

But when the Israelites cried out to the LORD, the LORD raised up for them a deliverer, Ehud son of Gera, the Benjaminite, a left-handed man. The Israelites sent tribute by him to King Eglon of Moab.

Ehud made for himself a sword with two edges, a cubit in length; and he fastened it on his right thigh under his clothes. Then he presented the tribute to King Eglon of Moab. Now Eglon was a very fat man.

When Ehud had finished presenting the tribute, he sent the people who carried the tribute on their way. But he himself turned back at the sculptured stones near Gilgal, and said, "I have a secret message for you, O king." So the king said, "Silence!" and all his attendants went out from his presence.

Ehud came to him, while he was sitting alone in his cool roof chamber, and said, "I have a message from God for you." So he rose from his seat.

Then Ehud reached with his left hand, took the sword from his right thigh, and thrust it into Eglon's belly; the hilt also went in after the blade, and the fat closed over the blade, for he did not draw the sword out of his belly; and the dirt came out.

Then Ehud went out into the vestibule, and closed the doors of the roof chamber on him, and locked them.

After he had gone, the servants came. When they saw that the doors of the roof chamber were locked, they thought, "He must be relieving himself in the cool chamber."

So they waited until they were embarrassed. When he still did not open the doors of the roof chamber, they took the key and opened them.

There was their lord lying dead on the floor.

Ehud escaped while they delayed, and passed beyond the sculptured stones, and escaped to Seirah. When he arrived, he sounded the trumpet in the hill country of Ephraim; and the Israelites went down with him from the hill country, having him at their head. He said to them, "Follow after me; for the LORD has given your enemies the Moabites into your hand." So they went down after him, and seized the fords of the Jordan against the Moabites, and allowed no one to cross over. At that time they killed about ten thousand of the Moabites, all strong, able-bodied men; no one escaped. So Moab was subdued that day under the hand of Israel. And the land had rest eighty years.

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

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.

She sent and summoned Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali, and said to him, "The LORD, the God of Israel, commands you, 'Go, take position at Mount Tabor, bringing ten thousand from the tribe of Naphtali and the tribe of Zebulun.

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.'"

Barak said to her, "If you will go with me, I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go."

And she said, "I will surely go with you; nevertheless, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the LORD will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman." Then Deborah got up and went with Barak to Kedesh. Barak summoned Zebulun and Naphtali to Kedesh; and ten thousand warriors went up behind him; and Deborah went up with him. Now Heber the Kenite had separated from the other Kenites, that is, the descendants of Hobab the father-in-law of Moses, and had encamped as far away as Elon-bezaananim, which is near Kedesh. When Sisera was told that Barak son of Abinoam had gone up to Mount Tabor,

Sisera called out all his chariots, nine hundred chariots of iron, and all the troops who were with him, from Harosheth-ha-goiim to the Wadi Kishon.

Then Deborah said to Barak, "Up! For this is the day on which the LORD has given Sisera into your hand. The LORD is indeed going out before you." So Barak went down from Mount Tabor with ten thousand warriors following him.

And the LORD threw Sisera and all his chariots and all his army into a panic before Barak; Sisera got down from his chariot and fled away on foot,

while Barak pursued the chariots and the army to Harosheth-ha-goiim. All the army of Sisera fell by the sword; no one was left.

¶ Now Sisera had fled away on foot to the tent of Jael wife of Heber the Kenite; for there was peace between King Jabin of Hazor and the clan of Heber the Kenite.

Jael came out to meet Sisera, and said to him, "Turn aside, my lord, turn aside to me; have no fear." So he turned aside to her into the tent, and she covered him with a rug.

Then he said to her, "Please give me a little water to drink; for I am thirsty." So she opened a skin of milk and gave him a drink and covered him.

He said to her, "Stand at the entrance of the tent, and if anybody comes and asks you, 'Is anyone here?' say, 'No.'"

But Jael wife of Heber took a tent peg, and took a hammer in her hand, and went softly to him and drove the peg into his temple, until it went down into the ground—he was lying fast asleep from weariness—and he died. Then, as Barak came in pursuit of Sisera, Jael went out to meet him, and said to him, "Come, and I will show you the man whom you are seeking." So he went into her tent; and there was Sisera lying dead, with the tent peg in his temple.

