

Suttons Bay Congregational Church
Judges 4:18-22, 5:24-27

February 17, 2008
Rev. Robin Long

18 Jael went out to meet Sisera and said to him, "Come, my Lord, come right in. Don't be afraid." So he entered her tent, and she put a covering over him.

19 "I'm thirsty," he said. "Please give me some water." She opened a skin of milk, gave him a drink, and covered him up.

20 "Stand in the doorway of the tent," he told her. "If someone comes by and asks you, 'Is anyone here?' say 'No.' "

21 But Jael, Heber's wife, picked up a tent peg and a hammer and went quietly to him while he lay fast asleep, exhausted. She drove the peg through his temple into the ground, and he died.

22 Barak came by in pursuit of Sisera, and Jael went out to meet him. "Come," she said, "I will show you the man you're looking for." So he went in with her, and there lay Sisera with the tent peg through his temple-dead.

24 "Most blessed of women be Jael,
the wife of Heber the Kenite,
most blessed of tent-dwelling women.

25 He asked for water, and she gave him milk;
in a bowl fit for nobles she brought him curdled milk.

26 Her hand reached for the tent peg,
her right hand for the workman's hammer.
She struck Sisera, she crushed his head,
she shattered and pierced his temple.

27 At her feet he sank,
he fell; there he lay.
At her feet he sank, he fell;
where he sank, there he fell-dead.

“Most blessed of women be Jael.” I went to seminary with a woman named Lael. She wore hip clothes and artsy earrings, had a handsome husband, earned high grades, and was highly respected among the seminary students, staff, and faculty. Her last year on campus was my first year and when I grew up, I wanted to be just like Lael. At one point I asked about her unusual name. She told me she had been named after a woman in the Old Testament who killed a man by driving a tent peg through his head. Not the answer I had been expecting but from that time on I assumed that this woman Lael in the Old Testament, in the Hebrew her name starts with a “J” but is more easily pronounced as an “L” in English, I assumed that Lael was some kind of Old Testament heroine. Otherwise, why would my hero Lael’s parents have given her this name.

And so, when doing a series on misunderstood woman on the Bible—women who were thought of as being naughty but would actually turn out to have done something good—I thought of my old classmate Lael and the Biblical heroine with the hammer and tent peg after whom she was named. In the Book of Judges it says “most blessed of women be Jael”, so surely there had to be something good about this naughty girl, right?

Well, perhaps there is but I’ll be darned if I can figure out what it is. Here’s the story. Sisera was a general in the army of Jabin, a Canaanite King. Barak was a general in the army of Deborah, an Israelite Prophetess. The Canaanites and the Israelites were fighting each other. Sisera’s army had fallen and he was on the run. He ran into the Tents of Heber because Heber—Lael’s husband—was an ally of King Jabin and Sisera was a general in Jabin’s army. Thinking she was his ally, Sisera sought refuge in Lael’s tent. She welcomed him

there and gave him some milk—a sign of kind hospitality. She invited him to lay down and covered him up to keep him comfortable. Then, after asking Lael to keep him safe from his pursuers, he fell asleep. At which point Lael grabbed a thick tent peg and her hammer—lined the sharp end of the tent peg up with Sisera’s temple—and then whacked the end of that tent peg with all of her might until she drove it through his head and into the ground upon which his head had been resting. She murdered a man in cold blood. And she is to be most blessed of women?

Now there are scholars who will try to twist and bend this story to fit their agendas. For instance, if this was a congregation of militant feminists I would probably get away with telling you that this story was about the power of women to organize and defeat great armies of men. After all, the ruler Deborah said that Sisera would fall at the hands of a woman and indeed he did, he fell at the hand of—or more accurately hammer of—Lael. However, if I were to choose an example of a woman of strength and courage in scripture—it would not be this story of a woman waiting until a man fell asleep to drive a tent peg through his head. Instead I would talk with you about Mary, the mother of Jesus, who though blinded by tears and heart breaking, stayed with her son and wept at his feet even as he was dying on a cross—that is feminine strength and courage. And so, we’ll save the militant feminist critique for militant feminists. It just doesn’t wash here.

There are other scholars who might try to say this is a story about self-defense. They might tell you that the scripture isn’t telling the whole truth. According to Old Testament scholar Dr. James Orr, “Some critics suggest that Sisera was not asleep when murdered, and thus try to convert Jael’s treachery into strategy.” In other words Sisera was playing possum in preparation for attacking Lael but she beat him at his own game. “But to kill your guest while he is drinking the milk of hospitality is little less culpable than to murder him while asleep. There is no evidence that Sisera offered Jael any insult or violence . . .”¹ Alas, the self-defense defense isn’t going to work here.

