

*The Word of God for the People of God?*

Judges | Jueces 4:1-7

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There is little ambiguity in the Israel described to us in the book of Judges. It was a nation with a keen understanding of right and wrong. This was a place where truth was readily at hand and where facts were unquestioned. Yahweh is God. Deborah is judge. When conflict arises, there is a special tent where disputes are settled. Are there any questions? Good.

The question of authority is at the heart of Israel's history. Legally, politically, spiritually - the Hebrew Bible is a chronicle of what will have authority. Just think of the voice of God speaking to Moses at the burning bush. Moses listens to this voice in the flame because it comes directly from God - "Go and tell Pharaoh, 'Let my people Go.'" The plagues of Egypt, the parting of the waters, the manna falling from Heaven. All of these events establish God as the ultimate authority. The Ten Commandments are law provided by God to the people so that they may govern themselves faithfully. By the time we get to the book of Judges, the politics are more interesting and the characters are more colorful - but it's the same old story. Who do we trust to put our lives in order? And how do we order our lives in accord with what has ultimate authority? There's nothing democratic about Israel's history, either under the tribal judges like Deborah or under Israel's later kings like David. There's no shared power. There's no due process. This is not a political system that we would want for ourselves, but just notice how God passes judgment on the nation. It's doesn't matter who holds the power - Pharaoh or Deborah or David - God's judgment comes when Israel's life together is not ordered faithfully.

It occurs to me this not entirely fair or just. If power is distributed unequally, then you might expect God to exercise judgment selectively. Why punish everybody in Egypt for Pharaoh's idolatry? Our text today begins with another assignment of collective responsibility: "The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord." The whole country gets handed over to King Jabin of the Canaanites. Later, everyone will suffer for the sins of King David. That doesn't seem right, does it? Why won't God just accept the leader as a scapegoat? This is one of the more frustrating themes of the Biblical narrative, recurring in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. God's judgment isn't usually meted out privately and selectively; it's doled out corporately. It's unpredictable, not very fair minded, and we all have to deal with it. "The rain will fall on the just and the unjust alike," Jesus has said.

One might say we're wrestling with similar questions in our much more advanced democracy today, don't you think? Why does everyone have to suffer for the failures and shortcomings of a few political leaders - or even one? Much of our trouble goes back to that old question of authority that defined the early history of Israel. Deborah settled questions not with elections but with a tent peg. Primitive and tribal as that may sound, at least Deborah was able to settle the question. In our country, so far this year, the outcome of our election is hardly so clear. I'm utterly mystified that the vote - the popular vote coupled with the electoral college system - is not a sufficiently authoritative ground of victory for one candidate over another. When one party will not accept the results of an election, it really raises the stakes in our search for reliable answers. The authority we thought we would put our trust in is not also trusted by others.

You know it's pretty alarming for me to see on social media members of my family sharing information about the November election that is not true. One message that I saw recently suggested that the vote counting process itself was not trustworthy. Other messages have suggested

that the results of the election shouldn't be accepted even if the tallies are accurate. I know I'm not the only one who feels put in a bind when I see others casting doubt on the electoral process. And at the same time I'm not sure what to say to those I know who post these messages because it seems like we live in two different worlds and operate by very different assumptions. What seems factual to me is not accepted as truth by others. That feels very dangerous to me and very worrisome.

It almost makes me yearn for a simpler and earlier time. It makes me wish that God would speak the truth unambiguously and indisputably, maybe from a burning bush on holy ground or from some transcendent mountaintop. But I suppose the truth when it comes from God is never really uncontested. The experience of Jesus was not that the world embraced the truth but that the world rejected the truth. Nicodemus, the skeptic at the beginning of John's gospel, certainly believes the Word of God - but he doesn't see it in Jesus. Later, Jesus testifies in court that his whole life is dedicated to revealing the truth of God. Pilate's response discloses his cynicism and resignation. "What is truth?"

I'm simply astonished by what I'm seeing and hearing. I imagine others are too. It's somewhat comforting to me, though, to remember that the search for authority and for real truth is biblically normal. The Bible is about people trying to figure out who and what to trust. None of these characters, we learn, are ultimately authoritative - not Moses, not Deborah, not David - except to the extent that they reflect the faithfulness of God. What is true for us is the memory of God's faithfulness. The politics change. The judges and kings rise and fall. All the people pass away like Jesus before the dejected Pilate. But God's faithfulness remains, and that's what strengthens us to remain active in our search. This is the work of our faith - to search, to seek, to love, to act. God has never promised that we would not be deceived. God has never promised that we would have perfect information. God has only promised to be faithful to us whatever our circumstances might bring. Our faith then is learning to trust in God and, perhaps, learning to trust ourselves to know God.