

After yesterday's news of political violence with an assassination attempt of the former president- another senseless shooting resulting in death, let us take a moment to pray. This is a prayer from the Catholic Health Association. *God who is beyond politics and nations, Christ who transcends the power of violence, Holy Spirit who animates all people, Be with us in this moment of violence, division, and turmoil. Transform our rage and hate that we might see our brothers and sisters with your eyes. Break our hearts of stone, give us hearts of love and understanding that your peace might prevail. Amen.*

Yesterday's event and the ongoing wars surrounding us are yet among many examples of how we, as people, "who are settled in a good land, nonetheless or perhaps therefore- need to be saved from our own tendency to violence, discord, and arrogance; who need wise governance, together with unwavering trust in God when the day of trouble comes. When we scratch the antique surface of the book of Judges, the relevance is startling" (Ellen F. Davis, *Opening Israel's Scriptures*). The book of Judges highlights a transitional time in the life of the Israelites. Before God appointed kings to help rule God's people, God appointed judges. These judges, six major military leaders in all, were chosen as leaders of the tribes of Israel. The book of Judges seems to echo what Moses told the Israelites on the other side of the Jordan: *You shall keep carefully the commandments of YHWH your God and his testimonies and statutes which he commanded you. You shall do what is right and good in the eyes of YHWH, in order that it may go well for you, and you may enter and take possession of the good land that YHWH*

promised to your ancestors (Deut. 6:17-18; cf. Exodus 15:26). This echo in Judges reveal that in the Promised Land of Canaan, “the situation is now directly contrary to what it should be; the norm for behavior is not YHWH’s will the the will of each individual Israelite” (Davis). For when there is no king in Israel- or even when there is a king in Israel- everyone does what is right in their own eyes. We in modern-day America know this social norm of everyone choosing their own immediate self-interest well. The Book of Judges is a violent book, which may explain why the verses of today’s scripture are the only ones in the entire book selected for the common lectionary, which is what is usually exposed to the common pew sitter. “All the trouble in Judges begins with culpable ignorance. After the death of Joshua’s generation, ‘there arose another generation after them that did not know YHWH or the work that he had done for Israel’ (Judges 2:10)” (Davis). They forgot who and whose they were. We forget, too. It’s as if all of that instructional history never took place. This ignorance launches a pattern or cycle among the people of Israel, which is outlined over and over again in the Book of Judges: 1. Israel sins. 2. God gets angry and hands Israel over to their enemies. 3. Israel cries out to God. 4. God raises up a military deliverer and leader and delivers them. And 5. There is a period of quiet and peace. And then the cycle repeats itself. And what is missing here is Israel’s repentance. Therein, sums up the Book of Judges. But within these cycles we find a gem of a face of faith: Deborah. Before we learn more about her and listen to God’s word for us this day, let us first pray. **PRAY. READ.**

At the beginning of today's story, Ehud, the previous judge has died, and the cycle begins again with the Israelites doing what was evil (4:1). They have once again fallen short of staying in right relationship with the Lord. Thus they find themselves being oppressed for over 20 years by the Canaanites until they cried out, and God raises up a 4th judge to fight the oppressor and restore moral and spiritual order to the community. We're first introduced to Deborah but Deborah's story cannot be told separate from the stories of Barak and Jael, as the three of them together, with God's help, deliver the people of Israel. Theirs is a story that is as unique as it is intriguing because it is told in two versions: first in prose (Judges 4) and then in poetry (Judges 5). We just read from the prose or narrative. However, many scholars consider the poem, entitled "Deborah's song," to be among the oldest compositions in the Bible (Davis). So, who is this Deborah?

We're told three things about Deborah. 1. She is a prophetess or female prophet. Believe it or not, she was not the only female prophet in the Bible. 2. She is married and 3. She is a judge. No scholar contests the fact that Deborah was a prophet. However, some argue whether or not she was married. "The Hebrew expression, 'wife of Lappidoth' could also be 'woman of Lappidoth,' referring to where she comes from. Or, that phrase could be a description of Deborah's character; the word 'lappidoth' means 'torch,' or 'fire,' so Deborah could be a 'fiery woman'" (Sara M. Koenig, workingpreacher.org). Another dispute among some scholars, even though Deborah is referred to as a "judge," is who exactly the judge is in this story. There are a few reasons for this dispute:

Deborah seems to function more in the legal world than in the military one. Yet, *News and World Report* featured an [article](#) in 2008 entitled, *As a Military Leader, Deborah is a Rare Biblical Character*. The writer of the article begins, *From her seat in the shade of a palm tree, Deborah looked out over the highlands of Israel. These dry hills were her people's home, and she could see all was not well. It was a time of chaos, a time that called for strong leadership*. Deborah is also the first and only female judge in the book. Deborah clearly speaks for God- the prophet role. But Barak, who is the commander of the Israelite army and whose name means "lightning," was sought out by Deborah and though appearing reluctant, he also seems to be a contender for judge, as his name is listed among Paul's list of the Hall of Faithful Israelite Heroes in the book of Hebrews (11:32). Deborah is somehow skipped over in this list. Things that make you go hmmm. After Deborah commands Barak to ready his troops because salvation is at hand, he insisted that Deborah accompany him into battle. He gave her one of those "if you don't go, I won't go" ultimatums. Barak obviously thinks highly of Deborah's faith and leadership. He isn't willing to take on Sisera and his Canaanite army without Deborah's unwavering support. Deborah's answer to Barak's request was assertive and prophetic: "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" (4:9). Many think this "woman" is Deborah, but it is not. We didn't read this far today, but the "woman" is Jael, a non-Israelite and Israel's enemy turned ally, who is a person for another sermon and arguably the third contender for the title of "judge" in today's story, kills Sisera, the

