Up!
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Twenty-Fifth Sunday After Pentecost, Judges 4:1-7
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Judges 4:1-7

4:1 The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD,
after Ehud died.

4:2 So the LORD sold them into the hand of King Jabin of Canaan,
who reigned in Hazor; the commander of his army was Sisera, who
lived in Harosheth-ha-goiim.

4:3 Then the Israelites cried out to the LORD for help, for he had nine
hundred chariots of iron and had oppressed the Israelites cruelly
twenty years.

4:4 At that time Deborah, a prophetess, wife of Lappidoth, was
judging Israel.

4:5 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.

4:6 She sent and summoned Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in
Naphtali and said to him, "The LORD, the God of Israel, commands
you, 'Position yourself at Mount Tabor, taking ten thousand from the
tribe of Naphtali and the tribe of Zebulun.

4:7 I will draw out Sisera, the general of Jabin's army, to meet you by
the Wadi Kishon with his chariots and his troops, and I will give him
into your hand.'"

Sermon: Up!

Moses leads Israel out of Egypt. Joshua leads Israel out of the wilderness and into the land of Canaan. And after Joshua, we move

into the age of Judges, regional leaders who emerge in each generation to restore the covenant of God, people, and land. In all, there are twelve judges. They rule major portions of Israel for 300 years preceding King David.

Today, we visit Deborah, the fourth judge, prophetess, all-around baller.

Our text sets the stage. Once more, Israel breaks her covenant with YHWH and finds herself oppressed by King Jabin of Canaan. Jabin has a mighty army led by his top general, Sisera, who has 900 iron chariots at his disposal, and a massive army whose presence has paralyzed Israel with fear for twenty years.

Up in the hills, there is a wise prophetess named Deborah. She's so wise that people come from all around to seek her counsel. She sits beneath a palm tree, settling the affairs of her people. But she's also got the gift of prophecy. She has a keen sense of the divine, and she listens when God speaks.

God says, "Deborah, it's time. Time for Israel to break this yoke."

Deborah summons Barak, the most powerful military leader of her people, who has ten thousand men at his disposal from the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun. And she says, "Barak, here's what's gonna happen: you are gonna gather your soldiers, and you are gonna march up Mount Tabor with your men. Once you are in position, Sisera will come out with his chariots and his army, and God will deliver him into your hand."

And do you know what this mighty general says?

"Okay, Miss Deborah. I'll go. But only if you go with me."

Deborah is so powerful, so respected, that a mighty general with a mighty army only feels confident in her presence.

Deborah says, "Yes, I'm going. I'll be with you. But there's something you need to know. Because you didn't fully trust this prophecy, the glory of this victory will not be yours. Sisera will fall at the hands of a woman. Now come on, let's go."

Off they go to Mount Tabor, Deborah riding at the front. They climb to the top and position themselves there. Sisera gets word and comes out with his chariots and his troops.

When Deborah sees them, she turns to Barak: "Up! For this is the day on which the Lord has given Sisera into your hand. Has not the Lord gone out before you?"

Up!

Barak arises, and down the mountain his army goes. Sisera's forces are thrown into panic and routed. Sisera himself escapes, only to meet his end at the hands of Jael, another woman, just as Deborah foretold. And let's just say a tent peg gets involved. You'll have to read that part for yourself. The prophecy Deborah foretells comes to be. And Israel enters an era of peace.

So that's our text.

And you may be thinking, "Well that's a great story, Bob. You've given us a tale of women's empowerment, an impressive battle, and

apparently a tent peg. Maybe the *Chicks* could even turn this into a folk song on their next album. But what does this story have to do with Millbrook Baptist Church? What does it have to do with thriving? What are we supposed to draw out of this narrative?" Believe it or not, a lot.

It's true, the violence in Judges is hard to hear. But our faithfulness doesn't require us to pretend otherwise. Beneath it all – the chariots, the soldiers, the tent pegging of another human being – is a timeless question: *What happens when God's people become so overwhelmed by what threatens them that they forget what God has already placed among them?*

Sisera's army held sway for twenty years. It was so fearsome in appearance and presence that Israel couldn't see through her fear. Pharaoh's army and the Nephilim of this generation. And so, despite resources like a God who always stays faithful and ten thousand people ready to stand against Sisera, Israel remained subdued.

Deborah doesn't manufacture courage for Israel. Nor does she conjure an army out of thin air. Deborah simply recognizes what is already there. Right in front of her. In the present. She sees people convinced of their helplessness. She sees what fear prevents them from seeing.

God is still here. God's gifts are still here. God's people are still here. God's possibilities are still here.

And then she gives them one word: Up!

"Up! Up! Up! Israel. It's no longer time to stay down, to sit on our hands, to be consumed by fear. It's time to stand up. It's time to live into our giftedness."

