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Eastminster Worship Services

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Never the Same: When the Word Changes You

Sin and Glass Ceilings

Judges 4:1-24

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Sin is any failure to conform to the moral law of God in act, attitude or nature.¹ Glass ceilings are acknowledged barriers to advancement in a profession, especially affecting women and minorities.²

The Israelites were being oppressed by the Canaanites. Why? Their sin. God's judgment was upon the people for their moral and spiritual failure. Throughout the book of Judges, the Israelites found themselves at war with someone. God punished their disobedience by sending an army to defeat them. They suffered under the defeat for some years and then a warrior or judge came along and led them to victory. Inevitably, however, the people fell back into their sins.

No matter how hard we try to practice our Christian faith in a way that honors God, some sin, be it in word or deed displays itself. But, through a friend, the poor, a pastor, an author, a missionary, Bible reading, prayer, the marginalized or some leader in the church, sin is exposed for what it is. The glass ceiling is broken. God's will is advanced particularly through the least of these Jesus teaches.

Sin disrupts our participation in God's mission. Barriers keep us from hearing the voice of God. God chooses the most unlikely to break through the glass ceiling to expose our sin and advance his kingdom.

Soon after Joshua's death, the tribes of Israel gradually turned away from worshiping Yahweh alone. They began to follow the lead of their Canaanite neighbors and added worshiping idols and false gods to their religious routine. Because of this disobedience, God ordained one of Israel's pagan neighbors to invade and conquer the chosen people enslaving and oppressing them until the Israelites would again turn toward God, cry out in repentance and beg for deliverance. The divine solution was to call and establish a "judge" over the Israelite people; a female judge. Guided and strengthened by Yahweh, this judge would bring about the means of Israel's deliverance.

Sin disrupted the Israelites participation in God's mission. The barrier of false God's and idols was built

¹Wayne Grudem, *Bible Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1999), 493.

²*Concise Oxford Dictionary, Tenth Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 601.

into the Israelites religion. God chose a female judge to break through the glass ceiling to expose Israel's sin and advance his kingdom.

Deborah was the fourth judge. Think about it; a woman having authority over men. Deborah broke through the glass ceiling in that she became the first female to exercise such high level leadership over the people of God. Deborah played multiple roles in her lifetime of leadership. She was a wife to Lappidoth who was a prophet of God and a judge for Israel. The function of Deborah's judgeship appears to be that of a dispute settler among the tribes of Israel. She held court in a special place and the people sought her out for her decisions. Deborah heard a word from the LORD that ultimately placed her into a military role. She was God's person at God's time to deal with God's people and their sin. Much like the parable of the ten virgins, Deborah was wise.³ Like the five wise virgins who trimmed their lamps, Deborah found favor from God. She, like the five wise virgins had kept watch. As the writer of Hebrews states, leaders like Deborah were commended for their faith, faith which conquered kingdoms, administered justice and gained what was promised.⁴

Chapter 4 begins by describing the sorry state Israel had once again gotten itself into because of its disobedience to God. Once again the Israelites were doing what was evil in the eyes of the LORD. Jabin, identified here as "king . . . of the Canaanites," became Israel's harsh master. It took the Israelites considerable time to repent from their pagan pathways. It was after 20 years of this oppression that Israel "cried out to the LORD for help."

Jabin was the king of Canaan. He was the oppressor of the Jews and had an intimidating commander-in-chief and a truly awe-inspiring enemy force (900 iron chariots). Deborah summoned Barak and ordered him to assume military leadership over the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali. As a prophet, Deborah was comfortable issuing the words of the LORD to others. But Barak balked at Deborah's message. He refused to venture out on his own. He demanded that Deborah accompany him to the scene of the impending battle. Deborah journeyed to the battleground with Barak. She had confidence in God's calling on her life to fight against Sisera's ironclad forces.

