

27th Week after Pentecost – Year A – Proper 28 - November 19, 2008 - Homily
Judges 4:1-7, Psalm 123; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11; Matthew 25:14-30
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Michael Lienau was 20 years old and the youngest member of a film crew when Mount St. Helens erupted in May of 1980. By his own admission, he was eager for his big break as a young cameraman. He took a risk that his intuition told him was just plain crazy by joining four others to film the earliest shots of devastation from the smoking volcano's explosive presence. What he thought was going to be a three-hour shoot turned into three days. The crew was literally left battling for survival when they got caught up in the second eruption. Hot ash and the magnetic force of the volcano rendered compasses useless and the crew got hopelessly lost. This is how Lienau describes the experience right before the second blast, "The atmosphere was charged with electricity, but it was deathly quiet. The blast rocketed over our heads to be heard by people two hundred miles away."

Thousands of miles from this place, and thousands of years ago, another group of people, the fledgling Israelites were also struggling under the oppression of the Canaanites. The battle that the prophetess and judge of Israel, Deborah, calls Barak to fight in will liberate the Israelites from the Canaanites after a long period of domination. The explanation for this period is that "the Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord." This was a rather black and white understanding of God that has changed and developed over many years. Through Jesus, our Lord, we have a much clearer picture of God and a more nuanced understanding of God as Love, rather than a God of rewards and punishments. Although what is also clear from tonight's reading from Judges is that the Israelites understood their covenant with God, and the Law, yet struggled hard to maintain their faithfulness in a polytheistic society.

Fortunately, few of us have to face such a life and death struggle for survival as either Lienau or the ancient Israelites. The raw physicality of these battles keeps us in mind that fighting for survival has been a way of life for humanity since the earliest days. Yet this is not the only type of battle that we might face in life. There are emotional struggles, there are other types of physical struggles like overcoming addictions or fighting diseases like cancer, and then there are spiritual struggles. Our faith can be seriously tested through the death of a loved one, or by those around us who have chosen to set aside God's desire for us to love our neighbors as ourselves, and have fallen into sin and error. Perhaps out of fear or anger, or pride, or pure selfish interest, there is no doubt that we hurt one another, and cause the kind of spiritual or emotional pain that gets between us and God. There is a great deal of truth in the saying that, "hurt people, hurt people". The Israelites certainly saw this impending battle as God-ordained and part of their spiritual release, in the same way that they understood the exodus to be God ordained and necessary for their freedom from slavery under Egyptian rule. What or Who is our release, the liberating force of life, when we are struggling or battling against all kinds of evil in the world?

What is surprising about this whole scenario is that Deborah was the judge of all Israel at this point in history. In Hebrew, her name means 'bee', but it can also be translated as 'spirited woman' or 'woman of fire'. According to Elizabeth Fletcher's *Women in the Bible*, the story of Israel's victory under Deborah occurs in approximately 1125 BC. Her role as judge meant that she was the tribal leader, in the same way that Moses was the leader that brought the Israelites out of Egypt. Deborah's authority extended to settling disputes and problems amongst the people, and gathering the tribal armies in times of war. Deborah, like all the judges, is considered a representative of God, and unquestioningly spoke the word of God to God's people. Deborah, known as the mother of Israel, is the only woman judge mentioned in the Hebrew Scriptures. As a prophetess, Deborah did not foretell the future, but was blessed with the gifts of discernment and wisdom, as well as the kind of faith that made her a woman of God, whom God could use to guide His people in spiritual and temporal matters. In this case, to take on a huge and well-organized army that was technologically superior to the small band of relatively untrained

Israelites. Deborah's inexorable courage and confidence in the Israelite victory in this battle comes from the deep well of her faith. Her prophetic voice tells us that, "The Lord the God of Israel commands..." and it is God who will give the Canaanites into their hands. By all accounts, Deborah is an exceptional woman leader. She is one of many women throughout the ages who have given themselves to God in faith, and as history proves, have been used mightily for God's work. I need hardly mention Mary the mother of Jesus or Mary Magdalene. But not just the women of the Bible, there are many women who we recognize and celebrate as saints of God, including the martyr Perpetua, Catherine of Sienna, Dame Julian of Norwich, Hilda of Whitby, and I might add Mother Teresa of Calcutta our more contemporary sister in Christ. Secure in her knowledge of God's faithfulness Deborah guided the Israelites back to faith, as well as to freedom.

Lienau, along with four others, is stranded on an active volcano. He goes on to tell that he and the film crew *became* the story – declared missing and presumed dead. They were all lost, cold, hungry and had suffered various injuries. It was then that he called out to God. The nearness and reality of death was like a cold hand pressing hard on him and the others. He saw a broken tree in the shape of a cross and heard a voice calling out to him, "Michael, look up to your left." Minutes later a helicopter appeared exactly where the voice had told Michael to look. The crew was rescued, and the footage they captured became a documentary titled, "*The Fire Below Us: Remembering Mount St. Helens.*" Lienau credits that day with the moment when he gave his life to Christ. It is a strange and wonderful part of God's plan for each one of us that we so often find our faith deepening in the moments of greatest struggle. Yet this story and the passage from the Book of Judges tells us something else. That it is also important for us to stay alert to the people God uses around us to share the Good News, the message of hope and freedom in Christ, to love and support us in the battle, and to celebrate our victories with us. God uses many people to reach out to us in His steadfast love through all the struggles that life lays in our path. It is not always those we expect who are the ones who help us see the way forward, but it is usually those who are faithful servants of the Lord, willing to be used by God in love and service.

Amen.