But wait—we have another line of defense—the “killing in the name of God defense.” Truth be told this is what I thought this sermon was going to be about—I thought I was going to be telling you that Lael’s action was a result of her faith in God—that she had to kill this soldier Sisera because he was a threat to her beloved Israelite people. Well, imagine my chagrin when I discovered that Lael wasn’t even an Israelite! I thought for sure that she was because an Israelite Prophetess—Deborah—praises her in her song calling her “Blessed among all women.” But Lael wasn’t an Israelite, she was a Kennite—she was neutral, Switzerland if you will. Her people had a peace treaty with the Israelites but they also had a peace treaty with King Jabin of Canaan for whom Sisera was a military general. When Sisera sought protection in Lael’s tent, he thought he was being sheltered by an ally. So Lael was not a soldier in the army of the Lord for there is “little probability that she acted under any spiritual or Divine suggestion.”² Alas, the killing in the name of God defense won’t hold either.

So, why’d she do it? If she wasn’t an early militant feminist and if she wasn’t protecting herself and if she wasn’t protecting the Israelite people from godless foreigners, then what was she doing and why did she do it? Here we return to our friend Dr. James Orr for an answer. “Jael was unquestionably prudential. Sisera was in flight and Barak (the Israelite general) was in pursuit. Probably her sympathy was with Barak, but certainly reflections would show her that it would not be [wise] to permit Barak to find Sisera in her tent. (In other words, to find her harboring his enemy.) She knew, too, that death would be Sisera’s portion should he be captured—therefore she would kill him and thus cement a friendship with the conqueror.”³

¹ Dr. James Orr, *New Interpreter’s Bible*

² Orr, .

³ Orr,

Geemenee Crickets friends—it’s a perfect example of play ground politics. I get along with Sally and Nancy but Sally and Nancy don’t like each other and Sally has candy and Nancy doesn’t and so I’m going to be mean to Nancy so that I can be friends with Sally so I can get some of her candy. And for this kind of behavior you are called “most blessed of women?” Well sure, if the one doing the blessing is Sally, or in this case Deborah, whose cause Lael promoted when she drove that tent spike through Sisera’s head. From my most critical and honest reading of this passage, Lael was serving her own best self interests and for that, she is remembered in Deborah’s song.

“Most blessed of women be Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, most blessed of tent-dwelling women. He asked for water, and she gave him milk; in a bowl fit for nobles she brought him curdled milk. Her hand reached for the tent peg, her right hand for the workman’s hammer. She struck Sisera, she crushed his dead, she shattered and pierced his temple. At her feet he sank, he fell; there he lay. At her feet he sank, he fell; where he sank, there he fell—dead.” “Most blessed of women be Jael.” What a way to find one’s 15 minutes of fame which, in Lael’s case, was extended to at least 15 centuries. After all, here I am talking about her fame this morning.

I was meeting with Jim Vachow this past week and he told me about an exercise he used to do with some of his mother’s friends at an assisted living center. He would sit down next to someone and say “You look like a famous person. Were you famous in some way?” And from that point many of the persons of whom he made his inquiry went on to tell amazing stories of the things they had done that made them famous. And I chuckle when I think of Jim as an ancient Canaanite sitting down next to an elderly woman at the town gate and asking “Were you famous in some way?” and she replied, “Well yes. I am famous. I drove a tent peg through general Sisera’s head and killed him right there in my own tent. He never saw it comin’.”

Which brings me to the only redeemable thing I can find to say about Lael—she prompts us to ask of ourselves, for what will we be remembered. What made us famous in this life. Now I’m not talking famous, famous like Brad Pitt or Princess Diana here. I’m talking about famous as in that something you said or did that was unique and special and memorable. What makes you “most blessed” among men or women? And is it something that brought blessing to others?

I think we learn best how to be a blessing to others by imitating those who have been a blessing to us. For instance, when I was in seminary, I was blessed by Lael who took me under her wing and showed me the ropes. I then in turn took a young woman named Mindy who was new to campus under my arm when I was in my final year of seminary. I made suggestions of professors and classes, I invited her to be a part of the student government organization, and I sat next to her in chapel. I don’t imagine that she is now preaching sermons that begin with “Most blessed among women be Robin”, but perhaps I made her first weeks at seminary a little easier for her.

Churches are great places to learn how to be a blessing to others because churches are full of people who have been blessings to us. I could start to name names, but I want you to do that. That’s right, this is a congregational participation sermon. During the next 3 or 4 minutes, I want you to turn to someone sitting near you and tell the story of a man or woman of faith who has been a blessing to you, someone who is still among us or someone who is now a part of the Great Cloud of Witnesses—tell the story of someone who has inspired you or loved you or taught you or shared with you. And then listen to your partner’s story. Go ahead, it’s all of your turns to be the preacher . . .

Surely we are surrounded by people who have been a blessing to us. And, chances are that they are more deserving of fame than today's naughty girl of the Bible, the one called "most blessed among women", this ancient Kennite Lael. And though the names of those who have been famous in our lives won't be known throughout history, their spirit lives on in us. And because it does, we can hope that we too one day might be called most blessed because we have shown another the way to, and ways of, Christ.