So on that day God subdued King Jabin of Canaan before the Israelites.

In a not so surprising development, neither of the passages you heard read this morning from Judges ever appears in the Lectionary cycle of readings. Apparently they think these texts may not need to be preached.

And, perhaps they have a point. These texts are disgusting. Murder, violence, war, destruction. Dangerous women and left handed Benjaminites.

Yet, these texts, too, are the Word of the Lord, just as much as the Sermon on the Mount or the 10 Commandments.

What does that mean for us, as people who call this Book the Word of the Lord?

We believe the Bible to be God's word to and for us.

All around us in our culture, people hold up the Bible as the solution to all of society's problems. And it might be—but which chapters, exactly, are they thinking of when they say we need the Bible in the schools? Do we really want our kids reading some of these passages without parents around to help interpret?

Do we really know what we're doing when we present Bibles to 3rd graders? Perhaps sections of it should have a PG 13 rating?

And really, how do we make the Bible seem so boring that kids never want to pick it up? Because it is anything but boring.

What we should do is forbid our children and tell them the Bible is too violent to read.

**No "Guts", No Glory Judges 3 and 4
Southminster Presbyterian YotB**

**Marci Auld Glass
Sept 13, 2009**

That would get most kids I know to read it.

Listen to some of this language from our Book of Confessions about how the church has understood our relationship with Scripture through the ages.

From the Scots Confession from the 1500's:

As we believe and confess the Scriptures of God sufficient to instruct and make perfect the man of God, so do we affirm and avow their authority

to be from God, and not to depend on men or angels. Scots Confession 3.19

The Westminster Confession, a more modern document from the mid-1600's says:

All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all; yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed, for salvation, are so clearly propounded and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them. Westminster Confession 6.007
Confessional language changes, over the years, however. By the time the Confession of 1967 was written, listen to how our understanding has changed:

The one sufficient revelation of God is Jesus Christ, the Word of God incarnate, to whom the Holy Spirit bears unique and authoritative witness through the Holy Scriptures, which are received and obeyed as the word of God written. C 67 9.27

The Bible is to be interpreted in the light of its witness to God's work of reconciliation in Christ. The Scriptures, given under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, are nevertheless the words of men, conditioned by the language, thought forms, and literary fashions of the places and times at which they were written. They reflect views of life, history, and the cosmos which were then current. The church, therefore, has an obligation to approach the Scriptures with literary and historical understanding. As God has spoken his word in diverse cultural situations, the church is confident that he will continue to speak through the Scriptures in a changing world and in every form of human culture. C 67 9.29

I confess I am much more comfortable with the language from 1967

than I am with Scots and Westminster. Because how, exactly, I've been wondering, do these stories from Judges help us "instruct and make perfect the man of God"?

And I know that for some of you, reading through these Old Testament books has been a disconcerting experience. If all you know of the Bible is what people tell you about it then reading through the lists in Numbers or these stories in Judges has been difficult. Where is "God's Word" to you in this?

So, let's look at these texts with new eyes. Let's keep in the back of our minds what the Confession of 1967 tells us—both that these need to be read keeping the context in which they were written in mind and trusting that God is still speaking to the church today.

Let's start with Ehud the left handed Benjaminite.

Isn't it interesting that his left handedness is mentioned in the text? I am a left handed person, so I tend to notice when it is mentioned. For years, as I'm sure you know, being left handed was seen in a negative light. The word "sinister", comes from the Latin for "left". My aunt was left handed, but forced to become a right handed person by her teachers.

So, much like women not often being named in scripture, when a left handed person gets a shout out in scripture, it is worth noting.

And our left handed Benjaminite, Ehud, is raised up by God to deliver the people from the bondage of Moab. But why were they under Moab's rule in the first place? Because they sinned and did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. This refrain works its way through the Old Testament to explain why bad things kept happening to the tribes of Israel. Eventually the people will repent and call out to God.

Deliverance is not only the big theme of Exodus. Deliverance happens again and again.