Canaanite commander, and ends the war. But as I mentioned earlier, I believe all three of them play a role in delivering Israel. I mean we have a woman of fire, along with Commander Lightning, and I don't know what Jael means but most importantly there's God. It's better than an Avengers movie. Just because Barak is listed in Paul's hall of faith doesn't mean he's any more important than Deborah or Jael just as it doesn't mean Barak isn't faithful because he is reluctant to heed God's instructions per Deborah and looks to her to accompany him into battle. Maybe Paul mentions Barak in the Book of Hebrews along with Samson, who was a womanizer, and other imperfect people of faith to show that God can use any of us despite our glaring flaws. And perhaps not everyone's faith can be as BIG as Deborah's and that's ok!

Deborah demonstrates BIG faith. The B is for bold. The I is for integrity and the G is for grit. Deborah is bold and confident in her faith and trust in God. This was a calling for Deborah, and she lived out her gifts. Not only does God speak through her as a prophet, but Deborah walks the walk and talk the talk that God will deliver God's people. As a woman holding court under a palm tree, Deborah was known for her wisdom, guidance, and influence with both women and men. Deborah's uncompromising integrity is on point. She is who she says she is and believes in God. Hard stop. Deborah's grit and tenacity are prevalent throughout this story. She doesn't hesitate to accompany Barak into battle, and she doesn't mince words as to who will receive credit for the victory to come. Over and over again, God uses unlikely heroes to accomplish God's purposes. Regardless of the varied opinions about

who Deborah really was, she was a woman of BIG faith. I don't know about you, but we all need Deborahs in our lives, especially in today's often violent, uncertain and scary world. Like Deborah, some people just have an aura about them; they light up a place. They are light which means **in times of darkness they offer hope, encouragement, kindness and compassion.** In times where others are struggling they lead by offering a way to help them to regain their glow and to shine. Deborah, woman of fire, and Barak, Commander of Lightning. They're named for a reason. Deborahs inspire people to action. Yes, "grace can come in the form of a leader who can identify gifts of others, encourage their use, and stand alongside people in difficult situations" (Lynn Japinga, *The Women of the Old Testament*). You can tell. Deborahs wait on the Lord. They walk the walk and talk the talk. They're a non-anxious presence who exude and embody divine wisdom. They're direct, decisive, honest, and courageous. One Deborah I know is Pat Parker. If you don't know Pat, I invite you to get to know her. Pat just celebrated her 15th year of working at Triune. She runs the Mercy Center, and she is also our resident Deborah. If there was a counter placed on Pat's door to monitor the daily comings and goings, it would be a lot. We, the staff, volunteers and parishioners, go and sit at Pat's round table to discuss life's joys and challenges and of course matters of faith. Pat, like Deborah in her authority, creates space where people feel not only welcomed but also held accountable for their actions or inactions but not in a super judge-y way. Pat, like Deborah, is a reassurer of God's presence and faithfulness, a wisdom dispenser, a disciple-maker, a prayer warrior, a chaplain. I don't say this to swell Pat's head. I say this

because I experience Pat living into God's calling upon her life, as well as using her God-given gifts. There are many other Deborahs in this community. I'm just highlighting one. It's ok if you don't feel as though you have BIG faith. You may identify more with Barak or Jael. It's ok if we're hesitant or reluctant or doubtful in our faith. God sends us Deborahs to assure us of God's faithfulness and presence with us. Because Lord knows "sometimes we can let the oppression we have experienced and the obstacles in our path convince us that transformation or deliverance is not possible. Twenty years is a long time to live in fear of Sisera's army, as it were" (Wm. Marcus Small, *Connections*). But with God...all things are possible. "God's promise of victory can overcome our fear, empowering us to change our sinful ways. We're called to trust God in spite of the obstacles that loom large in front of us. Paul exhorts believers in 1 Thessalonians 5 to be 'children of light' (vv. 4-5) and 'to encourage one another (v.11). The Christian hope articulated in this passage is nothing less than the hope of grace, something to which believers can cling in times of challenge for 'God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ' (v. 9)" (Small). As for our current time of challenge, may we have faith and hope of grace and may we continue to pray for those wounded and killed in yesterday's acts of violence, not just in PA but all over the world. Pray that any spirit of retribution would be transformed by love. Pray for all of us that we would remember that God never forsakes us; we never walk alone. Let us strive to be people of BIG faith for we always have choices to make. Pray we make good ones (Diana Butler Bass, *The Cottage* e-newsletter). To God be the glory! Amen.