite so easy to know who to root for, or at least not so sure how celebratory you should be for them. This is the story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael. The passage we read in chapter five of the Book of Judges is actually part of a song, a song that retells the story of what happened in the chapter prior. So this whole thing is a song from two people named Deborah and Barak, after all the major things happened in their story.

Here's what happened. Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, so as it happens over and over in the Book of Judges, God gives them up to a rival king, and in this case it was a king named Jabin of the land of Canaan, situated just to the north of Israel, so this was a neighbor. And Israel languished under Jabin for twenty years. Jabin's really not that big a factor in the story. The one who is is the commander of Jabin's army is a man named Sisera. A big thing to know about Sisera is that he's leading an army featuring nine hundred chariots of iron. And not that we have to be experts of ancient warfare to understand this, but if you're coming to a fight with some rusty, dull blades and the others are coming with metal chariots, to some degree it doesn't matter how brave you are if you don't account for chariots coming at you, bringing a knife to a gunfight, so to speak. So Israel languished under their rule. They cried out, so God raised up someone to deliver them.

Here's where it starts to get a bit muddled though. Normally when Israel cries out to God, the book will say something like, "God raised up as a deliverer *so-and-so*." But we don't get that kind of clarity here. The clearest candidate is the next person we hear about when the story is told in chapter four and is the same as one of the singers whose words we read here in chapter 5: a prophetess named Deborah. Apparently, Deborah had been settling minor disputes among the Israelites during this time, as she would "judge" between them. But it's not so clear that she was specifically the one that God raised up to deliver Israel. Never says she was.

Deborah summons a man named Barak, who seems to be the closest thing Israel had to a military leader at the time. Deborah tells him to gather 10,000 soldiers to him and that God would deliver Sisera, the enemy commander with his 900 iron chariots, into his hands. So now it seems maybe Barak is the one that God is raising up. He's got the army. He's leading them into battle. He seems to fit the bill. But then Barak kind of shrinks away from it. He says in chapter 4 that he would only go if Deborah went with him. Not exactly the sort of bravery or trust in the Lord you would hope to see out of God's chosen deliverer. But Deborah goes with him, and Barak does summon 10,000 soldiers from the tribes of Israel. However, even then Barak doesn't seem to be so inspiring. One part of the song that we read talks about how only half the tribes actually answer the call. The other half refuse the call or just aren't heard from at all. Not exactly a stirring scene of an oppressed people rising up as one to throw off the shackles of their oppressors.

Nevertheless, Barak summons his army, as Deborah instructed him to do. And Sisera, with his army and his 900 chariots, comes to the fight. Must have been quite the scene. You have the Israelite army, half-gathered in faith but woefully unprepared, since they're still facing off against an army with advanced technology, like bringing a bunch of muskets against tanks and machine guns. And I don't think we're led to believe this was some kind of "Braveheart" moment either. You know, where the Scottish rebels, led by William Wallace, are facing off against the English army, in particular their cavalry. Completely outmatched. But taking advantage of English arrogance, when the cavalry charge, the Scots reveal they've made hundreds of sharp wooden pikes to stop the horses' charge. There's no indication that anything like that has happened, some kind of clever tactic. Instead, it seems like Deborah and Barak have brought a knife to a gunfight, and oh to be in the shoes of those soldiers once the chariots start coming toward them.

But then God shows up. Starting in v. 19: "The stars fought from heaven, from their courses they fought against Sisera. The torrent Kishon swept them away, the onrushing torrent, the torrent Kishon. March on, my soul, with might! Then loud beat the horses' hoofs with the galloping, galloping of his steeds." What seems to have happened is that God sent a sudden rainstorm, the heavens fighting against Sisera, as it puts it, causing a flash flood of the small river flowing through the battlefield. This threw the horses into a panic, at which point Sisera doesn't have so much of an advantage anymore, and Deborah, Barak, and the Israelite army win the day.

Except Sisera gets away. That'd be the moment of glory for an army's leader like Barak: capturing or killing the enemy commander, but he doesn't get him. Sisera gets away from the battle and is running for his life. And he comes to the home of a man named Heber the Kenite. Heber isn't there, but his wife Jael is. Heber was likely a metalworker, and he and his wife weren't even Israelites. They're not even fully a part of their own clan. It turns out that they had left their homeland in the south to come north to this area, probably so that he could profit from Sisera's army. Heber was a metalworker. Sisera needed lots of iron chariots. Definitely some profit to be made. So it's like Sisera was coming to the home of his arms dealer. Reason to think he'd be safe there. So Jael beckons him in and hides him from the pursuing Israelites. Sisera asks for water, but Jael instead gives him milk, which puts him to sleep. And once he's asleep, Jael goes up to him, takes a tent peg and a mallet, and drives the tent peg through Sisera's temple until it comes out the other side, killing him. It catches you off guard, because why on earth would she do this? She's not an Israelite, and in fact it would seem that her household has profited greatly from Sisera. Maybe she was going with the winning hand, and Israel had just won. Or maybe she was one who maintained faith in God, even though she wasn't an Israelite.

We have no idea, because it doesn't tell us. What we do know is that she invited this man in, under the protection of her home, offering him her household's hospitality and protection—and that's a big deal in this culture—but then she breaks that hospitality, killing him in his sleep in graphic, gory fashion. And *she's* the one who finally defeats this enemy commander. Not Deborah. Not Barak. Not the army. Instead this woman coming out of nowhere into the story. The song ends with an abrupt shift to the perspective of someone we might not

expect. It goes to the window of Sisera's mother, yes the mother of the commander who had just been killed. It's kind of heartbreaking. She's looking out her window, wondering why it has taken so long for her son and his army to come back. Her attendants tell her it's surely because they're so busy raping and pillaging that it's taking them a bit longer than anticipated, so they're not exactly innocents here. But nevertheless, the song seems to relish in the fact that this mother and these women will soon receive the news that the army would not be coming back and that Sisera himself had been killed.

"And the land had rest forty years," it says in v. 31, wrapping up the story. And now you have no idea what to make of all this. Because think about it. Who's supposed to be the hero in all of this? The Israelites? Heck, only half the tribes even bothered to show up to the fight. Barak, their leader? He didn't exactly show a deep trust in God from the get-go, and it wasn't like he was some brilliant tactician either. Nothing he did won the battle for them, and it wasn't him who caught Sisera either. Was it Jael? Sure she was the one who actually killed Sisera, ending the threat of his army for good, but she did so by deceiving him and breaking the somewhat sacred pact of hospitality, inviting this man into her home, promising him protection, giving him milk to make him sleep, and then driving a tent peg through his skull. Or was it Deborah? The prophetess who got this whole thing started. She's the one who summoned Barak, the one who called upon him to gather the army, the one who went with him when he insisted, the one who rallied him to action when the day of battle had come. But then she's also the one singing this song, which means she's the one celebrating that Sisera's mother was looking out the window anxiously, wondering why her son hadn't come home yet. I mean, I get celebrating a victory, but relishing the fact that the general's mother would be devastated when she learned of her son's gruesome death? That's just cruel. That's Deborah. That's her song.

So who are you supposed to root for here? Who's the one that God has raised up to deliver his people? It's not entirely clear. But maybe that's the point. It's not a groundbreaking statement to make to say that the gears of the world turn by the actions and decisions of deeply flawed, even at times despicable people. Sometimes you can sense a clarity of right and wrong, like Russia's aggression against Ukraine. But often the lines aren't so clear. Or even if the lines are clear, those on what you sense to be the right side may not be ones you're eager to root for either. Think about World War II. It seems pretty clear now that Germany's actions of aggression and brutality needed to be resisted, but do you think Roosevelt and Churchill felt all that great rooting for Josef Stalin against him on the Eastern Front? It's not like Roosevelt and Churchill were a couple of saints either. And even in arenas perhaps a bit less intense than global geopolitics. How many times have you gone into a voting booth, seeing the options in front of you, for whatever office it might be, and sometimes there might be someone you feel strongly about, but how many times has a choice felt like choosing the lesser of who cares?

Sometimes it's hard to know who you're supposed to root for. I think this story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael puts that front and center. Just as Israel continues its downward spiral, so too does the quality of its judges, of those whom God raises up to deliver the people. It gets harder and harder to really admire them as heroes. But still, the message seems to be that though it's not so easy to identify Deborah or Barak or Jael as the human hero of the story, the true architect of Israel's deliverance is never in question. For it is the Lord who sends the storm and the torrent to throw the enemy into a panic. It is the Lord who hears Israel's cry. And it is the Lord who is able to use even the flawed motives, the deception, the tricks, the cowardice, the dishonor of a less-than-admirable crew to bring about the restoration of his people.

As it turns out, God's still at work that way. It remains a great mystery why God, after Christ's sacrifice on the cross and the glory of his resurrection, chose to make that witness known throughout the world not through further displays of miraculous power or of Jesus going on a never-ending tour around the world sharing the good news, but instead through the flawed, compromised work of a just as flawed and compromised group known as the church.

