

SERMON: Sunday – 17 September 2023 – Rev Alistair Cowper

Pray, Dress, Act

Judges 4:1-7
1 Timothy 2:1-15

The time of the Judges in Israel is often described as a Godless time in which the people did whatever they pleased. And yet amid the chaos which that brings, God was present and acting through a handful of prophetic leaders known as the Judges.

In order to get a bit of context, let me read a few verses from Judges chapter 2.

10 After that whole (Joshua) generation had been gathered to their ancestors, another generation grew up who knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel. 11 Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord and served the Baals. 12 They forsook the Lord, the God of their ancestors, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed and worshiped various gods of the peoples around them. They aroused the Lord's anger 13 because they forsook him and served Baal and the Ashtoreths. 14 In his anger against Israel the Lord gave them into the hands of raiders who plundered them. He sold them into the hands of their enemies all around, whom they were no longer able to resist. 15 Whenever Israel went out to fight, the hand of the Lord was against them to defeat them, just as he had sworn to them. They were in great distress.

16 Then the Lord raised up judges, who saved them out of the hands of these raiders. 17 Yet they would not listen to their judges but prostituted themselves to other gods and worshiped them. They quickly turned from the ways of their ancestors, who had been obedient to the Lord's commands. 18 Whenever the Lord raised up a judge for them, he was with the judge and saved them out of the hands of their enemies as long as the judge lived; for the Lord relented because of their groaning under those who oppressed and afflicted them. 19 But when the judge died, the people returned to ways even more corrupt than those of their ancestors, following other gods and serving and worshiping them. They refused to give up their evil practices and stubborn ways.

20 Therefore the Lord was very angry with Israel and said, "Because this nation has violated the covenant I ordained for their ancestors and has not listened to me, 21 I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations Joshua left when he died. 22 I will use them to test Israel and see whether they will keep the way of the Lord and walk in it as their ancestors did." 23 The

Lord had allowed those nations to remain; he did not drive them out at once by giving them into the hands of Joshua.

And so came the judges - Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar, Deborah.

Deborah is the only judge who is not criticised in the Bible. And, what's more, her part in the story results in a successful ending, which is not the case usually in the repeated cycle of events recounted from the period of the judges.

In both the old and new testament readings for this week we have a real contrast. On the one hand we have the description of Deborah, a prophetess and military planner, and on the other we have the exhortation to prayer in the first letter to Timothy, which includes an instruction for women to be silent and to submit to men.

But history proves that this wasn't always so.

At least 8 centuries before Christ, Deborah is both prophet and judge. Sitting under the palm trees between Ramah and Bethel, right in the heart of Israel, we can picture Deborah sheltering from the sun with people coming to her to seek a judgement on a dispute, in the way that Moses had done years before.

Deborah didn't only act judicially, she was also a military leader who is clear in giving her instructions to her army officer, Barak. She expects him to obey her direction and he initially balks, demanding that she accompany him.

There is an interesting dynamic at work in that relationship that some interpreters relate to weakness on Barak's part, which is then emphasised when his enemy on the battlefield, Sisera, does not fall at his own hand but rather at the hand of another woman—a story we might cover next week!

The historical Book of Judges depicts Deborah as a powerful woman who had authority over Israel. It is worth keeping in mind that the battle that ensues takes place some distance away, far north of where Deborah resided. Her reach of influence extended outwards. Deborah worked with others in order to bring about a successful outcome for Israel. She recognised the talents of those around her, and worked collaboratively with them to bring about that outcome.

Now contrast that with the words from Paul's first letter to Timothy, one of those passages wielded by some who have sought to diminish and deny women from becoming leaders within the church.

It is maybe worth emphasising that most Biblical scholars reckon that Paul

was not the author of these letters. It was typical of the time for letters to be written by someone else making use of the famous name. But that doesn't mean we discount such inspired wisdom.

While Deborah is leading her people to victory on the battlefield, here the author of 1 Timothy is determined to protect the church at almost all costs: to keep your head down (literally in prayer, figuratively in not rocking the political boat) and live a peaceful life. It is an exhortation that is attractive to many.

For example, in the USA, the Southern Baptist Convention has been voting to remove women from holding leadership roles and expel churches that have female pastors. A reminder that patriarchy is not just a historic footnote, but is alive and kicking back against the equality and egalitarianism of the gospel which Jesus and Paul taught and lived.

I wonder what sort of world we might live in if we had more Deborah's in charge. Would it be a better world? Would we fight each other less?

I think it probably would be a better world with less conflict and more cooperation but so often women aren't given the opportunity or if they are they have to struggle to reach the top.

Could we men make it easier for women to rise and not hold women back as the Southern Baptists want to?

Spill the Beans included this reflection on Deborah and the women referred to in 1 Timothy:

The bold Deborah
and the silenced women.
Such contrasts.
Deborah issuing orders,
the silenced following commands.
We so easily forget the circumstances.
The same people will celebrate Deborah
and still uphold the silencing of women.
What do they fear?
Why is it women's voices are feared?
What don't they want to hear?
Hiding behind ancient words,
taken out of context, misunderstood,
abused.
We cannot all be a Deborah,
but we all have voices.
Some quieter than others,
but all worth hearing.

Women of God
let your voices rise,
be heard not silenced.
Your voice is beautiful,
let it ring out!

When we read a passage like Timothy 2:1-15 we see that there is in it a very human attempt to introduce some sense of order to human behaviour.

As we probably all agree, rules are necessary for communities to function fairly, making sure people are safe. And rules have other functions, like the ones Janice read.

But we'll come back to that in a minute, Firstly, I'm going to read out a list of rules, not from a religious setting but rules which are an attempt to help create a peaceful or prosperous society.

So, what do you think, true or false?

1. In Milan, Italy, it is illegal for citizens to frown in public—unless they are at a funeral or visiting someone in the hospital.
2. It is illegal to chew gum in Singapore. In fact, no gum is bought or sold here. The law is said to be in place to keep public spaces clean.
3. In Mexico, it is illegal for bicyclists to lift their feet off the pedals while riding as this might cause them to lose control of the bike.
4. In Switzerland, it's against the law to flush a toilet after 10 p.m. in an apartment building.
5. In the UK, you can't sing on a train.
6. Also in the UK, you can't be drunk in a pub (according to the 1872 Licensing Act).
7. In Oshawa, Ontario, it is against the law to climb a tree.

The Scriptures are full of rules and wisdom for creating commonwealth, which isn't a bad description of the kingdom of the God who wants all to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:4).

Here's our rules for today:

(SLIDE)

1. **Pray** for kings and others in authority
2. **Dress** yourselves with good deeds
3. **Act** in faith, love and holiness

