

## **“The Fear Factor”**

Judges 4, Matt. 25:14-30  
Nov. 13, 2011, Hope Church, Lynn Japinga

[Before OT reading. There is only one passage from Judges in the lectionary. Perhaps because the book is full of death and destruction, and not too many positive moral lessons, or signs of good news. And the lectionary only includes the first seven verses of chapter four, which leaves out most of the good stuff.]

Sermon:

If you were a contestant on the TV show Fear Factor (which I’ve never actually watched; I had to look this up on Wikipedia!) ... you might have to confront your fear of heights or rats or blood or eating something disgusting. But I wonder if it might be more realistic to make Fear Factor episodes look like this.

You are a parent, and you have to take your three small children on a cross country flight, but when you arrive, you have to spend eight more hours in the plane on the tarmac because of a snow storm.

You are locked in a small office for 24 hours with your most mean-spirited colleague.

You are a pastor, and you have to preside over a 24-hour Consistory meeting in which people complain about how unspiritual the church has become since you arrived.

You are in middle school, and you have to spend an entire day trapped in the hallway with the kids who harass you and threaten to stuff you in a locker.

You are alone in a room for three days with absolutely nothing to do except wait for the doctor to come and give you test results which you think are going to be bad.

These may not make for very good television, but they represent the things we are most deeply afraid of. Dealing with difficult people. Losing a job. Failing at something important to us. Being in a confined space with cranky children. Getting sick. And we could add to that list the fear that something bad will happen to our children. The fear that someone will discover our deep dark secrets. The fear that God will be angry if we don't live perfectly. The fear that we are not good enough.

The story we read from the book of Judges is also about fear. The Israelites had had been oppressed for twenty years by the king of Canaan. They may have deserved it, but the people were miserable and frightened and anxious about the future.

And in the midst of this, there was Deborah, sitting under a tree, giving advice and making decisions and offering guidance. She is one of very few women in the Old Testament to exercise leadership in such an explicit way. Clearly she was respected and admired. God used her to send a message to a man named Barak. He needed to gather up his troops, Deborah said, and go to battle against Sisera, the general of the Canaanite army. Barak was a bit reluctant, though. He knew about those 900 chariots that the Canaanites had, and he was afraid that even with 10,000 troops, the Israelites would be quickly defeated. He told Deborah that he would only go to battle if she went also. Here was this supposedly strong, confident military man, insisting that he would not go into battle without a woman!

Deborah agreed to go, but she also informed Barak that because he was so hesitant, he would not get the glory and acclaim for the victory. In fact, she said, it will be a woman who gets all the glory!

Barak gathered his troops and Deborah told him when to go to war and assured him that God would be present with him. And then the text said that God was not only present but very active! God threw Sisera and all his chariots and all his army into a panic! And Barak and his troops ended up killing all of Sisera's army. And the powerful Sisera got out of his chariot and ran away on foot!

Sisera found himself at the tent of Jael. Jael's husband seemed to have some kind of relationship with the king of Canaan, so Sisera thought Jael would be an ally who would keep him safe. But Jael was an independent woman who thought for herself, and she was clearly on the side of the Israelites. It is kind of ironic that she tells Sisera to "have no fear," because it turns out that fear was more than justified in this situation! Jael played the role of a kind, motherly woman. She offered Sisera food and a place to sleep and he asked her to stand guard at the door. But rather than standing guard, as soon as he was asleep, she pounded the tent peg into his head! This was not exactly typical behavior for a woman ... and Jael takes a lot of criticism from the commentators for pretending to be hospitable and then killing the guy while he was sleeping. But, for the Israelites, she was a hero! She had killed one of their worst enemies ... after he had managed to escape from the Israelite army! And she could claim self-defense ... she was protecting herself, her family, and her nation. She may have been afraid ... but she didn't show it. She was bold and courageous.

This story raises so many questions about violence and warfare. It should not be read as an instruction manual for international relations! But it also makes an interesting point about gender roles. The men in this story are the ones with all the military power behind them, and yet they are fearful! The women, who don't have the same resources at their disposal, seem to be much more confident. They take action. They take risks.

There has been some debate about Deborah's leadership and whether women should be able to serve as political leaders. Some critics said that women should NOT do this, and that Deborah only had this role in Israel because none of the men would step up and do the job! It seems pretty clear, though, that Deborah was recognized as both a judge who exercised leadership, AND a prophet who conveyed the word of the Lord. And Jael, while we may be horrified by her methods, definitely took decisive action in defense of her people.

The gospel lesson for today also touches on the theme of fear. The master talents to his servants. Talent here does not refer to abilities, but to a large sum of money. Each talent was worth 15-20 years of wages. Two of the servants took enormous risks. They traded, they invested. They might have lost everything, but the market was kind to them. But the one talent man buried his talent in the ground because he was afraid. We can understand that though, can't we? Every time my retirement fund takes a hit and I think I'll be working until I'm 80, I wonder if I should be putting that money under the mattress! But this slave was sharply criticized for being so fearful and refusing to take a risk with the money that had been entrusted to him. The master probably would have been more tolerant if the slave had lost money, but he had no patience for doing nothing.

So in the midst of all of our own fears about the future, about money, about job security, about health ... when we feel paralyzed or helpless or beaten down, what might we learn from these stories?

We can be aware that God may work in unexpected ways and through unexpected people. Even women! Deborah and Jael were not the obvious choices for heroic action, but God used them to make a difference.

Secondly, we can remember the strong people that we know. This week I listened to one of my colleagues talk about what has sustained her work in an often difficult environment. It was inspiring to hear about the spiritual resources that had kept her going. We can learn from the strong people in our lives, but we can also ask them for help. Barak had the good sense to know that Deborah was a strong woman who had a powerful connection with God. He was fearful, yes, but he was smart enough to ask for help, even if it compromised his tough general image.

Finally, we can recognize that we have been given extraordinary gifts. Even the man who received only one talent had been given the equivalent of 15-20 years of wages! And we are called to use what we have ... not to bury it in an attempt to keep it safe. We live in a culture of scarcity right now that suggests there is never enough money. But God is generous, and we actually live with abundance. It may not be always so evident, but we have been given many gifts of grace. Whether that is our money, our abilities, our time, our love ... we are called to use what God has given us to make a difference in the world.

The fear factor is very real in our lives. We live with a lot of uncertainty and there are no quick and easy remedies for that. But we also live with a gospel of abundance, and the promise that we look to a merciful God who is going before us.