

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: October 9, 2011  
Sermon Title: "Where Have You Come From?  
Where Are You Going?"  
Scripture: Judges 4:4-10  
Pastors: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

## Judges 4:4-10

*At that time Deborah, a prophetess, wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel. She used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim; and the Israelites came up to her for judgment. She sent and summoned Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali, and said to him, 'The Lord, the God of Israel, commands you, "Go, take position at Mount Tabor, bringing ten thousand from the tribe of Naphtali and the tribe of Zebulun. I will draw out Sisera, the general of Jabin's army, to meet you by the Wadi Kishon with his chariots and his troops; and I will give him into your hand."' Barak said to her, 'If you will go with me, I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go.' And she said, 'I will surely go with you; nevertheless, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the Lord will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman.' Then Deborah got up and went with Barak to Kedesh. Barak summoned Zebulun and Naphtali to Kedesh; and ten thousand warriors went up behind him; and Deborah went up with him.*

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A couple of weekends ago, I was away in Greensboro, North Carolina. I was a surprise guest preacher at a Congregational church where they were honoring a friend of mine, Julie, for her 20 years as a pastor. You may remember Julie. She and her husband were the pastors who married us in January. Julie is a great person, a great pastor, and a great friend, so it was a delight to be there. They put me up in a magnificent historic hotel, the O. Henry. It turns out the great writer O. Henry was from Greensboro. And when you check in, there are free "Oh Henry!" candy bars at the desk. The lobby itself was a grand old-style lobby, with wood paneling, leather couches, plush chairs. So I settled in right there in the lobby to do some work in these lush surroundings of this classy hotel.

I sat myself down where some folks had just left, leaving wineglasses and cocktail glasses on the end table. So I'm sitting there with my big Bible open, working on my sermon, surrounded by empty liquor glasses. One of the staff comes up and asks me what I'm doing. I tell him I'm a guest preacher the next day and I'm working on my sermon. Looking at all the liquor glasses, he says, "I can see you're not a guest preacher at the Baptist church!"

Well, the next day I preached at my friend's church. I preached a sermon that celebrated pastoral ministry and especially women in pastoral ministry. You might wonder if that is an important issue anymore. Is it still a big deal? Is it still worth noting or celebrating? We are so accustomed to Alida here at our church. She has leadership, authority, and respect. But it's a fair estimate to say that Alida or my friend Julie in Greensboro could not get a job, could not get an interview, could not get taken seriously in two-thirds of the churches across America or in perhaps 90 percent of the Christian churches around the world.

So, let's consider women in ministry. You've already heard the Scripture lesson from the Old Testament Book of Judges, the story of Deborah. In those ancient days, Israel had a somewhat enlightened government. No kings. No tyrants. They had "judges," people elected sort of by popular acclaim, just folks who could be counted on to be wise and fair and faithful. At that particular point in history, Deborah was the judge. And there were tough times in the country. Big, bad enemies all around. The military was overstretched; the economy was in the dumper. Religion had lost its way. There was a lot of finger-pointing, grandstanding. The times called for boldness and faithfulness; courage and faithfulness; determination and faithfulness; vision and passion ... and faithfulness.

Deborah had that; the generals didn't. Deborah said to the generals, "There's the enemy, go get 'em!" The generals said, "No way," and Deborah said, "O.K., I'll do it myself." She hopped on her horse, she took the reins of leadership, and led Israel to victory. Before Margaret Thatcher, before Golda Meir, before Queen Victoria or Joan of Arc, before women in ministry or women in Congress or women in the military or women in the voting booth or women in the pulpit, before anything that we now see as progress or as justice or as normal and right and good, before all that, there was Deborah, hearing God's call, answering God's call, doing God's work.

In my last book of poetry, I had this one about Deborah:

**Deborah  
(Judges 4 and 5)**

Deborah  
a woman  
chosen  
after waiting in line  
since the beginning of time  
chosen to listen  
to guide and be wise  
but leave the heavy lifting to the guys  
NOW chosen to lead from below  
a reversal of role  
a change in direction  
at God's discretion  
chosen  
to take the toys away from the boys  
the game of war  
they play too much  
such pageantry  
    gallantry  
    camaraderie  
if assured of victory  
and spoils.

But in the face of cowardice  
    and faithlessness  
Deborah is warrior  
fully woman  
fully chosen  
and brings the enemy to rout  
the enemy within  
the enemy without.

p.s. Such change rearranges fear  
    in another three thousand years.

Well, 3,000 years later we come to someone like Alida or my friend Julie or all those young women up at Yale Divinity School whom our church has supported for years. At some point in their lives, in the great mystery of faith, those women found themselves going one-on-one with God. God wants them, heart and soul. God wants them, full time. God wants them to lead.

Back when I was in seminary, we were taught that pastors have four roles: we were expected to be king, priest, judge, and prophet. *King, priest, judge, and prophet.* And there was hardly a church in America looking for a woman to do any of that. Think about it. King ... leadership, authority; priest... the go-between with God; judge... decision-maker; prophet ... shaking things up, fighting for what's right, bold, brassy, daring, aggressive.

