“God’s Surprising Network”

Judges 4:1–10 (11–24)

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Prayer: *All-knowing God, open our minds and hearts that we may be illumined by your living Word and do your will.* **Amen.**

If you listen closely to the stories our world tells, a clear pattern emerges: our culture celebrates the lone hero.

From movies to biographies to leadership seminars, we’re conditioned to look for the solitary genius—the lone stranger who saves the town, the visionary founder who builds the empire, the unstoppable leader who rescues the company single-handedly.

We put single names on buildings. We build statues to lone figures.

And sometimes, without even realizing it, we carry the quiet weight of that myth: the exhausting belief that if something is broken, it’s on us, that only we are capable of fixing it.

That myth isn't just exhausting; it distorts how real deliverance works. And nowhere is that tension sharper than in one of the messiest books of the Bible

At first, the book of Judges seems to follow a familiar pattern. Before Israel had a king, the people were a loose collection of tribes. And they kept falling into the same cycle.

They worship other gods. God allows their enemies to oppress them. The people cry out for help. God raises up a leader, called a judge, to rescue them. But as soon as that leader dies, the people go back to their old ways.

And the whole thing starts all over again.

We see this pattern with the first two judges, Othniel and Ehud.

So, by the time we get to chapter 4, we pretty much know what to expect. Ehud dies. Israel turns away from God again. And another enemy comes along.

This time, it's a ruthless general named Sisera. He commands nine hundred iron chariots. Think of them as the ancient equivalent of a powerful armored force.

For twenty years, Sisera and his army have Israel under their thumb. Finally, the people cry out to God for help.

Now, if Hollywood were writing this story, we would expect God to send one mighty hero to save the day.

But that's not what happens.

Instead, God puts together a team. A network, if you will. Three very different people. Three rather unexpected people. Each with a part to play.

The first person in God's network is **Deborah**.

Deborah is the only woman identified as a judge in the book of Judges. In this book, the word "judge" usually refers to a military leader or warrior who rescues Israel. But Deborah's role is a little different.

She also serves as a judge in the more familiar sense. People come to her to settle disputes and seek guidance. And she's identified as a prophet, someone who speaks God's word to the people.

When Israel cries out for help, God gives Deborah a message. God also gives her a battle plan.

So Deborah summons a man named Barak, who is responsible for organizing and leading Israel's troops. She tells him that God wants him to gather ten thousand men at Mount Tabor. God will draw Sisera's army toward the Kishon River. And there, Israel will defeat them.

That brings us to the second person in God's network: **Barak**.

Barak is the military leader. He's the one who will organize the troops and lead them into battle.

Remember, Israel doesn't have a king or a standing army at this point. So Barak is essentially a military leader organizing an army of ordinary people, citizen soldiers, if you will.

But notice what happens when Deborah gives him his orders. In verse 8, Barak says something rather interesting: "If you will go with me, I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go."

Now, this is an important moment in the story. If we stop reading at verse 7, as the lectionary suggests, we miss it altogether. That's why I extended today's reading to verse 10.

But there's more to the story. And it would have given us a fuller picture if we had read the whole chapter. But chapter 4 is long, so, following Princeton Seminary professor Dennis Olson's advice to preachers, I will try to tell the rest of the story by mentioning the core elements.[1]

For centuries, many Bible commentators have understood Barak's response as a sign of weakness or fear. Perhaps he was intimidated by Sisera's nine hundred iron chariots.[2]

Other scholars offer a different interpretation. They suggest that Barak respects Deborah's leadership so much that he doesn't want to go into battle without her.[3] Others believe he wants her there because, as God's prophet, she can offer spiritual guidance and blessing to the troops.[4]

But I agree with Dennis Olson, who suggests that we might be judging Barak by the wrong standard. We tend to admire the lone hero. The rugged individual who never asks for help. The person who takes charge and gets things done all by himself.

But perhaps Barak isn't being timid or weak at all. Perhaps he understands something important: this mission isn't his to carry alone.

He needs Deborah. He needs God's guidance. And he needs others to share the responsibility.

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[1] Dennis T. Olson, "Commentary on Judges 4:1-7," in *Working Preacher*, November 19, 2017 https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-33/commentary-on-judges-41-7-4.
[2] Dennis T. Olson, "The Book of Judges," *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, Vol. II, Leander E. Keck, et al., eds. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015), 185.
[3] Sara M. Koenig, "Commentary on Judges 4:1-17," Working Preacher, November 15, 2020, https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-33/commentary-on-judges-41-7.
[4] Olson, *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, Vol. II, p. 185.

