

Reflection:

Our readings today are fairly different, you may have noticed. One old testament, one new; one dealing with someone who was likely a real person, another a parable and a sort of extreme one in my opinion. Here I'll mainly be looking at the Judges passage, with a sprinkling of Matthew thrown in.

Judges is a book that you won't hear preached much in church I'd wager. For one thing, today is the only instance of it cropping up in our lectionary. For another, it's one of those books we don't quite know what to do with. This time in the history of Israel was fraught with battles and violence, this violence and these battles alleged often to be at the behest of God. This doesn't always preach well.

Judges is an account of the time in the life of Israel in which God's people had judges appointed who acted as sort of tribal leaders, offering wisdom, leadership and as in Deborah's case, a direct line to God. The pattern of this time has been chronicled by many as:

The people are rebellious and do what is evil in the sight of the Lord

God lets them be taken by an enemy

They suffer and cry out to God for help

God raises up a judge for them

There is peace for 40 years

But then the judge dies and as people so seldom learn from history,

They again return to their ways of disobedience and discord and the cycle starts again.

Enter Deborah, a judge raised up to help God's people. A prophet, a woman.

There are many who have downplayed the character of Deborah.

There are, I would wager, many who avoid her story all together.

There are many who would go to great lengths to explain just what it is that this story is actually trying to convey- how it has been perhaps mistranslated, how Deborah's role is surely blown out of proportion, how in this instance we see a woman seeming to command a man who is himself in charge of armies, but how this must surely be a once off and maybe there has been a mistake and maybe we should just read another story, because of course God doesn't put women in charge.

I have known people who find the thought of women in leadership deeply uncomfortable. Fortunately for me, I've not encountered many of them on my road to ordination, and fortunately for all of us the Uniting Church takes a pretty harsh view of anyone espousing such things, but it is an inescapable part of our history; women have most often taken a back seat. In biblical interpretation, in the hierarchy of important biblical characters, in leadership, and in the home.

Years of patriarchal church foundations and indeed scriptural writing and translation have left many churches still with the very misguided notion that women are just not intended to take leadership roles or be anything really other than good wives and mothers. Even those who no longer hold this view suffer from the after effects of years of ingrained misogynistic

views. One of them is a prizing of certain stories within the biblical texts over others, like this story here.

In a time when men were definitely in charge, when women were largely considered property and certainly second-class citizens, here we have a woman, Deborah, appointed by God to judge God's people. Not only is she a judge, but she is a married woman and a prophet, which sounds to me like a fairly decent foreshadowing of the oft-multiple roles a woman has to fill from day to day. Deborah is a role model for so many.

Deborah sits in a public place, under a palm tree known as hers, offering her wisdom as needed. Sounds like a pretty good job. And she's good at it. She's referred to as a mother to Israel in the chapter following this one. People seek her out. At God's behest, she talks to Barak, a leader in the army, and tells him God's plan – he should take 10,000 men from certain tribes and go to Mt Tabor and there he will be given victory over Sisera, a general of the opposing army.

He takes her very seriously. So seriously that in fact in the next bit that the lectionary for some reason leaves out, he says he won't go unless the prophetess goes with him. Deborah agrees but says there's a catch.

He'll win but the glory of the win will go to a woman, not him.

And no, she's not talking about herself, though presumably she does go alongside him into battle. Incidentally the other woman is Jael who lures Sisera into a tent under the ruse of offering him hospitality and who drives a tent peg into his head while he's having a nap. Amazing.

Now this is tricky, because this could all be read as Barak being embarrassed because he relied on a woman, like God was punishing him for being weak. But I think in actuality, this is about a man seeking assurances to make sure he's ok, as so many of us do, instead of just listening to what God has told him. He didn't want to take the risk.

And talk of risk leads me to the second reading.

I've spoken a little about the Matthew reading in the early word video, so I won't go over it here- but it seems to me this story speaks to us about our fear of taking risks, or our fear of trusting God to want the best for us, which are really the same thing.

This story of 3 servants, or slaves -we don't need to get into the word slave and what it means here, it's well known that the bible was pretty chill about people owning slaves which is another reason we need to be careful with our interpretation of it- with their various approaches to their masters' vast sums of money offers us a chance to ask some questions:

What is it that you or that we are avoiding taking the risk to do?

Do we consider the lives and therefore skills, gifts and opportunities to be valuable, a small fortune in our possession?

How are we burying ourselves and our one chance at living in the dirt?