So even now, as you see across the headlines or social media or whatever scene you might look out on, and as you may feel discouraged about the assortment of flawed even despicable characters at work in the world, you might wonder, "Just who am I supposed to root for here? What good could come from a crew this messed up?" Know that that is how God has been at work for a long time and continues to use the broken pieces of a broken world to bring about something better.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“No Direction Home: Down a Peg or Two”

Dr. Jay Howell

March 20, 2022

We continue in our series “No Direction Home,” a journey through the Old Testament book of Judges. As we’ve shared, this is a book that’s not often explored in-depth, probably because it’s not entirely encouraging. It’s gory. The characters that maybe we think we should think of heroes often don’t actually come off looking like heroes. The whole thing is cycle after cycle of Israel forsaking God, being subdued by its enemies, crying out, then being delivered by a “judge” sent from the Lord, only to forsake the Lord again. But we’re looking at it, because this book is a story that over and over points out just how corrupted the human heart can become against our Maker—not just the Israelites, not just them, but us. And that’s a point that perhaps we need to hear especially in this season of Lent, when we consider just how much in need of a Savior we are, because on our own, we’re not capable of very much at all.

That in fact is a big part of the story we explore today, the story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

*“Awake, awake, Deborah;
Awake, awake, sing a song!
Arise, Barak, and lead away your captives, son of Abinoam.
Then survivors came down to the nobles;
The people of the Lord came down to me as warriors.
From Ephraim those whose root is in Amalek came down,
Following you, Benjamin, with your peoples;
From Machir commanders came down,
And from Zebulun those who wield the staff of office.
And the princes of Issachar were with Deborah;
As was Issachar, so was Barak;
Into the valley they rushed at his heels;
Among the divisions of Reuben
There were great determinations of heart.
Why did you sit among the sheepfolds,
To hear the piping for the flocks?
Among the divisions of Reuben
There were great searchings of heart.
Gilead remained across the Jordan;
And why did Dan stay on ships?
Asher sat at the seashore,
And remained by its landings.
Zebulun was a people who risked their lives,
And Naphtali too, on the high places of the field.*

*“The kings came and fought;
Then the kings of Canaan fought
At Taanach near the waters of Megiddo;
They took no plunder in silver.
The stars fought from heaven,
From their paths they fought against Sisera.
The torrent of Kishon swept them away,
The ancient torrent, the torrent Kishon.
My soul, march on with strength!
Then the horses’ hoofs beat
From the galloping, the galloping of his mighty stallions.
‘Curse Meroz,’ said the angel of the Lord,
‘Utterly curse its inhabitants,*

*Because they did not come to the help of the Lord,
To the help of the Lord against the warriors.'*

*"Most blessed of women is Jael,
The wife of Heber the Kenite;
Most blessed is she of women in the tent.
He asked for water, she gave him milk;
In a magnificent bowl she brought him curds.
She reached out her hand for the tent peg,
And her right hand for the workmen's hammer.
Then she struck Sisera, she smashed his head;
And she shattered and pierced his temple.
Between her feet he bowed, he fell, he lay;
Between her feet he bowed, he fell;
Where he bowed, there he fell dead.*

*"Out of the window she looked and wailed,
The mother of Sisera through the lattice,
'Why does his chariot delay in coming?
Why do the hoofbeats of his chariots delay?'
Her wise princesses would answer her,
Indeed she repeats her words to herself,
'Are they not finding, are they not dividing the spoils?
A concubine, two concubines for every warrior;
To Sisera a spoil of dyed cloth,
A spoil of dyed cloth embroidered,
Dyed cloth of double embroidery on the neck of the plunderer?'
May all Your enemies perish in this way, Lord;
But may those who love Him be like the rising of the sun in its might."
And the land was at rest for forty years. **Judges 5:12-31***

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Sometimes it's hard to know who to root for, especially if you feel the options aren't quite so clear cut. You come across this every so often. Two teams you dislike, or two players you're not so fond of, and they end up playing each other. Who do you root for? Well, you end up saying something like, "Well can they both lose?"

Or maybe not necessarily two teams or players you don't especially like. Maybe just two teams or players whose flaws you're pretty familiar with, not just flaws in their game, but flaws in their character, in their personality, in their motives. Makes you feel not so confident or comfortable in hoping for their victory, or not so celebratory should they actually win. It's not like there was necessarily a clear-cut alternative, but it still doesn't make you feel so great.

Well, y'all, I'm afraid this may be that sort of story, one in which, when you think about it, it's not quite so easy to know who to root for, or at least not so sure how celebratory you should be for them. This is the story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael. The passage we read in chapter five of the Book of Judges is actually part of a song, a song that retells the story of what happened in the chapter prior. So this whole thing is a song from two people named Deborah and Barak, after all the major things happened in their story.

Here's what happened. Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, so as it happens over and over in the Book of Judges, God gives them up to a rival king, and in this case it was a king named Jabin of the land of Canaan, situated just to the north of Israel, so this was a neighbor. And Israel languished under Jabin for twenty years. Jabin's really not that big a factor in the story. The one who is is the commander of Jabin's army is a man named Sisera. A big thing to know about Sisera is that he's leading an army featuring nine hundred chariots of iron. And not that we have to be experts of ancient warfare to understand this, but if you're coming to a fight with some rusty, dull blades and the others are coming with metal chariots, to some degree it doesn't matter how brave you are if you don't account for chariots coming at you, bringing a knife to a gunfight, so to speak. So Israel languished under their rule. They cried out, so God raised up someone to deliver them.

Here's where it starts to get a bit muddled though. Normally when Israel cries out to God, the book will say something like, "God raised up as a deliverer *so-and-so*." But we don't get that kind of clarity here. The clearest candidate is the next person we hear about when the story is told in chapter four and is the same as one of the singers whose words we read here in chapter 5: a prophetess named Deborah. Apparently, Deborah had been settling minor disputes among the Israelites during this time, as she would "judge" between them. But it's not so clear that she was specifically the one that God raised up to deliver Israel. Never says she was.

Deborah summons a man named Barak, who seems to be the closest thing Israel had to a military leader at the time. Deborah tells him to gather 10,000 soldiers to him and that God would deliver Sisera, the enemy commander with his 900 iron chariots, into his hands. So now it seems maybe Barak is the one that God is raising up. He's got the army. He's leading them into battle. He seems to fit the bill. But then Barak kind of shrinks away from it. He says in chapter 4 that he would only go if Deborah went with him. Not exactly the sort of bravery or trust in the Lord you would hope to see out of God's chosen deliverer. But Deborah goes with him, and Barak does summon 10,000 soldiers from the tribes of Israel. However, even then Barak doesn't seem to be so inspiring. One part of the song that we read talks about how only half the tribes actually answer the call. The other half refuse the call or just aren't heard from at all. Not exactly a stirring scene of an oppressed people rising up as one to throw off the shackles of their oppressors.

Nevertheless, Barak summons his army, as Deborah instructed him to do. And Sisera, with his army and his 900 chariots, comes to the fight. Must have been quite the scene. You have the Israelite army, half-gathered in faith but woefully unprepared, since they're still facing off against an army with advanced technology, like bringing a bunch of muskets against tanks and machine guns. And I don't think we're led to believe this was some kind of "Braveheart" moment either. You know, where the Scottish rebels, led by William Wallace, are facing off against the English army, in particular their cavalry. Completely outmatched. But taking advantage of English arrogance, when the cavalry charge, the Scots reveal they've made hundreds of sharp wooden pikes to stop the horses' charge. There's no indication that anything like that has happened, some kind of clever tactic. Instead, it seems like Deborah and Barak have brought a knife to a gunfight, and oh to be in the shoes of those soldiers once the chariots start coming toward them.

But then God shows up. Starting in v. 19: "The stars fought from heaven, from their courses they fought against Sisera. The torrent Kishon swept them away, the onrushing torrent, the torrent Kishon. March on, my soul, with might! Then loud beat the horses' hoofs with the galloping, galloping of his steeds." What seems to have happened is that God sent a sudden rainstorm, the heavens fighting against Sisera, as it puts it, causing a flash flood of the small river flowing through the battlefield. This threw the horses into a panic, at which point Sisera doesn't have so much of an advantage anymore, and Deborah, Barak, and the Israelite army win the day.

Except Sisera gets away. That'd be the moment of glory for an army's leader like Barak: capturing or killing the enemy commander, but he doesn't get him. Sisera gets away from the battle and is running for his life. And he comes to the home of a man named Heber the Kenite. Heber isn't there, but his wife Jael is. Heber was likely a metalworker, and he and his wife weren't even Israelites. They're not even fully a part of their own clan. It turns out that they had left their homeland in the south to come north to this area, probably so that he could profit from Sisera's army. Heber was a metalworker. Sisera needed lots of iron chariots. Definitely some profit to be made. So it's like Sisera was coming to the home of his arms dealer. Reason to think he'd be safe there. So Jael beckons him in and hides him from the pursuing Israelites. Sisera asks for water, but Jael instead gives him milk, which puts him to sleep. And once he's asleep, Jael goes up to him, takes a tent peg and a mallet, and drives the tent peg through Sisera's temple until it comes out the other side, killing him. It catches you off guard, because why on earth would she do this? She's not an Israelite, and in fact it would seem that her household has profited greatly from Sisera. Maybe she was going with the winning hand, and Israel had just won. Or maybe she was one who maintained faith in God, even though she wasn't an Israelite.

We have no idea, because it doesn't tell us. What we do know is that she invited this man in, under the protection of her home, offering him her household's hospitality and protection—and that's a big deal in this culture—but then she breaks that hospitality, killing him in his sleep in graphic, gory fashion. And *she's* the one who finally defeats this enemy commander. Not Deborah. Not Barak. Not the army. Instead this woman coming out of nowhere into the story. The song ends with an abrupt shift to the perspective of someone we might not

expect. It goes to the window of Sisera's mother, yes the mother of the commander who had just been killed. It's kind of heartbreaking. She's looking out her window, wondering why it has taken so long for her son and his army to come back. Her attendants tell her it's surely because they're so busy raping and pillaging that it's taking them a bit longer than anticipated, so they're not exactly innocents here. But nevertheless, the song seems to relish in the fact that this mother and these women will soon receive the news that the army would not be coming back and that Sisera himself had been killed.