In other words, Barak understands the importance of working together. Deborah brings God's message and spiritual leadership. Barak brings military organization and leadership in battle. They each have something to contribute. And together, they head toward Mount Tabor.

When the battle begins, something remarkable happens. God sends a sudden, torrential rainstorm. The Kishon River overflows, and the surrounding valley turns into thick mud. Sisera's nine hundred iron chariots, the pride of his military power, become useless. They sink into the mud.

Barak and his troops charge down the mountain and defeat Sisera's army. It is such a decisive victory that the Israelites later celebrate it in a song known as the Song of Deborah, found in chapter 5.

But General Sisera manages to escape. He abandons his chariot and runs away on foot.

And that's when we meet the third person in God's network. Perhaps the most surprising one of all. Her name is **Jael**.

Jael isn't even an Israelite. She's a Kenite woman who lives on the margins of Israelite society.

Meanwhile, Sisera is running toward the tent of Heber the Kenite. Why does he go there? Because Heber's clan has a peace agreement with Sisera's king.

So Sisera believes he's heading into friendly territory. He thinks he'll be safe. When he arrives, Heber's wife, Jael, comes out to meet him.

Now, Jael wasn't part of Deborah and Barak's planning. She wasn't at Mount Tabor. She wasn't involved in the battle.

But when she sees this exhausted general, she takes action. She welcomes him into her tent. She covers him with a blanket. And when he asks for water, she gives him milk instead, perhaps to put him to sleep.

And Sisera falls into a deep sleep.

Then Jael takes two ordinary household tools—a wooden tent peg and a hammer—and uses them to kill him.

By the time Barak arrives in hot pursuit, Jael comes out of her tent and says, "Come, and I will show you the man whom you are seeking."

Barak steps inside. And there, lying dead on the floor, is Sisera. The battle is over.

Now, let's step back for a moment and look at what has happened.

This story presents the victory as God's work. It begins with God's message entrusted to Deborah. But God doesn't accomplish this work through one extraordinary person.

God uses three very different people.

Think about it. Take Deborah out of this story, and nobody hears God’s vision or has the courage to mobilize. Take Barak out of this story, and nobody gathers the troops or fights the battle in the valley. Take Jael out of this story, and Sisera escapes, regroups, and continues his oppression of Israel.

Each one plays an important part. None of them could have accomplished this alone. God defeats a powerful military force, not through a lone superstar, but through a network of people who each contribute something different.

And that's what makes this story so powerful.

We love a good hero story. We want to know who the hero is. We want to put that person's name on a building or build a statue in their honor.

But God seems to have a different idea. God brings people together. People with different gifts, different abilities, and different roles. And somehow, through all of them, God's purpose is accomplished.

This reminds me of Paul's words in his first letter to the Corinthians. The church in Corinth had its own problem with competition. People were arguing over which leaders were more important and who deserved the most recognition.

So Paul reminds them that the church is like a human body. "The body does not consist of one member, but of many." And he goes on to say that the eye cannot tell the hand, "I have no need of you."

In other words, nobody in the community can say, "I don't need you." Every member matters. Every gift matters. We need one another.

God often works through people the world overlooks. People who may not have the most impressive titles or the greatest influence. People whose contributions might never be noticed.

And that brings us to what this story might be saying to us today.

First, God’s network frees us from having to be the hero.

Many of us are exhausted because we believe everything rests on our shoulders—at home, at work, and at church. But today's story reminds us that we were never meant to carry everything alone.

Second, your quiet faithfulness matters.

Not everyone is called to stand in front of a crowd or lead a major project. Some people lead. Others encourage. Some teach. Others listen. Some offer a helping hand. Others quietly pray.

And sometimes, we never get to see how our small acts of faithfulness connect with something much bigger. But they matter.

Finally, never write anyone off.

God routinely works through people on the margins—people who don't fit the mold. Sometimes, the most unlikely person is exactly who God uses to finish the work.

The world is still waiting for a solitary hero. Meanwhile, God is building a network of ordinary people bound together by grace.

So, look around the sanctuary and the online screen today—you are looking at God’s team, a network of ordinary people, sometimes unlikely. But when we bring our unique gifts together, we will be amazed at what we can accomplish.

And in that spirit, I close with these words from the apostle Paul:

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen. (Ephesians 3:20–21).