Millbrook, we're not under assault from an occupying army. Still, we know something about being overwhelmed by forces that seem bigger than us: a warming climate, a housing crisis, global conflicts, the unraveling of Protestant privilege, and the predictable Church. Each of these things can leave us wondering what kind of difference people like us, or a congregation like ours, could possibly make.

How often do we let our anxiety and uncertainty tether us to the captivity of mediocrity, mourning, and helplessness?

How often do we determine that a problem is infinitely more powerful than our collective gifts?

How often, grieving a present that isn't as shiny as the past we remember, do we forget that faith isn't only something we have? Faith is something we are.

How often do we fail to *faith* our way into God's future?

Deborah joins the long line of prophetic voices who discover what God has already placed among us.

Longing for freedom in captivity, Moses meets YHWH, who tells him, "You will be my voice. You will set my people free."

"But how?" Moses asks.

God's responds, "What's in your hand?"

A staff. And right beside Moses are a brother and sister, Aaron and Miriam, offering prophetic voices and fierce love.

The disciples look out at a multitude of hungry people and ask, "How are we supposed to feed all these people?"

Jesus responds, "You give them something to eat."

And they do! *Acts* tells the story of a community that makes and shares its bread.

Israel looks at Sisera's iron chariots and wonders, "How can we possibly stand against that?"

Deborah says: "Up!"

Scripture keeps telling the same story in every generation. We see unsolvable problems, unmeetable needs. God reminds us of the gifts already among us.

Could it be that thriving begins when we stop paying so much attention to the things we lack, and we start noticing, appreciating, making holy, even, all that we have?

I submit to you this morning, Millbrook, that a healthy, thriving congregation is not some impossible future we're waiting for God to create. The seeds have always been here. Are still here. The question is whether we will recognize them, tend them, share them, and trust what God might do with them.

We can feed people. We can offer nourishment for body and spirit.

We can care for people. We can tend to heart, mind, and soul.

We can love our neighbor, not just by offering our collective gifts to them, but also by receiving and credentialing theirs as being every bit as needed and valid as ours.

We can build an ever-evolving creation that becomes even more divine with each new and uniquely added expression.

We can do all of this because we have a God who loves us beyond our wildest successes and our wildest failures.

We can do all of this because I see, before me, and behind me, and all around me, dozens of faithful people.

Not simply persons *with* faith. People *of* faith.

People who believe knowledge of God's faithfulness and God's possibilities is not something to be carried or possessed like a spellbook, but rather, people whose faith is infused in them, transforming their entire composition.

The good stuff in me, in you, in all of us, Millbrook, is the God Stuff. We needn't miss that truth. Not for one moment. Not ever!

Whatever it is we're seeking, the answer isn't found in being overwhelmed by what we don't have. The answer lies in using our gratitude to identify our strongest gifts, and *faithing*, boldly, in their possibilities.

The world needs faith communities that listen, care, and love, and interrupt the tired narrative that the Church is void of meaning, authenticity, and transformation.

Think about the most Millbrooky that Millbrook has ever made you feel. A moment you knew you were welcome. When you felt seen. When you felt safe. When somebody fed you, prayed for you, laughed with you, made room for you, or trusted you with something that mattered.

Now imagine more people getting to experience that, too.

Up, Millbrook. Up!

The time is right now to be that church for Raleigh and beyond.

Yes, Bob, but they had a Deborah! I hope it's not lost on you that we've got a Deborah, too. Not to mention several Debbies.

Our Deborah doesn't sit beneath a palm tree. But her office resides beneath two towering, shady oaks. And she, like our other Debbies, has never been shy to share her wisdom with us, nor to point out the giftedness she sees in others.

We also have Joels, and Marys, and Johns, and Elizabeths, and others living into the meaning their names carry.

When we pay attention to our present, Millbrook, we discover that there are people like this all around us. People whose faithfulness sometimes becomes so familiar that we can forget to call it remarkable. People who see what needs doing. And do it. People

who recognize gifts in others. People who show up. People who quietly remind us, again and again, that God has already given this congregation so much of what it needs. It's all more proof that God's story continues in our generation, too.

Let me leave you with a final thought.

Judges 5 is Deborah's song, the poetic remembrance of what happened when a frightened people finally got up.

Three lines offer a fitting benediction.

When they let down their hair in Israel,
they let it blow wild in the wind.
The people volunteered with abandon,
bless God! (Judges 5:2)

Millbrook, may we be that people!

Then you, Deborah, rose up;
you got up, a mother in Israel. (Judges 5:7)

Millbrook, may prophetic voices continue to rise among us, reminding us of who we are, what we have, and God's call upon our lives.

Wake up, wake up, Deborah!
Wake up, wake up, sing a song!
On your feet, Barak!
And on your feet, Millbrook. (Judges 5:12)

Millbrook, the saints before us met their moment with purpose. This moment is ours. Our gifts are here. Our people are here. Most importantly, God is here!

Up, Millbrook. Up, Up, Up!

May it be so. And may it be soon.

Amen.