

## Chariots of Iron

Judges 4:1-9; Matthew 25:14-30

Rev. Mary Speers, the Union Church of Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, November 16, 2008

In our steeplechase this year through the foundational stories of the Bible, the lectionary committee is like an old horse heading for the barn, they just want to get us happily ever after into the Promised Land—before Advent and Christmas and the whole year starts over again. And because it's the end of the Church year, and we're supposed to be thinking about the Second Coming and the Last Judgment...oh, and the pledging season besides, they have us dealing with some of the most difficult and disturbing parables of Jesus at the same time.

So, of the two books of the Hebrew Bible that tell the long and complex story of how the People of God came to live again in the land of Canaan, the book of Joshua gets two weeks, and the period of the Judges, exactly one week—this one—when it has to compete with Stewardship Sunday and the Parable of the Talents.

Now, of course, the Book of Judges isn't what we would consider one of the more "Christian" or "uplifting" of the books of the Bible, it's full of what Allan Sherman called "smiting and smoting," and runnings-through with the sword, all in lurid and Jacobean detail, but it's got some good stories in it, none of which are in the lectionary.

It's got the story of Gideon, and Samson and Delilah, and let's not forget Balaam and the angel and the talking donkey, and then there's the tragic and terrifying story of Jephthah, and the just plain revolting story of big fat Eglon...the kind of stories that Christians like to get all smug about and use them to justify the persistent and ever-heretical idea that the Hebrew Bible is somehow not quite relevant to Christian faith.

Well, Jesus didn't think so: that was his Bible. So by now you've guessed that I decided, in a rather contrary mood, to use mostly the Old Testament reading today, and particularly that little phrase that kept cropping up, "nine hundred chariots of iron." And I thought I would ring some changes on chariots of iron, and talents we're given that we use and don't use, and throw in some bolts of lightning, and a few other things as we go along, and see where it all takes us.

The Book of Joshua is a good example of how history is written by the winners. In it, you hear the story of the glorious conquest of the Promised Land and how the Children of Israel, with God on their side, deck the Canaanites and win the Promised Land just as God said they would, Joshua marches around the city seven times and blows all the trumpets, and the walls of Jericho come tumbling down.

The Book of Judges is a little more complicated than that. It points out how the Children of Israel prevailed *in spite of their weaknesses*, starting right up front with an easy-to-miss little statement, right in the first chapter, that the LORD was with them, but they had to stay up in the hills, because the inhabitants of the plain (where the big wealthy cities were and the richest farmland) "had chariots of iron."

Well, I looked it up, and sure enough, this all took place around 1200 B.C., which was right around the time of the transition from the Bronze Age to the Iron Age. And iron is harder than bronze, and more complicated than bronze to refine and

manufacture—so it's as though the inhabitants of the plain had, for their day, nuclear weapons. You could say that the Children of Israel weren't...Y-1K-B.C.-ready.

Now then, if the Book of Joshua is all glorious conquering hero, the Book of Judges has more of a...well, dare I say, community organizing point of view, with a lot of little villages and little people without many resources or much power, with no king but only these local leaders with good people skills, judges they were called, and one of them, Deborah, is in our story today.

Now, the story as we have it in today's reading is chopped off, mostly because the rest of it isn't terribly savory. We meet Sisera, this Canaanite chieftain who has these 900 chariots of iron—the latest in high-tech weapons, you see, and a lot of them, too. And then we have the Hebrew chieftain Barak (I didn't do this on purpose, it just comes up in the lectionary this week) whom Deborah sends off to do something about Sisera, but Barak has to get creative, since his raggedy army and their moldy old bronze weapons couldn't possibly defeat Sisera head on.

But Deborah promises her army as a decoy to get the chariots to go past a certain hill, and Barak's men do a good job of running down the hill waving their funny-looking old bronze swords and yelling a lot and scaring Sisera's chariot horses, and, once the horses have run away with the chariots, of putting all of Sisera's charioteers to the sword (which happens a lot in the Book of Judges), and then, while this is going on, the Bible says, Sisera sneaks away by himself under cover of darkness, presumably to fight another day. Not much of a role model, our Sisera.

We don't hear in our reading about Jael, either, except obliquely—well, that's because this is one of those memorably-grisly Bible stories, and if you haven't heard this one, you have probably heard the one about Judith, and it's the same idea. Jael, you see, has no army at all, but she is very clever and very beautiful and also a very good cook—and this, as we see, can be a lethal combination.

Jael entices Sisera into her tent, and she lulls him to sleep with a really good dinner and a lot of wine, and then she takes a tent peg and hammers it into the side of his head, and then, the Bible says rather laconically, he dies...well, yes, ouch, it would have that effect. Not very uplifting but definitely memorable, it's the kind of story you might associate with Caravaggio, and I even had a painting in my mind's eye, but when I looked it up, guess what, it wasn't by Caravaggio at all, it was painted by a contemporary of his, one of the few women artists in art history: Artemesia Gentileschi, and guess what else, in Artemesia's painting, Sisera's face bears a striking resemblance to...Caravaggio!

But meanwhile, as we see, Sisera's nine hundred chariots of iron have done him no good at all, they've been useless against the kind of grassroots campaign that Deborah gets going with Barak and Jael, making the most of some raggedy hill tribes and some old bronze weapons, which probably belonged in a museum even then.

Now, who was Deborah? She was a judge, we know that, and one of the few women in the Bible about whom we know anything more than her name, if indeed that much. And we are told in all the English translations that she was "wife of Lappidoth."