"And the land had rest forty years," it says in v. 31, wrapping up the story. And now you have no idea what to make of all this. Because think about it. Who's supposed to be the hero in all of this? The Israelites? Heck, only half the tribes even bothered to show up to the fight. Barak, their leader? He didn't exactly show a deep trust in God from the get-go, and it wasn't like he was some brilliant tactician either. Nothing he did won the battle for them, and it wasn't him who caught Sisera either. Was it Jael? Sure she was the one who actually killed Sisera, ending the threat of his army for good, but she did so by deceiving him and breaking the somewhat sacred pact of hospitality, inviting this man into her home, promising him protection, giving him milk to make him sleep, and then driving a tent peg through his skull. Or was it Deborah? The prophetess who got this whole thing started. She's the one who summoned Barak, the one who called upon him to gather the army, the one who went with him when he insisted, the one who rallied him to action when the day of battle had come. But then she's also the one singing this song, which means she's the one celebrating that Sisera's mother was looking out the window anxiously, wondering why her son hadn't come home yet. I mean, I get celebrating a victory, but relishing the fact that the general's mother would be devastated when she learned of her son's gruesome death? That's just cruel. That's Deborah. That's her song.

So who are you supposed to root for here? Who's the one that God has raised up to deliver his people? It's not entirely clear. But maybe that's the point. It's not a groundbreaking statement to make to say that the gears of the world turn by the actions and decisions of deeply flawed, even at times despicable people. Sometimes you can sense a clarity of right and wrong, like Russia's aggression against Ukraine. But often the lines aren't so clear. Or even if the lines are clear, those on what you sense to be the right side may not be ones you're eager to root for either. Think about World War II. It seems pretty clear now that Germany's actions of aggression and brutality needed to be resisted, but do you think Roosevelt and Churchill felt all that great rooting for Josef Stalin against him on the Eastern Front? It's not like Roosevelt and Churchill were a couple of saints either. And even in arenas perhaps a bit less intense than global geopolitics. How many times have you gone into a voting booth, seeing the options in front of you, for whatever office it might be, and sometimes there might be someone you feel strongly about, but how many times has a choice felt like choosing the lesser of who cares?

Sometimes it's hard to know who you're supposed to root for. I think this story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael puts that front and center. Just as Israel continues its downward spiral, so too does the quality of its judges, of those whom God raises up to deliver the people. It gets harder and harder to really admire them as heroes. But still, the message seems to be that though it's not so easy to identify Deborah or Barak or Jael as the human hero of the story, the true architect of Israel's deliverance is never in question. For it is the Lord who sends the storm and the torrent to throw the enemy into a panic. It is the Lord who hears Israel's cry. And it is the Lord who is able to use even the flawed motives, the deception, the tricks, the cowardice, the dishonor of a less-than-admirable crew to bring about the restoration of his people.

As it turns out, God's still at work that way. It remains a great mystery why God, after Christ's sacrifice on the cross and the glory of his resurrection, chose to make that witness known throughout the world not through further displays of miraculous power or of Jesus going on a never-ending tour around the world sharing the good news, but instead through the flawed, compromised work of a just as flawed and compromised group known as the church.

So even now, as you see across the headlines or social media or whatever scene you might look out on, and as you may feel discouraged about the assortment of flawed even despicable characters at work in the world, you might wonder, "Just who am I supposed to root for here? What good could come from a crew this messed up?" Know that that is how God has been at work for a long time and continues to use the broken pieces of a broken world to bring about something better.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“No Direction Home: Down a Peg or Two”

Dr. Jay Howell

March 20, 2022

We continue in our series “No Direction Home,” a journey through the Old Testament book of Judges. As we’ve shared, this is a book that’s not often explored in-depth, probably because it’s not entirely encouraging. It’s gory. The characters that maybe we think we should think of heroes often don’t actually come off looking like heroes. The whole thing is cycle after cycle of Israel forsaking God, being subdued by its enemies, crying out, then being delivered by a “judge” sent from the Lord, only to forsake the Lord again. But we’re looking at it, because this book is a story that over and over points out just how corrupted the human heart can become against our Maker—not just the Israelites, not just them, but us. And that’s a point that perhaps we need to hear especially in this season of Lent, when we consider just how much in need of a Savior we are, because on our own, we’re not capable of very much at all.

That in fact is a big part of the story we explore today, the story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

*“Awake, awake, Deborah;
Awake, awake, sing a song!
Arise, Barak, and lead away your captives, son of Abinoam.
Then survivors came down to the nobles;
The people of the Lord came down to me as warriors.
From Ephraim those whose root is in Amalek came down,
Following you, Benjamin, with your peoples;
From Machir commanders came down,
And from Zebulun those who wield the staff of office.
And the princes of Issachar were with Deborah;
As was Issachar, so was Barak;
Into the valley they rushed at his heels;
Among the divisions of Reuben
There were great determinations of heart.
Why did you sit among the sheepfolds,
To hear the piping for the flocks?
Among the divisions of Reuben
There were great searchings of heart.
Gilead remained across the Jordan;
And why did Dan stay on ships?
Asher sat at the seashore,
And remained by its landings.
Zebulun was a people who risked their lives,
And Naphtali too, on the high places of the field.*

*“The kings came and fought;
Then the kings of Canaan fought
At Taanach near the waters of Megiddo;
They took no plunder in silver.
The stars fought from heaven,
From their paths they fought against Sisera.
The torrent of Kishon swept them away,
The ancient torrent, the torrent Kishon.
My soul, march on with strength!
Then the horses’ hoofs beat
From the galloping, the galloping of his mighty stallions.
‘Curse Meroz,’ said the angel of the Lord,
‘Utterly curse its inhabitants,*

*Because they did not come to the help of the Lord,
To the help of the Lord against the warriors.'*

*"Most blessed of women is Jael,
The wife of Heber the Kenite;
Most blessed is she of women in the tent.
He asked for water, she gave him milk;
In a magnificent bowl she brought him curds.
She reached out her hand for the tent peg,
And her right hand for the workmen's hammer.
Then she struck Sisera, she smashed his head;
And she shattered and pierced his temple.
Between her feet he bowed, he fell, he lay;
Between her feet he bowed, he fell;
Where he bowed, there he fell dead.*

*"Out of the window she looked and wailed,
The mother of Sisera through the lattice,
'Why does his chariot delay in coming?
Why do the hoofbeats of his chariots delay?'
Her wise princesses would answer her,
Indeed she repeats her words to herself,
'Are they not finding, are they not dividing the spoils?
A concubine, two concubines for every warrior;
To Sisera a spoil of dyed cloth,
A spoil of dyed cloth embroidered,
Dyed cloth of double embroidery on the neck of the plunderer?'
May all Your enemies perish in this way, Lord;
But may those who love Him be like the rising of the sun in its might."
And the land was at rest for forty years. **Judges 5:12-31***

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Sometimes it's hard to know who to root for, especially if you feel the options aren't quite so clear cut. You come across this every so often. Two teams you dislike, or two players you're not so fond of, and they end up playing each other. Who do you root for? Well, you end up saying something like, "Well can they both lose?"

Or maybe not necessarily two teams or players you don't especially like. Maybe just two teams or players whose flaws you're pretty familiar with, not just flaws in their game, but flaws in their character, in their personality, in their motives. Makes you feel not so confident or comfortable in hoping for their victory, or not so celebratory should they actually win. It's not like there was necessarily a clear-cut alternative, but it still doesn't make you feel so great.

Well, y'all, I'm afraid this may be that sort of story, one in which, when you think about it, it's not quite so easy to know who to root for, or at least not so sure how celebratory you should be for them. This is the story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael. The passage we read in chapter five of the Book of Judges is actually part of a song, a song that retells the story of what happened in the chapter prior. So this whole thing is a song from two people named Deborah and Barak, after all the major things happened in their story.

Here's what happened. Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, so as it happens over and over in the Book of Judges, God gives them up to a rival king, and in this case it was a king named Jabin of the land of Canaan, situated just to the north of Israel, so this was a neighbor. And Israel languished under Jabin for twenty years. Jabin's really not that big a factor in the story. The one who is is the commander of Jabin's army is a man named Sisera. A big thing to know about Sisera is that he's leading an army featuring nine hundred chariots of iron. And not that we have to be experts of ancient warfare to understand this, but if you're coming to a fight with some rusty, dull blades and the others are coming with metal chariots, to some degree it doesn't matter how brave you are if you don't account for chariots coming at you, bringing a knife to a gunfight, so to speak. So Israel languished under their rule. They cried out, so God raised up someone to deliver them.

Here's where it starts to get a bit muddled though. Normally when Israel cries out to God, the book will say something like, "God raised up as a deliverer *so-and-so*." But we don't get that kind of clarity here. The clearest candidate is the next person we hear about when the story is told in chapter four and is the same as one of the singers whose words we read here in chapter 5: a prophetess named Deborah. Apparently, Deborah had been settling minor disputes among the Israelites during this time, as she would "judge" between them. But it's not so clear that she was specifically the one that God raised up to deliver Israel. Never says she was.

