

Sermon, St. David's Episcopal, Judges 4:1-7, 11/19/23 (*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

This morning's collect is my favorite collect of the entire church year. A quick review: the collect of the day can be found on page four of your bulletin. The word looks like the verb "collect," because that's what it does: *collects* the readings of the day into one prayer. While our readings vary over a three-year cycle, the collects come up every year, so each one has to "collect" three sets of readings.

Today's collect, written by Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, asks God that we may hear, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest the holy scriptures. Hear, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest. Isn't that a wonderful collection of images? Hearing the scriptures, especially here in this space together. Reading them by following along. Marking them: I love seeing people's Bibles that are underlined or highlighted. Learning together. But my favorite phrase in that list is "inwardly digest:" I adore the idea of slowly chewing on scripture with all of you. Also makes me think of those wonderful edible Bibles the kids made out of rice Krispie treats back in September on the third Sundays.

More than five years ago we started a midday Bible study here at St. David's and inwardly digesting scripture together once a week has been a deep joy for me. This past year we have focused on something called The Women's Lectionary, a year of readings put together that feature women's stories. We have far fewer stories of women in the Bible than men, and Deborah stands out among the women, even though her appearance today is all too brief.

Her appearance is brief but at least she makes an appearance—this is the only snippet of Scripture we get from the book of Judges in the three-year cycle of readings on Sunday. In between the conquest of the Holy Land in the book of Joshua and the beginning of the monarchy in Israel in the book of Samuel we find the book of Judges, during which time the country was led by judges instead of kings. Deborah is one of the six major judges mentioned in the book of Judges, the only woman in the bunch, and the only one we actually see judging, which happens in our reading this morning: "she used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim; and the Israelites came up to her for judgment."

In the United States today we have legislative, executive, and judicial branches, and we have these at the local as well as federal level. Our country is far from perfect, but we try to balance out these arms of government to achieve something just. Imagine if we were run by judges. That was a turbulent time for the Israelites, and women seemed able to eke out a bit more power than during the time of the monarchy, which our readings will focus on in the new church year. Taking power from judges and giving it to kings didn't solve any problems.

Kings and judges show major flaws in the Bible, but Deborah the judge stands out as admirable. Today's translation calls her the wife of Lappidoth, but this could also be translated as fiery

woman or woman of flames, both of which I prefer. In addition to being a judge, fiery Deborah was a prophet, as we hear today, as well as, we find out later in the book of Judges, a poet, a liturgist, and a warrior. When I was growing up, the women I remember learning about in Sunday School were Mary the mother of Jesus, Eve, and Delilah. Delilah, like Deborah, was in the book of Judges, but she didn't come off as well. She cut Samson's hair and then disappeared. I wish I'd heard more about Deborah instead.

Since we only have this little snippet about Deborah today, I encourage you to go home and read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest the rest of the book of Judges so that you can read more about how Barak did not go into battle until Deborah went with him, and how they not only triumphed but she wrote and performed a song about their triumph, and the land was then quiet for forty years.

Deborah wasn't the sole female responsible for this victory: Sisera, the evil commander of the army with nine hundred chariots of iron that we heard about this morning, was actually killed by a different woman, Jael, who drove a tent peg through his head. I didn't learn about Jael in Sunday School, either. I've offered to come up with a Godly Play story about her but Dana and Kathy Love have some concerns. I thought about putting a tent peg in the box today for the children's sermon but resisted.

I think we don't hear much from the books of Joshua and Judges because they are so violent, and when we come to church on Sunday mornings we seek strength to go back out into the world, and hearing more violence gets in the way of that. So we hear fewer psalms of lament and instead pray together more psalms of praise. We sing and hear music that lifts our spirits, and we share the bread and wine. I am always especially moved on these third Sundays when I get to see you all praying with each other. I'm so moved to see people kneeling at the altar while an unctioner anoints them with oil and murmurs prayers.

So I understand why we avoid some of the scarier stories in the Bible on Sunday mornings, but I implore all of us to take home the bulletins today and commit today's collect to memory with its language about hearing Holy Scriptures as well as reading, marking, learning, and inwardly digesting them. We don't hear all of the stories read aloud on Sunday mornings, but we are called as Christians to hear, read, mark, lean and inwardly digest them all.