My first "encounter" (and I use that word on purpose), my first "encounter" with women in ministry was probably in the mid-70s. I was back at Andover-Newton Seminary for some conference. I'm sitting at a long table in the cafeteria. We are eating dinner, and I asked the young woman sitting next to me to pass the salt. She grabs the salt and slams it down on the table next to my plate. Then I asked for the ketchup, and she grabs the ketchup and slams it down even harder, even louder, sending tomato sauce in every direction. By then I'm a little terrified and must have looked it, so she said to me, "It's people like you who keep people like me out of ministry." We eventually made peace, but I was forever grateful for that visible reminder, that visceral reminder of what it feels like to know what you can do, to know what God wants you to do, to know what needs doing ... and to be scorned, rejected, denied, overlooked. To be Deborah, with an enemy at the door, with God's plan in your hand, and no one will listen.

Let's forget about 2,000 years of Christian history or 3,500 years going back to Deborah. Let's just think about the world, the Christian world, the church world that Alida faced as she grew into faith and a sense of calling and a desire to serve. The church in America, late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the church as it was: smug, content, lackadaisical, in decline, asleep at the wheel. And here comes Alida or my friend Julie and they want to take the wheel. Thank God, literally, thank the good Lord because we needed help badly!

You know how men always want the remote control? Do you think it's the "remote" they want or the "control"? And when men have the remote control, what is the real complaint? That they have control? Or that they abuse it? Flicking from channel to channel, channel surfing, can't make up

their minds. It ruins the whole TV entertainment experience. It's the same with religion. Men have controlled religion. Men have had the wheel. And they've driven religion into a ditch.

I have reached a certain age in my life, a certain stage in my career, a certain standing in my profession, so I can say whatever I want. I don't much like my profession, "the ordained clergy." I am a third-generation pastor: my grandfather, father, and I, plus two uncles and a cousin, 280 years of pastoral experience, so I feel I've earned the right to be blunt. I don't much like clergy. Lazy or inept, we mostly fall or fail. Our moral failure gave rise to Elmer Gantry long before there was a Jimmy Swaggart or Jim Bakker. Our arrogance led to bloody jihads long before we ever heard of Islamists.

Meanwhile, we have kept ourselves busy with ecclesiastical pettiness, doctrinal silliness, dogmatic mumbo-jumbo. No wonder churches are in trouble, and clergy have lost their clout. There is a joke I heard: "A priest, a rabbi, and a minister walk into a bar. They sit down, and the bartender says to the other patrons, 'It's O.K. now, let's go to church.'" In other words we've **bored** people or **scared** people. For too long we've been a barrier to people, an obstacle, an impediment. Kings, priests, judges, and prophets: we too often loved the power but failed to do the work.

When I was studying for my doctoral degree, I took a course on "The Church," and the various images of the church in the Bible, including the very special term that "the church is the Bride of Christ." What a beautiful, intimate, personal, loving idea! We, we ... are "the Bride of Christ"! And the professor said, "The proof that the church really IS the bride of Christ is, after 2,000 years of lousy leadership, the church still stands, Jesus still loves us."

When I was preparing this sermon for my friend's celebration, I was up at Yale Divinity School, and I found the Divinity School's quarterly, *Reflections*, the spring 2011 issue, devoted to "Women's Journeys: Progress and Peril." It was great stuff, cover to cover, of women who have ventured forth on all sorts of tasks, inviting God to use them magnificently, powerfully, boldly; the Deborahs of the day who see what needs doing and determine to do it.

I actually stole my sermon title from one of its articles, "The Bible in Transit," by an old professor of mine, Phyllis Trible. She was reflecting on Hagar from Genesis 16. Quick background: God promised Abraham he'd be the father of a great nation. Decades go by. He and his wife Sarah never have kids. Sarah gives him her servant girl, Hagar, to have a baby with. Hagar does give birth to a son. Lo and behold, old Sarah suddenly gets

pregnant with a son, and she doesn't want the competition, so poor Hagar and her little boy are kicked into the desert to die. But God saves them.

Trible writes, "Then an angel of God asked Hagar, 'Where have you come from? And where are you going?' Hagar answered the first question, 'I am fleeing from my mistress, Sarah.' But Hagar never answered the second question. She spoke about the **present** and the **past** but she couldn't imagine the **future**." Trible sees those two questions as central to the Christianity of today and of tomorrow. It's good to know where we have come from, but we'd better work on where we are going.

Of course, the real issue can't be male versus female clergy. In the professions, in my profession, two criteria, and only two, should count: one, does a person feel "called" to the ministry? "Calling" is a tough concept to pin down, but at the least it means that a person feels connected to God, and in that connection feels, senses God's nudge, God's push, God's call to be a pastor. And two, who is the best person for the job? Who has got the leadership skills, the drive, the passion, the oomph, the work ethic to get the job done?

Dr. Phyllis Trible says we've got to work on where we're going. As a Christian church where we're going, our destination is the kingdom of God. Our destination is to do God's will. Our destination is what we call "Christ-likeness." Our destination is to be a church that is as much like Christ as possible. To get there we need the best possible leaders. Whether it is my friend down in Greensboro or Alida right here, these are our modern-day Deborahs, hearing God's call, knowing God's plan, doing God's work.

They are not afraid of anything. They're not afraid of the Bible or social action. They're not afraid of faith. They're not afraid of angels or wrestling with angels. They're not afraid of controversy or fighting, or compassion or silence. They're not afraid of hard work or prayer. They're not afraid of yesterday or tomorrow.

Our church is 286 years old. For 264 of those years 50 percent of this church, the female half, especially the young people, could look up at the pulpit and say, "I could never do that." Today, after the years of Alida's ministry, 100 percent of the kids growing up in this church know, they *know* they can do it. That's a much better church.