Deborah summons a man named Barak, who seems to be the closest thing Israel had to a military leader at the time. Deborah tells him to gather 10,000 soldiers to him and that God would deliver Sisera, the enemy commander with his 900 iron chariots, into his hands. So now it seems maybe Barak is the one that God is raising up. He's got the army. He's leading them into battle. He seems to fit the bill. But then Barak kind of shrinks away from it. He says in chapter 4 that he would only go if Deborah went with him. Not exactly the sort of bravery or trust in the Lord you would hope to see out of God's chosen deliverer. But Deborah goes with him, and Barak does summon 10,000 soldiers from the tribes of Israel. However, even then Barak doesn't seem to be so inspiring. One part of the song that we read talks about how only half the tribes actually answer the call. The other half refuse the call or just aren't heard from at all. Not exactly a stirring scene of an oppressed people rising up as one to throw off the shackles of their oppressors.

Nevertheless, Barak summons his army, as Deborah instructed him to do. And Sisera, with his army and his 900 chariots, comes to the fight. Must have been quite the scene. You have the Israelite army, half-gathered in faith but woefully unprepared, since they're still facing off against an army with advanced technology, like bringing a bunch of muskets against tanks and machine guns. And I don't think we're led to believe this was some kind of "Braveheart" moment either. You know, where the Scottish rebels, led by William Wallace, are facing off against the English army, in particular their cavalry. Completely outmatched. But taking advantage of English arrogance, when the cavalry charge, the Scots reveal they've made hundreds of sharp wooden pikes to stop the horses' charge. There's no indication that anything like that has happened, some kind of clever tactic. Instead, it seems like Deborah and Barak have brought a knife to a gunfight, and oh to be in the shoes of those soldiers once the chariots start coming toward them.

But then God shows up. Starting in v. 19: "The stars fought from heaven, from their courses they fought against Sisera. The torrent Kishon swept them away, the onrushing torrent, the torrent Kishon. March on, my soul, with might! Then loud beat the horses' hoofs with the galloping, galloping of his steeds." What seems to have happened is that God sent a sudden rainstorm, the heavens fighting against Sisera, as it puts it, causing a flash flood of the small river flowing through the battlefield. This threw the horses into a panic, at which point Sisera doesn't have so much of an advantage anymore, and Deborah, Barak, and the Israelite army win the day.

Except Sisera gets away. That'd be the moment of glory for an army's leader like Barak: capturing or killing the enemy commander, but he doesn't get him. Sisera gets away from the battle and is running for his life. And he comes to the home of a man named Heber the Kenite. Heber isn't there, but his wife Jael is. Heber was likely a metalworker, and he and his wife weren't even Israelites. They're not even fully a part of their own clan. It turns out that they had left their homeland in the south to come north to this area, probably so that he could profit from Sisera's army. Heber was a metalworker. Sisera needed lots of iron chariots. Definitely some profit to be made. So it's like Sisera was coming to the home of his arms dealer. Reason to think he'd be safe there. So Jael beckons him in and hides him from the pursuing Israelites. Sisera asks for water, but Jael instead gives him milk, which puts him to sleep. And once he's asleep, Jael goes up to him, takes a tent peg and a mallet, and drives the tent peg through Sisera's temple until it comes out the other side, killing him. It catches you off guard, because why on earth would she do this? She's not an Israelite, and in fact it would seem that her household has profited greatly from Sisera. Maybe she was going with the winning hand, and Israel had just won. Or maybe she was one who maintained faith in God, even though she wasn't an Israelite.

We have no idea, because it doesn't tell us. What we do know is that she invited this man in, under the protection of her home, offering him her household's hospitality and protection—and that's a big deal in this culture—but then she breaks that hospitality, killing him in his sleep in graphic, gory fashion. And *she's* the one who finally defeats this enemy commander. Not Deborah. Not Barak. Not the army. Instead this woman coming out of nowhere into the story. The song ends with an abrupt shift to the perspective of someone we might not

expect. It goes to the window of Sisera's mother, yes the mother of the commander who had just been killed. It's kind of heartbreaking. She's looking out her window, wondering why it has taken so long for her son and his army to come back. Her attendants tell her it's surely because they're so busy raping and pillaging that it's taking them a bit longer than anticipated, so they're not exactly innocents here. But nevertheless, the song seems to relish in the fact that this mother and these women will soon receive the news that the army would not be coming back and that Sisera himself had been killed.

"And the land had rest forty years," it says in v. 31, wrapping up the story. And now you have no idea what to make of all this. Because think about it. Who's supposed to be the hero in all of this? The Israelites? Heck, only half the tribes even bothered to show up to the fight. Barak, their leader? He didn't exactly show a deep trust in God from the get-go, and it wasn't like he was some brilliant tactician either. Nothing he did won the battle for them, and it wasn't him who caught Sisera either. Was it Jael? Sure she was the one who actually killed Sisera, ending the threat of his army for good, but she did so by deceiving him and breaking the somewhat sacred pact of hospitality, inviting this man into her home, promising him protection, giving him milk to make him sleep, and then driving a tent peg through his skull. Or was it Deborah? The prophetess who got this whole thing started. She's the one who summoned Barak, the one who called upon him to gather the army, the one who went with him when he insisted, the one who rallied him to action when the day of battle had come. But then she's also the one singing this song, which means she's the one celebrating that Sisera's mother was looking out the window anxiously, wondering why her son hadn't come home yet. I mean, I get celebrating a victory, but relishing the fact that the general's mother would be devastated when she learned of her son's gruesome death? That's just cruel. That's Deborah. That's her song.

So who are you supposed to root for here? Who's the one that God has raised up to deliver his people? It's not entirely clear. But maybe that's the point. It's not a groundbreaking statement to make to say that the gears of the world turn by the actions and decisions of deeply flawed, even at times despicable people. Sometimes you can sense a clarity of right and wrong, like Russia's aggression against Ukraine. But often the lines aren't so clear. Or even if the lines are clear, those on what you sense to be the right side may not be ones you're eager to root for either. Think about World War II. It seems pretty clear now that Germany's actions of aggression and brutality needed to be resisted, but do you think Roosevelt and Churchill felt all that great rooting for Josef Stalin against him on the Eastern Front? It's not like Roosevelt and Churchill were a couple of saints either. And even in arenas perhaps a bit less intense than global geopolitics. How many times have you gone into a voting booth, seeing the options in front of you, for whatever office it might be, and sometimes there might be someone you feel strongly about, but how many times has a choice felt like choosing the lesser of who cares?

Sometimes it's hard to know who you're supposed to root for. I think this story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael puts that front and center. Just as Israel continues its downward spiral, so too does the quality of its judges, of those whom God raises up to deliver the people. It gets harder and harder to really admire them as heroes. But still, the message seems to be that though it's not so easy to identify Deborah or Barak or Jael as the human hero of the story, the true architect of Israel's deliverance is never in question. For it is the Lord who sends the storm and the torrent to throw the enemy into a panic. It is the Lord who hears Israel's cry. And it is the Lord who is able to use even the flawed motives, the deception, the tricks, the cowardice, the dishonor of a less-than-admirable crew to bring about the restoration of his people.

As it turns out, God's still at work that way. It remains a great mystery why God, after Christ's sacrifice on the cross and the glory of his resurrection, chose to make that witness known throughout the world not through further displays of miraculous power or of Jesus going on a never-ending tour around the world sharing the good news, but instead through the flawed, compromised work of a just as flawed and compromised group known as the church.

So even now, as you see across the headlines or social media or whatever scene you might look out on, and as you may feel discouraged about the assortment of flawed even despicable characters at work in the world, you might wonder, "Just who am I supposed to root for here? What good could come from a crew this messed up?" Know that that is how God has been at work for a long time and continues to use the broken pieces of a broken world to bring about something better.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“No Direction Home: Down a Peg or Two”

Dr. Jay Howell

March 20, 2022

We continue in our series “No Direction Home,” a journey through the Old Testament book of Judges. As we’ve shared, this is a book that’s not often explored in-depth, probably because it’s not entirely encouraging. It’s gory. The characters that maybe we think we should think of heroes often don’t actually come off looking like heroes. The whole thing is cycle after cycle of Israel forsaking God, being subdued by its enemies, crying out, then being delivered by a “judge” sent from the Lord, only to forsake the Lord again. But we’re looking at it, because this book is a story that over and over points out just how corrupted the human heart can become against our Maker—not just the Israelites, not just them, but us. And that’s a point that perhaps we need to hear especially in this season of Lent, when we consider just how much in need of a Savior we are, because on our own, we’re not capable of very much at all.