The Israelites were at King Jabin's mercy. At Deborah's direction, Barak summoned 10,000 troops to Mount Tabor. Sisera got wind of what he considered an insurrection and prepared to subdue the Israelites. Sisera called out all 900 of his chariots. The LORD caused a panic among the Canaanite troops who were all slaughtered. The once-feared Sisera ran off.

³Matthew 25:1-13

⁴Hebrews 11:32-39

Sisera and his troops were routed and he fled the battle. Sisera ran to the tent of Jael, the wife of a Kenite named Heber. He had every reason to think he would be safe in Jael's tent. Sisera and his king, Jabin, had no quarrel with the Kenites. Jael put him at ease, telling him to have no fear. While Sisera was sleeping, Jael drove a tent stake through his head.

The sin of disobedience disrupted Sisera's sleep. The barrier of lying so that he could break the conventions of appropriate hospitality stopped Sisera from dying with his troops. God chose Jael to break through the glass ceiling to expose Israel's sin and advance God's kingdom. Sisera was a famous military commander. Conquering heroes generally had their way with women. Sisera had violated hospitality customs by entering Jael's tent. Jael may have legitimately feared that she was going to be raped.

When we face situations of persecution, oppression and cruelty, we sometimes have an initial feeling of righteous indignation. Our problem often is that we don't translate our righteous indignation into action. If we are tempted to turn away from an example of injustice, to go on with business as usual, Deborah's speech to Barak may become the word we need to hear. Deborah implored Barak to take action and trust God's deliverance, for God had already given the victory.⁵

The story of the victory that Deborah recounted should encourage us to obey the Great Commission and the Great Commandments. Israel's victory didn't come about through brute strength. In fact, by using Deborah to bring about the end of the Canaanites' oppression over Israel, this text turns its attention away from military might to dependence on God. God's saving intentions come about because Barak listened to a woman who was acting as both judge and prophet for Israel. Deborah raised her voice, not a weapon. Deborah had told Barak to lead the charge alone, but Barak insisted that Deborah go with him. Jael was used by God to assist Barak in the defeat of Sisera and his mighty army. According to the fourth century Church Father John Chrysostom, "Indeed, nothing; nothing, I repeat is more potent than a good and prudent woman in molding a man and shaping his soul in whatever way she desires. For he will not bear with friends or teachers or magistrates in the same way as his wife, when she admonishes and advises him."⁶

Sin disrupts our participation in God's mission. As followers of Jesus we are often blinded by selfishness, preferences and misguided power. Barriers stop us from hearing the voice of God. As followers of Jesus we have

⁵Judges 4:14

⁶John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of John 61* in *Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*,

our check lists, items that are no more than the “pluses” after Jesus. Jesus “plus” something equals spiritual correctness. We Christians often have predetermined qualifications that must be met by others in order to demonstrate their spiritual fitness or rightness. God chooses the most unlikely to break through the glass ceiling to expose our sin and advance his kingdom. As followers of Jesus, women are now allowed to be elders and ministers of Word and Sacrament. As missionaries, when we serve the downtrodden, oppressed and marginalized in Wichita, Kansas, the other forty-nine and the ends of the earth with our various mission partners, we are the hands, feet, heart, voice, eyes and ears of Jesus and their lives speak into ours.

Sin disrupts our participation in God’s mission, but Jesus has shown us the way. He said, repent and follow me. Barriers stop us from hearing the voice of God, but Jesus has shown us the way. He called the Pharisees and Sadducees white washed tombs. They had built many barriers of “pluses” to the religion of Jews. Jesus said, repent and follow me. God chooses the most unlikely to break through the glass ceiling in order to expose our sin and advance his kingdom. Five virgins had not fallen asleep. When Jesus came they were ready. Jesus said to the foolish virgins, “I tell you the truth, I don’t know you.”

Let us repent of our sin and follow Jesus. Let us recognize and demolish the barriers we have built to keep God at a distance. May the voice of the least of these penetrate the glass ceilings, so that our sin is exposed and the kingdom of God advanced. Never the Same: When the Word changes you. Let us pray!

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