

Lessons From History
A Sermon by David Roquemore
First Presbyterian Church, Newton NC
November 19, 2023

Judges 4: 1-3, 12-25

There is a war going on. Sisera is the great general for the enemy army. He is separated from his army, and comes upon Jael in her tent. She invites him in, and promises to hide him. He agrees and comes in. She gives him something to drink, perhaps to eat also. He falls asleep.

AND SHE DRIVES A TENT PEG THROUGH HIS HEAD!

You have to really dislike someone to do that!

She is remembered in the text as one of the great heroes of Israel, along with Deborah, the reigning leader, or judge, at the time. But Jael is a foreigner! She is a Kenite, basically a bedouin whose tribe tended to live south of the Dead Sea in the Arabah or the Negev. So she is *not* one of the faithful of Israel. Yet she kills Israel's enemy general — well, the enemy of my enemy is my friend, right? She is remembered as “one of us, on our side,” even though she wasn't exactly one of us.

But wait — these are women! Women can't be leaders. Women can't do heroic things. We all have been taught that. We want women to stay at home and not have opinions. We only recently have begun to let women serve in the military, and they still aren't put into battle the same way men are.

Let's talk about women for a few minutes.

Today is the 145th anniversary of the first worship service in this building. It was built in 1878, and the first service was Nov. 17, 1878. Did you know that when it was being built, the decoration and all of the interior furnishings were left to the women to provide? They raised a lot of money for this — having all sorts of bake sales on the Courthouse Square, including ice cream in the summer! The history book tells us that “in every way possible, they made money for the church, at a time when money was scarce.” They even made men's suits, “with varying degrees of success,” it is noted. With the money raised, they bought the pews, the organ, the furnishings, and later on, the carpet.

Like Jael, they used what they had at hand to get the job done!

One of my son Peter's classmates in West Lafayette, in elementary school, was a Katie Bouman. Who? She went on to lead the team that first pictured a black hole a couple of years ago. She is a professor now at Cal Tech, but a few years ago she worked at MIT, and there developed the process used to take the photo. NASA released a picture of her with a lot of hard drives, and compared her to Margaret Hamilton, who wrote the code

that took the astronauts to the moon; in her picture, she is standing beside a pile of notebooks taller than she is!

Well, so what, you ask. My point is that you never know who will rise to greatness. It could be that little girl in your son's class. It could be a woman who has never had much chance at greatness, who turns out to be the one to write important computer code. Which I think also means that we should encourage and not discourage young women from pursuing their dreams, even in the sciences! We should never perpetuate the stereotypes that women can't do too much, because they can!

Reading the history of this congregation I kept coming across references to the men "who served as mayor of Newton." Apparently it was a Presbyterian tradition for years! But there were just as many references to women who attended worship and Bible study here, whose husbands came along later. The men may have run the town, but the women ran the households! You will remember that line from "My Big Fat Greek Wedding," where the woman says, "the man is the head of the household, but the woman is the neck!"

Those Presbyterians built a manse in the 1890s, which was a sign that at last they would have a pastor who actually lived here! That manse burned down in 1898, and the Session used the insurance money to — do what? Rebuild the manse? No! They expanded this sanctuary by adding the wings on each side.

Like Jael, they were not afraid to think of creative solutions to get the job done!

Through the decades the Presbyterians were faithful and raised their children in the faith, "in the nurture and admonition of the Lord," as the old baptismal service put it. One such person was Andrew Rader. He went to medical school and volunteered for the Army as the war broke out. He was captured in the Philippines, and died when a hospital ship was sunk. A medical facility at Ft. Meade in Maryland was named after him. He was the only fatality in WW2 from this congregation, as far as we know.

In 1951 the building was in need again, and the congregation came through. They rebuilt the windows, adding the ones you see now. (Which means they are nearing 75 years old!) A new steeple was added, and a new organ! That organ was expanded and renewed in 1995, and still works today (we hope!)

In the last years of 1990s, the Rev. Cynthia Williams came to serve as the congregation's first associate pastor, and only installed female pastor so far. You know, as we look at history, we see that women were not allowed a voice in many things across the church. So they organized themselves into missionary societies, and women's groups, and did things anyway! They had parallel stuff that continues to this day, with their own mission projects and things. The blanket offering today is a vestige of those days.

And so we come to the present. In 2017 this building was renovated yet again, repainted, had the ceiling repaired and floor fixed. It was completed and dedicated and worship was held here just three weeks before I arrived in January 2018.

I remember telling you on one of those first Sundays that I knew Robert Blumer when I was a young man; he was your pastor in the late 1950s and early 1960s. So there is a connection there; almost always there are connections if you look hard enough!

Back to Jael. She kills Sisera! What happens next? The war continued, but the Israelites win, destroying the enemies, with the help of God. And of course Jael the wife of Heber the Kenite. They had peace for forty years, and sang songs remembering Deborah, the leader, the *shophet*, or judge. One of those songs is Judges 5, which we will use for our confession of faith today!

You might have despaired had you been in Barak's army, facing the forces led by Sisera. You might worry; will we prevail?

You might have despaired in the early years of this congregation. Will we ever get a full-time pastor? Will we ever grow? Will good times come?

You may despair as we face the future. Will we prevail? Will we find the sort of prosperity we once had again?

I believe the answer is yes! We will — because God is with us. God is calling us to be a voice in this place, in this town, yet again. A voice that calls for justice for all the people. A voice that calls for inclusion of all the people in the life of the church. A voice that seeks diversity of all kinds.

One of my predecessors in this pulpit was said to be a very traditional and conservative Calvinist, who decried the Higher Criticism coming from the North! He'd be shocked to hear us now, I fear. But we must speak the truth, and the truth is, God is love, unbridled love, that comes to us always in Jesus Christ. Nothing can stop that love.

Well, as you read history, you find out things you'd rather wish weren't so. The "Old Soldiers" parade and reunion every August grew up around 1907, from the actions of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, which included six prominent Presbyterian women. Their husbands had been instrumental in putting the monument on the courthouse lawn. That was then, and this is now, as they say. We would rather that chapter of our history be closed. Again, God loves all people, of whatever race.

And so we go into the future. The newer members among us, from outside, tell us they see a vital congregation that will survive because this town needs us. The town needs us to remind it of the gospel, of the love of God which is always expanding to include every single person who comes by.

May God continue to bless his people in this place! Thanks be to God! Amen.