That in fact is a big part of the story we explore today, the story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

*“Awake, awake, Deborah;
Awake, awake, sing a song!
Arise, Barak, and lead away your captives, son of Abinoam.
Then survivors came down to the nobles;
The people of the Lord came down to me as warriors.
From Ephraim those whose root is in Amalek came down,
Following you, Benjamin, with your peoples;
From Machir commanders came down,
And from Zebulun those who wield the staff of office.
And the princes of Issachar were with Deborah;
As was Issachar, so was Barak;
Into the valley they rushed at his heels;
Among the divisions of Reuben
There were great determinations of heart.
Why did you sit among the sheepfolds,
To hear the piping for the flocks?
Among the divisions of Reuben
There were great searchings of heart.
Gilead remained across the Jordan;
And why did Dan stay on ships?
Asher sat at the seashore,
And remained by its landings.
Zebulun was a people who risked their lives,
And Naphtali too, on the high places of the field.*

*“The kings came and fought;
Then the kings of Canaan fought
At Taanach near the waters of Megiddo;
They took no plunder in silver.
The stars fought from heaven,
From their paths they fought against Sisera.
The torrent of Kishon swept them away,
The ancient torrent, the torrent Kishon.
My soul, march on with strength!
Then the horses’ hoofs beat
From the galloping, the galloping of his mighty stallions.
‘Curse Meroz,’ said the angel of the Lord,
‘Utterly curse its inhabitants,*

*Because they did not come to the help of the Lord,
To the help of the Lord against the warriors.'*

*"Most blessed of women is Jael,
The wife of Heber the Kenite;
Most blessed is she of women in the tent.
He asked for water, she gave him milk;
In a magnificent bowl she brought him curds.
She reached out her hand for the tent peg,
And her right hand for the workmen's hammer.
Then she struck Sisera, she smashed his head;
And she shattered and pierced his temple.
Between her feet he bowed, he fell, he lay;
Between her feet he bowed, he fell;
Where he bowed, there he fell dead.*

*"Out of the window she looked and wailed,
The mother of Sisera through the lattice,
'Why does his chariot delay in coming?
Why do the hoofbeats of his chariots delay?'
Her wise princesses would answer her,
Indeed she repeats her words to herself,
'Are they not finding, are they not dividing the spoils?
A concubine, two concubines for every warrior;
To Sisera a spoil of dyed cloth,
A spoil of dyed cloth embroidered,
Dyed cloth of double embroidery on the neck of the plunderer?'
May all Your enemies perish in this way, Lord;
But may those who love Him be like the rising of the sun in its might."
And the land was at rest for forty years. **Judges 5:12-31***

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Sometimes it's hard to know who to root for, especially if you feel the options aren't quite so clear cut. You come across this every so often. Two teams you dislike, or two players you're not so fond of, and they end up playing each other. Who do you root for? Well, you end up saying something like, "Well can they both lose?"

Or maybe not necessarily two teams or players you don't especially like. Maybe just two teams or players whose flaws you're pretty familiar with, not just flaws in their game, but flaws in their character, in their personality, in their motives. Makes you feel not so confident or comfortable in hoping for their victory, or not so celebratory should they actually win. It's not like there was necessarily a clear-cut alternative, but it still doesn't make you feel so great.

Well, y'all, I'm afraid this may be that sort of story, one in which, when you think about it, it's not quite so easy to know who to root for, or at least not so sure how celebratory you should be for them. This is the story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael. The passage we read in chapter five of the Book of Judges is actually part of a song, a song that retells the story of what happened in the chapter prior. So this whole thing is a song from two people named Deborah and Barak, after all the major things happened in their story.

Here's what happened. Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, so as it happens over and over in the Book of Judges, God gives them up to a rival king, and in this case it was a king named Jabin of the land of Canaan, situated just to the north of Israel, so this was a neighbor. And Israel languished under Jabin for twenty years. Jabin's really not that big a factor in the story. The one who is is the commander of Jabin's army is a man named Sisera. A big thing to know about Sisera is that he's leading an army featuring nine hundred chariots of iron. And not that we have to be experts of ancient warfare to understand this, but if you're coming to a fight with some rusty, dull blades and the others are coming with metal chariots, to some degree it doesn't matter how brave you are if you don't account for chariots coming at you, bringing a knife to a gunfight, so to speak. So Israel languished under their rule. They cried out, so God raised up someone to deliver them.

Here's where it starts to get a bit muddled though. Normally when Israel cries out to God, the book will say something like, "God raised up as a deliverer *so-and-so*." But we don't get that kind of clarity here. The clearest candidate is the next person we hear about when the story is told in chapter four and is the same as one of the singers whose words we read here in chapter 5: a prophetess named Deborah. Apparently, Deborah had been settling minor disputes among the Israelites during this time, as she would "judge" between them. But it's not so clear that she was specifically the one that God raised up to deliver Israel. Never says she was.

Deborah summons a man named Barak, who seems to be the closest thing Israel had to a military leader at the time. Deborah tells him to gather 10,000 soldiers to him and that God would deliver Sisera, the enemy commander with his 900 iron chariots, into his hands. So now it seems maybe Barak is the one that God is raising up. He's got the army. He's leading them into battle. He seems to fit the bill. But then Barak kind of shrinks away from it. He says in chapter 4 that he would only go if Deborah went with him. Not exactly the sort of bravery or trust in the Lord you would hope to see out of God's chosen deliverer. But Deborah goes with him, and Barak does summon 10,000 soldiers from the tribes of Israel. However, even then Barak doesn't seem to be so inspiring. One part of the song that we read talks about how only half the tribes actually answer the call. The other half refuse the call or just aren't heard from at all. Not exactly a stirring scene of an oppressed people rising up as one to throw off the shackles of their oppressors.

Nevertheless, Barak summons his army, as Deborah instructed him to do. And Sisera, with his army and his 900 chariots, comes to the fight. Must have been quite the scene. You have the Israelite army, half-gathered in faith but woefully unprepared, since they're still facing off against an army with advanced technology, like bringing a bunch of muskets against tanks and machine guns. And I don't think we're led to believe this was some kind of "Braveheart" moment either. You know, where the Scottish rebels, led by William Wallace, are facing off against the English army, in particular their cavalry. Completely outmatched. But taking advantage of English arrogance, when the cavalry charge, the Scots reveal they've made hundreds of sharp wooden pikes to stop the horses' charge. There's no indication that anything like that has happened, some kind of clever tactic. Instead, it seems like Deborah and Barak have brought a knife to a gunfight, and oh to be in the shoes of those soldiers once the chariots start coming toward them.

But then God shows up. Starting in v. 19: "The stars fought from heaven, from their courses they fought against Sisera. The torrent Kishon swept them away, the onrushing torrent, the torrent Kishon. March on, my soul, with might! Then loud beat the horses' hoofs with the galloping, galloping of his steeds." What seems to have happened is that God sent a sudden rainstorm, the heavens fighting against Sisera, as it puts it, causing a flash flood of the small river flowing through the battlefield. This threw the horses into a panic, at which point Sisera doesn't have so much of an advantage anymore, and Deborah, Barak, and the Israelite army win the day.

Except Sisera gets away. That'd be the moment of glory for an army's leader like Barak: capturing or killing the enemy commander, but he doesn't get him. Sisera gets away from the battle and is running for his life. And he comes to the home of a man named Heber the Kenite. Heber isn't there, but his wife Jael is. Heber was likely a metalworker, and he and his wife weren't even Israelites. They're not even fully a part of their own clan. It turns out that they had left their homeland in the south to come north to this area, probably so that he could profit from Sisera's army. Heber was a metalworker. Sisera needed lots of iron chariots. Definitely some profit to be made. So it's like Sisera was coming to the home of his arms dealer. Reason to think he'd be safe there. So Jael beckons him in and hides him from the pursuing Israelites. Sisera asks for water, but Jael instead gives him milk, which puts him to sleep. And once he's asleep, Jael goes up to him, takes a tent peg and a mallet, and drives the tent peg through Sisera's temple until it comes out the other side, killing him. It catches you off guard, because why on earth would she do this? She's not an Israelite, and in fact it would seem that her household has profited greatly from Sisera. Maybe she was going with the winning hand, and Israel had just won. Or maybe she was one who maintained faith in God, even though she wasn't an Israelite.

We have no idea, because it doesn't tell us. What we do know is that she invited this man in, under the protection of her home, offering him her household's hospitality and protection—and that's a big deal in this culture—but then she breaks that hospitality, killing him in his sleep in graphic, gory fashion. And *she's* the one who finally defeats this enemy commander. Not Deborah. Not Barak. Not the army. Instead this woman coming out of nowhere into the story. The song ends with an abrupt shift to the perspective of someone we might not

expect. It goes to the window of Sisera's mother, yes the mother of the commander who had just been killed. It's kind of heartbreaking. She's looking out her window, wondering why it has taken so long for her son and his army to come back. Her attendants tell her it's surely because they're so busy raping and pillaging that it's taking them a bit longer than anticipated, so they're not exactly innocents here. But nevertheless, the song seems to relish in the fact that this mother and these women will soon receive the news that the army would not be coming back and that Sisera himself had been killed.

"And the land had rest forty years," it says in v. 31, wrapping up the story. And now you have no idea what to make of all this. Because think about it. Who's supposed to be the hero in all of this? The Israelites? Heck, only half the tribes even bothered to show up to the fight. Barak, their leader? He didn't exactly show a deep trust in God from the get-go, and it wasn't like he was some brilliant tactician either. Nothing he did won the battle for them, and it wasn't him who caught Sisera either. Was it Jael? Sure she was the one who actually killed Sisera, ending the threat of his army for good, but she did so by deceiving him and breaking the somewhat sacred pact of hospitality, inviting this man into her home, promising him protection, giving him milk to make him sleep, and then driving a tent peg through his skull. Or was it Deborah? The prophetess who got this whole thing started. She's the one who summoned Barak, the one who called upon him to gather the army, the one who went with him when he insisted, the one who rallied him to action when the day of battle had come. But then she's also the one singing this song, which means she's the one celebrating that Sisera's mother was looking out the window anxiously, wondering why her son hadn't come home yet. I mean, I get celebrating a victory, but relishing the fact that the general's mother would be devastated when she learned of her son's gruesome death? That's just cruel. That's Deborah. That's her song.