What are we avoiding? Is it change? Is it being noticed? Is it the chance that we could do wonderful things, but also that we could try and fail?

An audiobook I'm listening to at the moment was talking about bodies. Author Caitlin Moran is one of few women I've ever heard of who actually likes her body, which is quite sad to meditate on, and she was exclaiming loudly into my car your body is literally all you've got. It's you and your body, there is no point going through life hating it, you won't get another one.

Why do I bring this up? Because it strikes me that this, the waste of time and energy and physicality it is to hate our bodies, is similar to the waste of life it is, to be afraid to live. Afraid to take chances. Afraid to be who we were created to be.

Imagine if Deborah had said when God called her, "oof, me? no thank you. You must have the wrong girl. I'm just a woman" or "no I'm not particularly confident in my abilities as a prophet thank you, I'm going to mend my husband's socks instead".

Deborah heeded God's call, as did so many of the other judges who were unexpected choices, and was one of many who worked hard to guide God's people back to the path they had left, working God's will in that place, using her gifts and her voice (her name actually means One Who Speaks) in a time and place that would have made it pretty hard for her to do so.

She risked, she listened, and she worked for good.  
Can we do the same thing?

In particular, can us women believe that God can have blessed us with gifts and talents outside of those which society has for so long told us we were made? Can you men take the risk of heeding advice from someone unexpected? Can we all take the risk of believing God has called us at all?

There are other kinds of risks here I think we need to think about:

Both of our readings lead us into the contested area of God's judgement.

I think similarly to those who have for years striven to make sure the role of women within biblical accounts is downplayed, there are those among us – particularly in the progressive, or liberal parts of the church where I am likely to sit- who strive to make sure the judgement of God in biblical accounts is downplayed.

They don't want people getting the idea that women could be considered equal to men in the eyes of God, and go on to take leadership positions that would give them ideas above their station, and we don't want people getting the idea that God is, well, judge-ie, and go on to take the view that God is not as loving and kind as we want them to know God is. Loving God is just such an easier sell.

Both in this book and in the story of the talents, we want to take the sharp edge off anything that mentions the judgement of God . We generally don't know what to do with judgement.

This is why we avoid books like Judges where God is said to give the people into the hands of their enemies when they refuse to live right.

What I want to ask though, is can we take the risk of trusting ourselves to read scripture, as it is? Can we take the risk of trusting God enough to look at our books and allow ourselves to see what they say, even if it makes us uncomfortable as they so often do?

It is a risk to read the bible. To allow it to speak for itself, in its own voice.

We might often see things we don't like, including for instance all the verses and passages that the people I spoke about before use to justify the belittling and exclusion of women.

Another book I'm reading currently is by a man named Pete Enns. It's a book about how to read the bible. His main thesis is that the bible is here to point us to wisdom, and to encourage us to use wisdom, when reading the bible.

This is a hard book to read for sure. We can't take the words written at face value any more, for, to use one example, we know that God made women in God's image, and uses women for the good of the Kingdom as much as men. Of course we do. So we have to use the wisdom God has given us to not hide behind "well the bible says" and try to get to what truth about God the text is pointing us to.

The truth is if you live in a way that preferences your wants and are self destructive, you may just self destruct. The truth is if you remove yourself from the ways God has shown you how to walk, if you shut out the good, bury the gift of your one wonderful, weird and precious life and particularly if you deliberately live in a way that hurts others, this will end up hurting you. I don't know ultimately what God's judgement looks like, but I know enough about the injustices happening in our world, sadly sometimes within our church, to long for God's judgement. Because where will God's justice come from, if not from God's seeing what is wrong and setting it to right?

I know it's hard looking at words like punishment and judgement, and wrath. It would be so much easier if we just dealt with God as healer, lover, parent. But as all parents know, that job too, isn't all smiles and presents.

We need to be able to sit with that which makes us uncomfortable. We need to be able to hold those obscure texts we never think about and wonder why they are included in our sacred book, what they have to teach us about the God who ultimately loves us. Because that is another truth we can grasp as we grapple with all of this; God so loves us, that God was willing to die to show us that. This death came soon after the uttering of this parable in fact. Judgement there may be, and rightfully so- we make a dreadful mess of things and lose our way, ending up in darkness so often- but there is also life lived fully, in the master's joy, if we can only take the risk of living it.

Like Deborah, we can't be afraid of taking that risk to live truly and openly as God intended; in our own lives of love and service to each other and the world, and in our lives as people devoted to uncovering the truth of God each and every day.

