

One of the really hard parts of diving into these less-known, or untold and unheard, stories of the Bible is that we need more context; we need more background to make sense of it all. For example, who is this Barak guy who shows up at the end, and why does he matter? Why is it such a big deal that Sisera's army is defeated? Why would Jael be brought into the story in the first place? What does this mean for Israel? Who cares today?

We start and end with this last question. This story matters for us right here, right now, and it matters because despite all the intrigue, the religious struggle, and the flipping of power dynamics on their heads, the story hinges on one man's prejudice.

This word is something of a "third-rail" for many of us. It is a loaded word that is used to name our tendency to see others through a veil of assumptions. This is a perfectly fine definition, but at its heart the idea goes even deeper. It is the tendency to walk into situations and encounters "having figured it out already."

This story today warns us about confirming what we expect to see. This warning, then, gives us the chance to see the world (1) as it really is, and (2) in a way that allows us to be agents of peace, reconciliation, and hope.

So, let's get back to this crazy story.

To put it as briefly as possible, the background for the tale is that this is the time of judges in Israel. Deborah is the leader and the Israelites have been harassed and controlled by the Canaanites for decades. Deborah senses it is time to take the fight to their ancient foe and she calls General Barak to prepare for a war against the army led by Sisera (an important side note, Sisera's army is the most powerful in the region with over 900 iron chariots). In the end, Israel wins and peace is made for 40 years. But it isn't that simple.

Deborah calls her general to go to war, but he responds by saying that he will only go if she joins him. So Deborah says, "ok, I will go, but the final victory (and all the honor) will not be yours. God will deliver General Sisera into the hands of a woman."

This is how Jael gets roped into the story of Israel finding independence from the Canaanites during the time of Deborah. The original *Song of Deborah* is one of the oldest parts of the whole Bible and is the original telling of this story, the narrative version is newer and is thought to have some mistakes in it from when it was pulled together. In the end, Barak wins freedom for Israel, but Jael is the one to literally drive the final nail in the coffin of Canaanite rule.

The story of Jael is this moment where Sisera staggers into this camp of nomads. Jael has her own tent, but is married. She welcomes him in. He asks for water, she gives him sour milk. He lays down to rest, secure in the time-honored tradition of hospitality and tells her to stand watch at the opening of the tent to throw off anyone who may be chasing him. Jael uses this moment to strike.

She breaks with convention, a sacred cultural practice, and kills a man who is under her care and hospitality. Rabbis have debated this for centuries, especially the sense of religious conviction she may have, or not have, had in taking action. Some have noted that he may have abused her and that this was an act of revenge. Others have pushed the narrative to another place countering that she seduced him and lulled him to sleep. At the end of it all, she kills him and then shows the body to Barak when he

arrives. The majority of scholars think that she recognized that it would be bad for her and her people for the victors to find the enemy under their protection, and that this was as good a time as any to make new friends.

All these dynamics are sitting in the background. Barak is an incomplete hero and Jael is a problematic heroine. Israel is free and finds peace. Sisera, however, winds up in a very unlikely spot. In a complete role-reversal he winds up a victim. I think he is a victim of his own arrogance.

Sisera is powerful. He commands the largest army in the region and has never lost a battle. He stands at the head of a confederation of Canaanite kings (there is some historical confusion whether he was in the employ of King Jabin, or whether Jabin was one of the kings that had come together with Sisera as head of this army). Sisera's voice is supposed to be so strong that it shakes buildings and can kill wild animals.

When he flees from the battlefield he knows he is in fairly safe territory, and he knows that, while the nomads are neutral in the fight with Israel, they have been on friendly terms with King Jabin and so he heads for cover, seeking comfort. In this crisis Sisera self-confirms the situation; he expects to find a friend, so Jael's words of comfort are even more disarming. He asks for water and receives milk. She gives him her blanket and her tent to sleep in. He is safe and sound, because he expects to be.

I wonder whether Sisera knew – or even cared to know – that Jael's husband was a direct descendent of Jethro (also called in other places of the Bible Hobab, or Reuel). This is the Midianite priest who was Moses' father-in-law. I wonder if Sisera would have considered loyalty – confused or otherwise – given this ancient connection to his enemy.

We could keep digging and digging and digging, turning up new and interesting artifacts of Israel's history and how they all come together to weave a story of intrigue, but at the end of it all, Sisera walks into a camp seeking shelter after a crushing defeat, having already knowing what to expect. This was his undoing.

Most of us will not find ourselves running from an army, seeking asylum, but... but, how often do we enter conversations or encounters with others having already made up our minds? Our preconceived notions and expectations can kill relationships.

The political arena seems to be the most obvious place to see this at work. How many conversations around social issues or politics feel like a ticking time bomb because the moment someone mentions a talking point "from the other side," we *know* their entire debate.

The same pattern shows up in far more intimate relationships. Parents and children tend to have a handful of the same conversations over and over and over again, saying the same thing, repeating themselves, it's all very redundant. The trap here is a very different headache than the one Sisera receives, but the damage can be immense; when we enter the conversation knowing what will be said then we look only for what confirms this bias, eroding trust and making others feel unheard. This happens with couples and long-time friends, with coworkers and with neighbors. The ripple effect of damaged relationships can kill community.

This is where our faith has an answer. In John's gospel Christ says that we will be "known for the love we have for each other." This idea of *beloved community* is more than trying to keep good vibes going, and is rather a charge to let nothing – especially our expectations – get in the way of our relationships. Living

openly, listening, is the antidote and saving grace that preserves our relationships, even in times such as now.

Personally, I have been testing this over the past several days. COVID time is hard. It is hard on everyone, and the way it has been hard for me has to do with the pressure-cooker of husband/father/pastor in an environment where no one is “their best self.” So the past several days I have tried (and often failed) to practice what I preach. I have stopped myself more often than I usual would from predicting what one of the kids would say; I have even tried (and often failed) to do this with my spouse. Here is what I have noticed... both kids want to talk more. They want to share, and I think it is because they can trust more that they will be heard.

Isn't this one of the most important needs we have as people? This need of being heard, of being seen fully for who we really are is so central to our being. The trap of becoming an unheard story, of being cast aside or ignored, drives a lot of anxiety in people. Once listened to, when heard and understood fully, we become more of our real self, the “us” we are created to be.

When we flip the switch and listen intently, naming and then ignoring the assumptions we bring to the conversation, we create an encounter that stands apart from what the world is accustomed to seeing. The Christian way is hard, not because it is complicated, but because it requires getting out of our way. Once we do this every moment has the potential to be a holy one.