So who are you supposed to root for here? Who's the one that God has raised up to deliver his people? It's not entirely clear. But maybe that's the point. It's not a groundbreaking statement to make to say that the gears of the world turn by the actions and decisions of deeply flawed, even at times despicable people. Sometimes you can sense a clarity of right and wrong, like Russia's aggression against Ukraine. But often the lines aren't so clear. Or even if the lines are clear, those on what you sense to be the right side may not be ones you're eager to root for either. Think about World War II. It seems pretty clear now that Germany's actions of aggression and brutality needed to be resisted, but do you think Roosevelt and Churchill felt all that great rooting for Josef Stalin against him on the Eastern Front? It's not like Roosevelt and Churchill were a couple of saints either. And even in arenas perhaps a bit less intense than global geopolitics. How many times have you gone into a voting booth, seeing the options in front of you, for whatever office it might be, and sometimes there might be someone you feel strongly about, but how many times has a choice felt like choosing the lesser of who cares?

Sometimes it's hard to know who you're supposed to root for. I think this story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael puts that front and center. Just as Israel continues its downward spiral, so too does the quality of its judges, of those whom God raises up to deliver the people. It gets harder and harder to really admire them as heroes. But still, the message seems to be that though it's not so easy to identify Deborah or Barak or Jael as the human hero of the story, the true architect of Israel's deliverance is never in question. For it is the Lord who sends the storm and the torrent to throw the enemy into a panic. It is the Lord who hears Israel's cry. And it is the Lord who is able to use even the flawed motives, the deception, the tricks, the cowardice, the dishonor of a less-than-admirable crew to bring about the restoration of his people.

As it turns out, God's still at work that way. It remains a great mystery why God, after Christ's sacrifice on the cross and the glory of his resurrection, chose to make that witness known throughout the world not through further displays of miraculous power or of Jesus going on a never-ending tour around the world sharing the good news, but instead through the flawed, compromised work of a just as flawed and compromised group known as the church.

So even now, as you see across the headlines or social media or whatever scene you might look out on, and as you may feel discouraged about the assortment of flawed even despicable characters at work in the world, you might wonder, "Just who am I supposed to root for here? What good could come from a crew this messed up?" Know that that is how God has been at work for a long time and continues to use the broken pieces of a broken world to bring about something better.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“No Direction Home: Down a Peg or Two”

Dr. Jay Howell

March 20, 2022

We continue in our series “No Direction Home,” a journey through the Old Testament book of Judges. As we’ve shared, this is a book that’s not often explored in-depth, probably because it’s not entirely encouraging. It’s gory. The characters that maybe we think we should think of heroes often don’t actually come off looking like heroes. The whole thing is cycle after cycle of Israel forsaking God, being subdued by its enemies, crying out, then being delivered by a “judge” sent from the Lord, only to forsake the Lord again. But we’re looking at it, because this book is a story that over and over points out just how corrupted the human heart can become against our Maker—not just the Israelites, not just them, but us. And that’s a point that perhaps we need to hear especially in this season of Lent, when we consider just how much in need of a Savior we are, because on our own, we’re not capable of very much at all.

That in fact is a big part of the story we explore today, the story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

*“Awake, awake, Deborah;
Awake, awake, sing a song!
Arise, Barak, and lead away your captives, son of Abinoam.
Then survivors came down to the nobles;
The people of the Lord came down to me as warriors.
From Ephraim those whose root is in Amalek came down,
Following you, Benjamin, with your peoples;
From Machir commanders came down,
And from Zebulun those who wield the staff of office.
And the princes of Issachar were with Deborah;
As was Issachar, so was Barak;
Into the valley they rushed at his heels;
Among the divisions of Reuben
There were great determinations of heart.
Why did you sit among the sheepfolds,
To hear the piping for the flocks?
Among the divisions of Reuben
There were great searchings of heart.
Gilead remained across the Jordan;
And why did Dan stay on ships?
Asher sat at the seashore,
And remained by its landings.
Zebulun was a people who risked their lives,
And Naphtali too, on the high places of the field.*

*“The kings came and fought;
Then the kings of Canaan fought
At Taanach near the waters of Megiddo;
They took no plunder in silver.
The stars fought from heaven,
From their paths they fought against Sisera.
The torrent of Kishon swept them away,
The ancient torrent, the torrent Kishon.
My soul, march on with strength!
Then the horses’ hoofs beat
From the galloping, the galloping of his mighty stallions.
‘Curse Meroz,’ said the angel of the Lord,
‘Utterly curse its inhabitants,*

*Because they did not come to the help of the Lord,
To the help of the Lord against the warriors.'*

*"Most blessed of women is Jael,
The wife of Heber the Kenite;
Most blessed is she of women in the tent.
He asked for water, she gave him milk;
In a magnificent bowl she brought him curds.
She reached out her hand for the tent peg,
And her right hand for the workmen's hammer.
Then she struck Sisera, she smashed his head;
And she shattered and pierced his temple.
Between her feet he bowed, he fell, he lay;
Between her feet he bowed, he fell;
Where he bowed, there he fell dead.*

*"Out of the window she looked and wailed,
The mother of Sisera through the lattice,
'Why does his chariot delay in coming?
Why do the hoofbeats of his chariots delay?'
Her wise princesses would answer her,
Indeed she repeats her words to herself,
'Are they not finding, are they not dividing the spoils?
A concubine, two concubines for every warrior;
To Sisera a spoil of dyed cloth,
A spoil of dyed cloth embroidered,
Dyed cloth of double embroidery on the neck of the plunderer?'
May all Your enemies perish in this way, Lord;
But may those who love Him be like the rising of the sun in its might."
And the land was at rest for forty years. **Judges 5:12-31***

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Sometimes it's hard to know who to root for, especially if you feel the options aren't quite so clear cut. You come across this every so often. Two teams you dislike, or two players you're not so fond of, and they end up playing each other. Who do you root for? Well, you end up saying something like, "Well can they both lose?"

Or maybe not necessarily two teams or players you don't especially like. Maybe just two teams or players whose flaws you're pretty familiar with, not just flaws in their game, but flaws in their character, in their personality, in their motives. Makes you feel not so confident or comfortable in hoping for their victory, or not so celebratory should they actually win. It's not like there was necessarily a clear-cut alternative, but it still doesn't make you feel so great.

Well, y'all, I'm afraid this may be that sort of story, one in which, when you think about it, it's not quite so easy to know who to root for, or at least not so sure how celebratory you should be for them. This is the story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael. The passage we read in chapter five of the Book of Judges is actually part of a song, a song that retells the story of what happened in the chapter prior. So this whole thing is a song from two people named Deborah and Barak, after all the major things happened in their story.

Here's what happened. Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, so as it happens over and over in the Book of Judges, God gives them up to a rival king, and in this case it was a king named Jabin of the land of Canaan, situated just to the north of Israel, so this was a neighbor. And Israel languished under Jabin for twenty years. Jabin's really not that big a factor in the story. The one who is is the commander of Jabin's army is a man named Sisera. A big thing to know about Sisera is that he's leading an army featuring nine hundred chariots of iron. And not that we have to be experts of ancient warfare to understand this, but if you're coming to a fight with some rusty, dull blades and the others are coming with metal chariots, to some degree it doesn't matter how brave you are if you don't account for chariots coming at you, bringing a knife to a gunfight, so to speak. So Israel languished under their rule. They cried out, so God raised up someone to deliver them.

Here's where it starts to get a bit muddled though. Normally when Israel cries out to God, the book will say something like, "God raised up as a deliverer *so-and-so*." But we don't get that kind of clarity here. The clearest candidate is the next person we hear about when the story is told in chapter four and is the same as one of the singers whose words we read here in chapter 5: a prophetess named Deborah. Apparently, Deborah had been settling minor disputes among the Israelites during this time, as she would "judge" between them. But it's not so clear that she was specifically the one that God raised up to deliver Israel. Never says she was.

Deborah summons a man named Barak, who seems to be the closest thing Israel had to a military leader at the time. Deborah tells him to gather 10,000 soldiers to him and that God would deliver Sisera, the enemy commander with his 900 iron chariots, into his hands. So now it seems maybe Barak is the one that God is raising up. He's got the army. He's leading them into battle. He seems to fit the bill. But then Barak kind of shrinks away from it. He says in chapter 4 that he would only go if Deborah went with him. Not exactly the sort of bravery or trust in the Lord you would hope to see out of God's chosen deliverer. But Deborah goes with him, and Barak does summon 10,000 soldiers from the tribes of Israel. However, even then Barak doesn't seem to be so inspiring. One part of the song that we read talks about how only half the tribes actually answer the call. The other half refuse the call or just aren't heard from at all. Not exactly a stirring scene of an oppressed people rising up as one to throw off the shackles of their oppressors.

Nevertheless, Barak summons his army, as Deborah instructed him to do. And Sisera, with his army and his 900 chariots, comes to the fight. Must have been quite the scene. You have the Israelite army, half-gathered in faith but woefully unprepared, since they're still facing off against an army with advanced technology, like bringing a bunch of muskets against tanks and machine guns. And I don't think we're led to believe this was some kind of "Braveheart" moment either. You know, where the Scottish rebels, led by William Wallace, are facing off against the English army, in particular their cavalry. Completely outmatched. But taking advantage of English arrogance, when the cavalry charge, the Scots reveal they've made hundreds of sharp wooden pikes to stop the horses' charge. There's no indication that anything like that has happened, some kind of clever tactic. Instead, it seems like Deborah and Barak have brought a knife to a gunfight, and oh to be in the shoes of those soldiers once the chariots start coming toward them.

But then God shows up. Starting in v. 19: "The stars fought from heaven, from their courses they fought against Sisera. The torrent Kishon swept them away, the onrushing torrent, the torrent Kishon. March on, my soul, with might! Then loud beat the horses' hoofs with the galloping, galloping of his steeds." What seems to have happened is that God sent a sudden rainstorm, the heavens fighting against Sisera, as it puts it, causing a flash flood of the small river flowing through the battlefield. This threw the horses into a panic, at which point Sisera doesn't have so much of an advantage anymore, and Deborah, Barak, and the Israelite army win the day.