No, we don't know who Lappidoth was. For once, you say, we know more about *her* than we do about her husband! But let's have a closer look at this. In Hebrew, as in many languages, you say "wife of" (or "husband of") by saying "woman of" (or "man of"). So Deborah was "woman of" Lappidoth, and what does "Lappidoth" mean if it's not a proper name? It means "torches", or elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, it's translated "bolts of lightning," so therefore, *woman of torches, woman of bolts of lightning...*

So, you see, it may be that our translators are simply following the cultural assumption that Deborah the judge is being defined by whose wife she was, when, in fact, what the Biblical narrator is saying is that she was a Joan of Arc sort of character, a firebrand, a "woman of bolts of lightning", or power surges of some kind anyway, or maybe it's flashes of insight; a "woman of torches," an enlightened woman? Well, she *was* a judge.

And it does take insight and planning and faith and just plain dogged persistence to see how to make the most of the little they had. So she sends Barak off to do what he's good at, and Jael off to do what *she's* good at, each according to their abilities and the opportunities available to them at the moment.

So let's see, so far we have chariots of iron and bolts of lightning. Sounds like a real action-hero movie. And why are action-hero movies so popular? Because we all come up against chariots of iron, and we all wish we had bolts of lightning to zap 'em.

And nobody wishes that more than that poor servant in the Parable of the Talents, the one who is given the least, and feels so overwhelmed, and in fact, you notice, doesn't *lose* anything, and for his pains is cast out into the outer darkness where there is wailing and gnashing of teeth—and the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, and how can this be Jesus, saying God is like this?

Okay, back up a minute. What's a talent, anyway? Remember that a talent in the Bible is a *weight*, primarily, and it's a considerable weight. It's seventy-five pounds, usually of silver, and seventy-five pounds of silver was worth, in those days, *fifteen years' salary*.

So yes, this *is* an outrageous story. This master hands these people 15 years' salary, or 30, or 75, with no explanation and no instructions, and then goes away for a long time.

Because in real life, let's face it, we all feel like that servant with the one talent. We really identify with that poor guy. In so many ways we're in a position of accountability for something we didn't ask for, don't know what to do with, and believe ourselves to be powerless, as individuals, to affect. Who wouldn't feel terribly burdened, and also terribly resentful, at being saddled, unasked, with the responsibility for that amount of money? Especially when there are chariots of iron out there.

Do we really trust God to take care of our families, our businesses, our church, our country, our world? Or do we feel that it's all our responsibility, and that it's unfair to expect us to go up against those chariots of iron—go up against God (sometimes we think), and we say, we'll just stay up here in the hill country, thank you very much, we'll just hide, we'll just bury this gift we didn't ask for anyway, resenting God all the time

for entrusting us with such a huge responsibility without asking us first and with no instructions.

What's a chariot of iron? It's a big complex problem, a problem none of us by ourselves can solve or even begin to know where to start. You know the kind: you know you're dealing with a Chariot of Iron if the harder you try to fight it head on, the bigger and stronger and more intractable it gets.

In this country, I can't think of a bigger chariot of iron than racism and the shameful heritage of slavery. It's been a chariot of iron precisely because it's bigger than all of us: we all hate it, because no matter how hard we try, we're all caught up in its terrible wheels...a true chariot of iron. And yet just a couple of weeks ago, through lots of little people and a few bolts of lightning, a few flashes of insight, through a combination of hope, wisdom, faith, and just plain dogged persistence—an overnight phenomenon that was years in the making—the world saw this country leave its race barrier behind.

Five decades ago, the great African-American theologian and preacher Howard Thurman had this to say: "The existence of the African-American spiritual is in itself a monument to one of the most striking instances on record in which a people forged a weapon out of a psychological shackle: the master's religion. There is a bottomless resourcefulness [placed in us] that ultimately enables us to transform "the spear of frustration" into "a shaft of light." Under such a circumstance, even one's deepest distress becomes so sanctified that a vast illumination points the way to the land one seeks. This is...God in human beings." *Chariots of Iron, and Bolts of Lightning*, indeed.

Oh, let us have no doubt that the race barrier's still there. The work of Christ, for reconciliation between brothers and sisters, and peace on earth, is still not finished. But as John McCain said so eloquently on Election Night, "This is an historic election ...A century ago, President Theodore Roosevelt's invitation of Booker T. Washington to dine at the White House was taken as an outrage in many quarters. America today is a world away from the cruel and prideful bigotry of that time. There is no better evidence of this than the election of an African-American to the presidency of the United States."

I believe Senator McCain is right; that no matter what our political differences may continue to be, all of us are different for this event. Once more, the world looks to us with love and expectation. "*Vive l'Amérique...enfin!* Long live America...at last!" wrote my French sister-in-law.

But all of us know there's work to be done, work on our economy, work on energy and climate change, work on health care, and yes, plenty of work left to do on racism and prejudice of all kinds—just look at the outcome on Proposition 8.

The election of an American of African descent to the highest office in our land is a momentous event. I hope we aren't going to take that one huge, unprecedented gift and do nothing with it, bury it in the ground out of fear of what might happen to us next, but that we—all of us, you and I and our city and this whole country—indeed, this whole hurting planet, will learn to make the most of this amazing opportunity...to beat our swords into ploughshares, our spears into pruning hooks, our chariots of iron into bolts of lightning...because God is egging us on. AMEN.