So, in our lives, when you read a text like this, think about the Deliverance in your life. There may be the big moment that you can look back to. But there may not be a big moment for you. There may be weekly deliverances that you can notice. And some of these deliverances may come in stories like this—okay, hopefully not exactly like this one, but not stories that you would ordinarily want to tell to people.

Our human tendency is to tell stories in a way that frame us as individuals and as a people, in the best light possible. George Washington, who couldn't tell a lie, helped to give his new country an ethos of integrity.

Yet, because of a sword through the king of Moab, Israel was delivered

to 80 years of peace in the land. So, perhaps reading this text can be a reminder to you to look for deliverance in the stories of your life that you aren't so proud of. Perhaps this text can be a reminder that here, in this place, we don't need to whitewash our lives. We can be who we are. If these stories can be in Holy Scripture, then surely we can come to church. Here we can accept ourselves for the things we've done and we can accept others for the things they have done. Even left handed Benjaminites.

But my favorite story from Judges is Deborah the Judge. Because she's a woman. And a Judge—someone to whom the people would come to lead and guide them. And the judges were often more than judges—they oftentimes seemed to be prophets as well. And Deborah goes into battle alongside the men. Even better, the men won't go into battle without her.

Most of you probably don't have much reason to go to my sermon blog since you hear them each week in worship. But a few weeks ago, someone found my blog on the web and started asking me about how women have the right to be ministers. He didn't seem to be combative, so I tried to answer his question. But I finally had to shut the conversation down because it became clear that, for him, the fact that nowhere in the Bible does it say, "women can be ministers" means that it isn't okay for women to be ministers.

This is why I wanted all of us to undertake the Year of the Bible. Because we need to know what the Bible actually says. This commenter was correct that the Bible never actually says, "women can be ministers". But his reasoning is faulty. It also doesn't say explicitly that blondes can be ministers. Or that people can use computers to make comments on people's blogs. There are lots of things the Bible does NOT tell us.

But in the story of Deborah, there are lots of things it does tell us. Women can lead the people, both in peace and in war. Women can be prophets, carrying God's word about the success of the battle to the people.

And then we get to Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite. Note that in this story, we have not one but TWO women who are named! Sisera, the opposing commander comes to their compound seeking rest from the battle. Jael feeds him and puts him to sleep in the tent. Then, while he's sleeping, she uses the tools available to her, in this case a tent peg, and kills him. This is not just a subtle, "feminine" murder of poisoning or trickery. Think about the strength required for this job. And Israel received its deliverance at the hands of a woman.

The whole of scripture, when you look at the involvement of women in the life of the church, is of more value than any one verse could be. The argument I gave up trying to make on my blog in response to this gentleman's comments is that the entirety of Scripture ought to be considered. George Bernard Shaw once said,

*"No man ever believes that the Bible means what it says: He is always convinced that it says what he means."
But think about how, for centuries, people used Scripture to tell women that they were somehow less human than men. "Eve sinned..." You know the story. But, clearly, they weren't using Judges 4 to build their case.*

Which brings up another reason to embark on the Year of the Bible. William Sloan Coffin, who was a Presbyterian pastor and civil rights activist, once said, "It is a mistake to look to the Bible to close a discussion; the Bible seeks to open one."

But the Bible can only open discussions if we're opening the Bible. It is a conversation that needs to be read.

So, as we encounter these texts that have remained, largely, hidden and unread in the Bible, I invite you to consider why they didn't make the lectionary or why they aren't often quoted on those signs they hold up at football games. What is it about these particular stories that we DON'T want to hear?

And what conversation might God be starting with these stories? How might these texts force us to reassess what we assume we know about God and ourselves?

The Adult Sunday School class will be taking one Sunday a month to look at our Year of the Bible readings. The next discussion is this coming Sunday, here in the sanctuary. Even if you haven't kept up with all of the readings, I invite you to come to the discussions. And then the next week, we'll start discussing Jack Rogers book, "Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality". This book will require us to be in conversation with Scripture and to trust that God is still speaking to the church through Scripture.

I am thankful to be on this journey with you, to be a partner with you in this conversation with God. Amen.