Except Sisera gets away. That'd be the moment of glory for an army's leader like Barak: capturing or killing the enemy commander, but he doesn't get him. Sisera gets away from the battle and is running for his life. And he comes to the home of a man named Heber the Kenite. Heber isn't there, but his wife Jael is. Heber was likely a metalworker, and he and his wife weren't even Israelites. They're not even fully a part of their own clan. It turns out that they had left their homeland in the south to come north to this area, probably so that he could profit from Sisera's army. Heber was a metalworker. Sisera needed lots of iron chariots. Definitely some profit to be made. So it's like Sisera was coming to the home of his arms dealer. Reason to think he'd be safe there. So Jael beckons him in and hides him from the pursuing Israelites. Sisera asks for water, but Jael instead gives him milk, which puts him to sleep. And once he's asleep, Jael goes up to him, takes a tent peg and a mallet, and drives the tent peg through Sisera's temple until it comes out the other side, killing him. It catches you off guard, because why on earth would she do this? She's not an Israelite, and in fact it would seem that her household has profited greatly from Sisera. Maybe she was going with the winning hand, and Israel had just won. Or maybe she was one who maintained faith in God, even though she wasn't an Israelite.

We have no idea, because it doesn't tell us. What we do know is that she invited this man in, under the protection of her home, offering him her household's hospitality and protection—and that's a big deal in this culture—but then she breaks that hospitality, killing him in his sleep in graphic, gory fashion. And *she's* the one who finally defeats this enemy commander. Not Deborah. Not Barak. Not the army. Instead this woman coming out of nowhere into the story. The song ends with an abrupt shift to the perspective of someone we might not

expect. It goes to the window of Sisera's mother, yes the mother of the commander who had just been killed. It's kind of heartbreaking. She's looking out her window, wondering why it has taken so long for her son and his army to come back. Her attendants tell her it's surely because they're so busy raping and pillaging that it's taking them a bit longer than anticipated, so they're not exactly innocents here. But nevertheless, the song seems to relish in the fact that this mother and these women will soon receive the news that the army would not be coming back and that Sisera himself had been killed.

"And the land had rest forty years," it says in v. 31, wrapping up the story. And now you have no idea what to make of all this. Because think about it. Who's supposed to be the hero in all of this? The Israelites? Heck, only half the tribes even bothered to show up to the fight. Barak, their leader? He didn't exactly show a deep trust in God from the get-go, and it wasn't like he was some brilliant tactician either. Nothing he did won the battle for them, and it wasn't him who caught Sisera either. Was it Jael? Sure she was the one who actually killed Sisera, ending the threat of his army for good, but she did so by deceiving him and breaking the somewhat sacred pact of hospitality, inviting this man into her home, promising him protection, giving him milk to make him sleep, and then driving a tent peg through his skull. Or was it Deborah? The prophetess who got this whole thing started. She's the one who summoned Barak, the one who called upon him to gather the army, the one who went with him when he insisted, the one who rallied him to action when the day of battle had come. But then she's also the one singing this song, which means she's the one celebrating that Sisera's mother was looking out the window anxiously, wondering why her son hadn't come home yet. I mean, I get celebrating a victory, but relishing the fact that the general's mother would be devastated when she learned of her son's gruesome death? That's just cruel. That's Deborah. That's her song.

So who are you supposed to root for here? Who's the one that God has raised up to deliver his people? It's not entirely clear. But maybe that's the point. It's not a groundbreaking statement to make to say that the gears of the world turn by the actions and decisions of deeply flawed, even at times despicable people. Sometimes you can sense a clarity of right and wrong, like Russia's aggression against Ukraine. But often the lines aren't so clear. Or even if the lines are clear, those on what you sense to be the right side may not be ones you're eager to root for either. Think about World War II. It seems pretty clear now that Germany's actions of aggression and brutality needed to be resisted, but do you think Roosevelt and Churchill felt all that great rooting for Josef Stalin against him on the Eastern Front? It's not like Roosevelt and Churchill were a couple of saints either. And even in arenas perhaps a bit less intense than global geopolitics. How many times have you gone into a voting booth, seeing the options in front of you, for whatever office it might be, and sometimes there might be someone you feel strongly about, but how many times has a choice felt like choosing the lesser of who cares?

Sometimes it's hard to know who you're supposed to root for. I think this story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael puts that front and center. Just as Israel continues its downward spiral, so too does the quality of its judges, of those whom God raises up to deliver the people. It gets harder and harder to really admire them as heroes. But still, the message seems to be that though it's not so easy to identify Deborah or Barak or Jael as the human hero of the story, the true architect of Israel's deliverance is never in question. For it is the Lord who sends the storm and the torrent to throw the enemy into a panic. It is the Lord who hears Israel's cry. And it is the Lord who is able to use even the flawed motives, the deception, the tricks, the cowardice, the dishonor of a less-than-admirable crew to bring about the restoration of his people.

As it turns out, God's still at work that way. It remains a great mystery why God, after Christ's sacrifice on the cross and the glory of his resurrection, chose to make that witness known throughout the world not through further displays of miraculous power or of Jesus going on a never-ending tour around the world sharing the good news, but instead through the flawed, compromised work of a just as flawed and compromised group known as the church.

So even now, as you see across the headlines or social media or whatever scene you might look out on, and as you may feel discouraged about the assortment of flawed even despicable characters at work in the world, you might wonder, "Just who am I supposed to root for here? What good could come from a crew this messed up?" Know that that is how God has been at work for a long time and continues to use the broken pieces of a broken world to bring about something better.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“No Direction Home: Down a Peg or Two”

Dr. Jay Howell

March 20, 2022

We continue in our series “No Direction Home,” a journey through the Old Testament book of Judges. As we’ve shared, this is a book that’s not often explored in-depth, probably because it’s not entirely encouraging. It’s gory. The characters that maybe we think we should think of heroes often don’t actually come off looking like heroes. The whole thing is cycle after cycle of Israel forsaking God, being subdued by its enemies, crying out, then being delivered by a “judge” sent from the Lord, only to forsake the Lord again. But we’re looking at it, because this book is a story that over and over points out just how corrupted the human heart can become against our Maker—not just the Israelites, not just them, but us. And that’s a point that perhaps we need to hear especially in this season of Lent, when we consider just how much in need of a Savior we are, because on our own, we’re not capable of very much at all.

That in fact is a big part of the story we explore today, the story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

*“Awake, awake, Deborah;
Awake, awake, sing a song!
Arise, Barak, and lead away your captives, son of Abinoam.
Then survivors came down to the nobles;
The people of the Lord came down to me as warriors.
From Ephraim those whose root is in Amalek came down,
Following you, Benjamin, with your peoples;
From Machir commanders came down,
And from Zebulun those who wield the staff of office.
And the princes of Issachar were with Deborah;
As was Issachar, so was Barak;
Into the valley they rushed at his heels;
Among the divisions of Reuben
There were great determinations of heart.
Why did you sit among the sheepfolds,
To hear the piping for the flocks?
Among the divisions of Reuben
There were great searchings of heart.
Gilead remained across the Jordan;
And why did Dan stay on ships?
Asher sat at the seashore,
And remained by its landings.
Zebulun was a people who risked their lives,
And Naphtali too, on the high places of the field.*

*“The kings came and fought;
Then the kings of Canaan fought
At Taanach near the waters of Megiddo;
They took no plunder in silver.
The stars fought from heaven,
From their paths they fought against Sisera.
The torrent of Kishon swept them away,
The ancient torrent, the torrent Kishon.
My soul, march on with strength!
Then the horses’ hoofs beat
From the galloping, the galloping of his mighty stallions.
‘Curse Meroz,’ said the angel of the Lord,
‘Utterly curse its inhabitants,*

*Because they did not come to the help of the Lord,
To the help of the Lord against the warriors.'*

*"Most blessed of women is Jael,
The wife of Heber the Kenite;
Most blessed is she of women in the tent.
He asked for water, she gave him milk;
In a magnificent bowl she brought him curds.
She reached out her hand for the tent peg,
And her right hand for the workmen's hammer.
Then she struck Sisera, she smashed his head;
And she shattered and pierced his temple.
Between her feet he bowed, he fell, he lay;
Between her feet he bowed, he fell;
Where he bowed, there he fell dead.*

*"Out of the window she looked and wailed,
The mother of Sisera through the lattice,
'Why does his chariot delay in coming?
Why do the hoofbeats of his chariots delay?'
Her wise princesses would answer her,
Indeed she repeats her words to herself,
'Are they not finding, are they not dividing the spoils?
A concubine, two concubines for every warrior;
To Sisera a spoil of dyed cloth,
A spoil of dyed cloth embroidered,
Dyed cloth of double embroidery on the neck of the plunderer?'
May all Your enemies perish in this way, Lord;
But may those who love Him be like the rising of the sun in its might."
And the land was at rest for forty years. **Judges 5:12-31***

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Sometimes it's hard to know who to root for, especially if you feel the options aren't quite so clear cut. You come across this every so often. Two teams you dislike, or two players you're not so fond of, and they end up playing each other. Who do you root for? Well, you end up saying something like, "Well can they both lose?"

Or maybe not necessarily two teams or players you don't especially like. Maybe just two teams or players whose flaws you're pretty familiar with, not just flaws in their game, but flaws in their character, in their personality, in their motives. Makes you feel not so confident or comfortable in hoping for their victory, or not so celebratory should they actually win. It's not like there was necessarily a clear-cut alternative, but it still doesn't make you feel so great.

