

Year A Proper 28
November 18, 2023
Judges 4:1-7
Psalm 123
1 Thessalonians 5:1-11
Matthew 25:14-30

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

Deborah, in today's story from the book of Judges, is something we don't often find in the Bible: a female ruler. This was unusual in Israel's patriarchal society, and Deborah's is the only one whose story is told in the book of Judges. Perhaps that's because she united all three of the usual leadership categories; she was a judge, a military leader, and a prophet.

During the approximately two-hundred-year period between Israel's conquest of Canaan and the creation of a monarchy under Saul (circa 1200–1020 B.C.E.), judges were political and military leaders who ruled over the tribes of Israel. The book of Judges tells the stories of 12 of them, always using the same narrative technique: a cycle of sin, punishment, repentance and then deliverance—that is, the Israelites do “what is evil in the eyes of the Lord” and a foreign king is allowed to oppress them, then the people “cry out” and God raises up a judge to overthrow the oppressor.

Deborah is a judge, but as she's also a prophet, she is shown adjudicating disputes under the “palm of Deborah” (Judg 4:5). So as a prophet, she is the only judge who is also a spokesperson for God. Deborah hears God's call to her to free the Israelites, so she and her general Barak lead the Israelite army in a battle against the Canaanite king Jabin and his general Sisera. Eventually they are successful, but let's focus for a moment on Deborah's resistance to the oppression of her people.

Again, she hears God's call to her to free the Israelites from their 20 years of oppression, and in heroic love for her people, she takes immediate action. For her, it *was* a call from God, but for most people the call to action can be less clear, or more gradual—but no less heroic. My great-uncle Dr. Arne Homb was one of those people.

During World War II when Norwegian King Haakon VII, and the elected government of Norway, refused to surrender to the Nazis, they attempted to kill the king and his ministers. Through air raids of civilian targets, the Germans bombed everywhere they thought the king might be hiding: villages, farms, even a civilian hospital. Without a hospital in the area it was impossible to treat the many casualties that resulted from the bombardment, so local doctors eventually fitted up a hotel in Lillehammer as a new field hospital. The local doctors and nurses, and doctors from Oslo, including Arne, stayed at this makeshift hospital through the winter, into May, in spite of the continued fighting all around them. In heroic love, risking their own lives, they treated everyone who needed help: military and civilian, Norwegian, British, and German patients.

The Nazis, in spite of all their efforts, didn't manage to kill, or even find the king, and in June of 1940, King Haakon and his ministers had formed the Norwegian government in exile in London, and the Germans had complete control of Norway. Or so they thought. In fact, what Arne and his colleagues had seen in their field hospital in Lillehammer, and the brutality they witnessed under the Germans in Oslo, made them decide to support the Norwegian underground and fight the occupation.

Back at his hospital in Oslo, Arne sensed that the occupation forces had a deep-seated fear of communicable disease and epidemics. So, the Norwegian doctors set up a communicable disease ward on the second floor of their hospital. Their intuition was correct, and since the German doctors and staff avoided that ward, the Norwegians treated sick or wounded members of the underground there, hoisting them up at night through a second-story window.

In the hospital morgue, Norwegian doctors and nurses set up a secret radio communications system. They hid their radio equipment inside of cadavers, using the equipment secretly in the cold and the dark.

In order to maintain the health of the Norwegian population and to avoid epidemics, the Germans allowed doctors to move about freely, making house calls to visit sick patients. Some doctors, like Arne, used this freedom to set up courier services for the resistance, delivering secret messages, which they hid in their doctor bags. The Germans occupied Norway for five years, and for love of their country, many members of the Norwegian medical community worked successfully with the underground, risking their lives, until they gained their freedom.

Today *we* don't struggle under an occupying power like Deborah's people, or Great Uncle Arne's did. But God does call us to love one another courageously, and this can sometimes mean taking a similar risk. It might mean risking our lives, as they did. Is there something you would risk your life for?

Loving courageously might mean risking our comfort, or giving up something we value. Is there something God is calling you to give up?

It might mean speaking out against something that you believe is wrong, risking public dissent. What is God calling you to say—or do?

You might not consider yourself to be heroic, but God is calling you to love courageously. Listen for God's call. Amen.

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