Well, y'all, I'm afraid this may be that sort of story, one in which, when you think about it, it's not quite so easy to know who to root for, or at least not so sure how celebratory you should be for them. This is the story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael. The passage we read in chapter five of the Book of Judges is actually part of a song, a song that retells the story of what happened in the chapter prior. So this whole thing is a song from two people named Deborah and Barak, after all the major things happened in their story.

Here's what happened. Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, so as it happens over and over in the Book of Judges, God gives them up to a rival king, and in this case it was a king named Jabin of the land of Canaan, situated just to the north of Israel, so this was a neighbor. And Israel languished under Jabin for twenty years. Jabin's really not that big a factor in the story. The one who is is the commander of Jabin's army is a man named Sisera. A big thing to know about Sisera is that he's leading an army featuring nine hundred chariots of iron. And not that we have to be experts of ancient warfare to understand this, but if you're coming to a fight with some rusty, dull blades and the others are coming with metal chariots, to some degree it doesn't matter how brave you are if you don't account for chariots coming at you, bringing a knife to a gunfight, so to speak. So Israel languished under their rule. They cried out, so God raised up someone to deliver them.

Here's where it starts to get a bit muddled though. Normally when Israel cries out to God, the book will say something like, "God raised up as a deliverer *so-and-so*." But we don't get that kind of clarity here. The clearest candidate is the next person we hear about when the story is told in chapter four and is the same as one of the singers whose words we read here in chapter 5: a prophetess named Deborah. Apparently, Deborah had been settling minor disputes among the Israelites during this time, as she would "judge" between them. But it's not so clear that she was specifically the one that God raised up to deliver Israel. Never says she was.

Deborah summons a man named Barak, who seems to be the closest thing Israel had to a military leader at the time. Deborah tells him to gather 10,000 soldiers to him and that God would deliver Sisera, the enemy commander with his 900 iron chariots, into his hands. So now it seems maybe Barak is the one that God is raising up. He's got the army. He's leading them into battle. He seems to fit the bill. But then Barak kind of shrinks away from it. He says in chapter 4 that he would only go if Deborah went with him. Not exactly the sort of bravery or trust in the Lord you would hope to see out of God's chosen deliverer. But Deborah goes with him, and Barak does summon 10,000 soldiers from the tribes of Israel. However, even then Barak doesn't seem to be so inspiring. One part of the song that we read talks about how only half the tribes actually answer the call. The other half refuse the call or just aren't heard from at all. Not exactly a stirring scene of an oppressed people rising up as one to throw off the shackles of their oppressors.

Nevertheless, Barak summons his army, as Deborah instructed him to do. And Sisera, with his army and his 900 chariots, comes to the fight. Must have been quite the scene. You have the Israelite army, half-gathered in faith but woefully unprepared, since they're still facing off against an army with advanced technology, like bringing a bunch of muskets against tanks and machine guns. And I don't think we're led to believe this was some kind of "Braveheart" moment either. You know, where the Scottish rebels, led by William Wallace, are facing off against the English army, in particular their cavalry. Completely outmatched. But taking advantage of English arrogance, when the cavalry charge, the Scots reveal they've made hundreds of sharp wooden pikes to stop the horses' charge. There's no indication that anything like that has happened, some kind of clever tactic. Instead, it seems like Deborah and Barak have brought a knife to a gunfight, and oh to be in the shoes of those soldiers once the chariots start coming toward them.

But then God shows up. Starting in v. 19: "The stars fought from heaven, from their courses they fought against Sisera. The torrent Kishon swept them away, the onrushing torrent, the torrent Kishon. March on, my soul, with might! Then loud beat the horses' hoofs with the galloping, galloping of his steeds." What seems to have happened is that God sent a sudden rainstorm, the heavens fighting against Sisera, as it puts it, causing a flash flood of the small river flowing through the battlefield. This threw the horses into a panic, at which point Sisera doesn't have so much of an advantage anymore, and Deborah, Barak, and the Israelite army win the day.

Except Sisera gets away. That'd be the moment of glory for an army's leader like Barak: capturing or killing the enemy commander, but he doesn't get him. Sisera gets away from the battle and is running for his life. And he comes to the home of a man named Heber the Kenite. Heber isn't there, but his wife Jael is. Heber was likely a metalworker, and he and his wife weren't even Israelites. They're not even fully a part of their own clan. It turns out that they had left their homeland in the south to come north to this area, probably so that he could profit from Sisera's army. Heber was a metalworker. Sisera needed lots of iron chariots. Definitely some profit to be made. So it's like Sisera was coming to the home of his arms dealer. Reason to think he'd be safe there. So Jael beckons him in and hides him from the pursuing Israelites. Sisera asks for water, but Jael instead gives him milk, which puts him to sleep. And once he's asleep, Jael goes up to him, takes a tent peg and a mallet, and drives the tent peg through Sisera's temple until it comes out the other side, killing him. It catches you off guard, because why on earth would she do this? She's not an Israelite, and in fact it would seem that her household has profited greatly from Sisera. Maybe she was going with the winning hand, and Israel had just won. Or maybe she was one who maintained faith in God, even though she wasn't an Israelite.

We have no idea, because it doesn't tell us. What we do know is that she invited this man in, under the protection of her home, offering him her household's hospitality and protection—and that's a big deal in this culture—but then she breaks that hospitality, killing him in his sleep in graphic, gory fashion. And *she's* the one who finally defeats this enemy commander. Not Deborah. Not Barak. Not the army. Instead this woman coming out of nowhere into the story. The song ends with an abrupt shift to the perspective of someone we might not

expect. It goes to the window of Sisera's mother, yes the mother of the commander who had just been killed. It's kind of heartbreaking. She's looking out her window, wondering why it has taken so long for her son and his army to come back. Her attendants tell her it's surely because they're so busy raping and pillaging that it's taking them a bit longer than anticipated, so they're not exactly innocents here. But nevertheless, the song seems to relish in the fact that this mother and these women will soon receive the news that the army would not be coming back and that Sisera himself had been killed.

"And the land had rest forty years," it says in v. 31, wrapping up the story. And now you have no idea what to make of all this. Because think about it. Who's supposed to be the hero in all of this? The Israelites? Heck, only half the tribes even bothered to show up to the fight. Barak, their leader? He didn't exactly show a deep trust in God from the get-go, and it wasn't like he was some brilliant tactician either. Nothing he did won the battle for them, and it wasn't him who caught Sisera either. Was it Jael? Sure she was the one who actually killed Sisera, ending the threat of his army for good, but she did so by deceiving him and breaking the somewhat sacred pact of hospitality, inviting this man into her home, promising him protection, giving him milk to make him sleep, and then driving a tent peg through his skull. Or was it Deborah? The prophetess who got this whole thing started. She's the one who summoned Barak, the one who called upon him to gather the army, the one who went with him when he insisted, the one who rallied him to action when the day of battle had come. But then she's also the one singing this song, which means she's the one celebrating that Sisera's mother was looking out the window anxiously, wondering why her son hadn't come home yet. I mean, I get celebrating a victory, but relishing the fact that the general's mother would be devastated when she learned of her son's gruesome death? That's just cruel. That's Deborah. That's her song.

So who are you supposed to root for here? Who's the one that God has raised up to deliver his people? It's not entirely clear. But maybe that's the point. It's not a groundbreaking statement to make to say that the gears of the world turn by the actions and decisions of deeply flawed, even at times despicable people. Sometimes you can sense a clarity of right and wrong, like Russia's aggression against Ukraine. But often the lines aren't so clear. Or even if the lines are clear, those on what you sense to be the right side may not be ones you're eager to root for either. Think about World War II. It seems pretty clear now that Germany's actions of aggression and brutality needed to be resisted, but do you think Roosevelt and Churchill felt all that great rooting for Josef Stalin against him on the Eastern Front? It's not like Roosevelt and Churchill were a couple of saints either. And even in arenas perhaps a bit less intense than global geopolitics. How many times have you gone into a voting booth, seeing the options in front of you, for whatever office it might be, and sometimes there might be someone you feel strongly about, but how many times has a choice felt like choosing the lesser of who cares?

Sometimes it's hard to know who you're supposed to root for. I think this story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael puts that front and center. Just as Israel continues its downward spiral, so too does the quality of its judges, of those whom God raises up to deliver the people. It gets harder and harder to really admire them as heroes. But still, the message seems to be that though it's not so easy to identify Deborah or Barak or Jael as the human hero of the story, the true architect of Israel's deliverance is never in question. For it is the Lord who sends the storm and the torrent to throw the enemy into a panic. It is the Lord who hears Israel's cry. And it is the Lord who is able to use even the flawed motives, the deception, the tricks, the cowardice, the dishonor of a less-than-admirable crew to bring about the restoration of his people.

As it turns out, God's still at work that way. It remains a great mystery why God, after Christ's sacrifice on the cross and the glory of his resurrection, chose to make that witness known throughout the world not through further displays of miraculous power or of Jesus going on a never-ending tour around the world sharing the good news, but instead through the flawed, compromised work of a just as flawed and compromised group known as the church.

So even now, as you see across the headlines or social media or whatever scene you might look out on, and as you may feel discouraged about the assortment of flawed even despicable characters at work in the world, you might wonder, "Just who am I supposed to root for here? What good could come from a crew this messed up?" Know that that is how God has been at work for a long time and continues to use the broken pieces of a broken world to bring about something better.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.