

Not To Your Glory
Judges 4:1-11
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If all you knew about war was what you see in the movies, you might be forgiven for thinking that there is glory in war, or more specifically, that there is glory to be gained in war. Perhaps you've seen it measured by how many orcs an elf can kill in the Lord of the Rings, or by how many Romulans a Klingon can blow up in Star Trek, or by a showdown with the enemy's best swordsman in a samurai movie, or by the courageous assault on an enemy position in any number of John Wayne World War 2 movies. In these tall tales, the warrior frequently goes into battle with the notion that even if he or she does not come out alive, there will be some glory conferred upon them for at least their noble attempt, if not their victory. Their names will be remembered, their exploits retold. By their participation in the fight, they will earn their fame, and a valuable measure of glory.

Perhaps that is what the Israelite commander Barak had in mind when he learned that he would be leading the troops into battle against the hated and oppressive Canaanites. As we heard, his people had been oppressed cruelly for twenty years, due mainly to their own faithlessness, but oppression is oppression and twenty years is a long time. The cries for help of his people go up to God, and God, with that wonderful sense of divine mercy, once again relents and gives them

another chance, and touches Barak on the shoulder with the call to battle. Now, Barak most likely knew the stories of his own people who did valiant deeds and who were remembered, people like Ehud, the left-handed assassin who delivered Israel by deceiving and murdering the evil King Eglon of Moab, just eighty years earlier, the last time they asked God to bail them out. His were a people who remembered the exploits of their heroes, whether they were Jacob or Joseph or Moses or Miriam or Joshua. We might reasonably imagine Barak getting somewhat excited about following in their footsteps and getting the call to be remembered as a great deliverer, perhaps even in a song, as Moses and Miriam were remembered in song, as Deborah of our story tonight would be remembered in song in the following chapter of the book of Judges. His fame was there for the taking. No doubt he thought he was a capable military leader, and no doubt he believed God was on their side, but just for good measure, perhaps to hedge his bets, perhaps to share the blame should something happen to go wrong, Barak asks the prophetess Deborah to accompany him on the battlefield as they confront and chase down the General Sisera and his 900 hundred strong contingent of chariots of iron. With the Lord's chosen on his side, his fame would be secure. And then he gets those sobering words, "I will surely go with you;" she says, "nevertheless, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the Lord will see Sisera into the hand of a woman," and as sure as he was one moment of his

impending glory, in the next it is taken away. “The road on which you are going will not lead to your glory.”

It is to Barak’s credit that he went ahead and did it, although if there is something more compelling than the prospect of glory, it is the fear of infamy. To back out then would have landed him in the company of that class of persons whom history forgets or disparages, and so he soldiers on with his ten thousand men, where they do indeed prevail, albeit with God’s help. We are told that as the battle was joined, “the Lord threw Sisera and all his chariots and all his army into a panic before Barak,” and the enemy is easily defeated. You may remember the rest of the story, in which General Sisera escapes the battlefield only to take refuge in what he believes is the house of a friend, only the friend decides Sisera deserves a tent peg through the side of the head while he sleeps, and so she gives it to him, and the fame is hers, as Deborah predicted. If there is any consolation for Barak it is that we are still talking about him several thousand years later, and perhaps that would not have happened had he decided that in the absence of glory, the battle was not worth the fight.

I do not think it is too great a stretch to suggest the world would be a very different place had the veterans sitting here tonight not decided in the same way as Barak, that even without the promise, or even possibility, of glory, they would commit themselves to the fight. These are men and women who know that the Hollywood image of war is far from its reality, that there is more gore than glory

on the battlefield, and that if there is any glory to be won, it will likely be claimed by those higher up the chain of command, the generals, the politicians, and the commanders-in-chief, while they are forgotten in their trenches and their foxholes. They are the PFCs and the grunts and the squawks and the bin rats and the boomers and the deck-apes, and the pingers, and all the other names for the people who deserve the glory if there is any to be had, but who fight and die even in its absence. They may have enlisted with some national pride in their hearts, or yearning for some adventure or seeking some GI Bill money for their education, but if any of them signed up for glory, they learned pretty quickly that it's in short supply, and probably destined for those least deserving of it. And then they went ahead and served anyway.

If we casually read the story of Barak and Deborah we might think that Deborah's reminder to Barak that "the road on which you are going will not lead to glory, for the Lord will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman," indicates that the glory of this battle will accrue instead to Jael, the woman who in the end kills the general Sisera. Taking nothing away from the heroic women in the story, however, that casual reading will overlook the fact that from Deborah's perspective, and that of the Bible, the glory here belongs to none other than God. For indeed, it is God who answers the Israelites' call for help. It is God who proclaims victory even before the battle begins. It is God who throws the army of Sisera into a panic. It is God who once again delivers a stubborn people who probably don't deserve it.

There is a role in the story for Barak and Deborah and Jael, but in the end, we are meant to remember that without God, their deeds are meaningless, and probably futile. “The road on which you are going will not lead to your glory.”

There is never a bad time for a message about humility, and perhaps the commemoration of Remembrance Day or Veterans Day is one of the best times to remember that we are not God, and that the reason there are veterans to remember at all is because as human beings we have abjectly failed to overcome our inclinations to violence, and to seeking glory, and to forgetting God. How does our story begin tonight? “The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord.” They forgot their Creator. They forgot their Redeemer. They forgot their Sustainer. They fell into the age-old habits that plague us still today, and they found themselves in an awful mess. For all of our glorious achievements as the human race, our buildings, our music, our art and literature, our compassion and wisdom, there is always that infamous part of the story that clings to us like our shadows on sunny day. And if we could lick it, we’d have no need of God, and I think God would be OK with that. But *you* know that we can’t, and *God* knows that we can’t, and if we can remember that unpleasant fact just a little more often, we just might have a chance of living a little more peacefully, and having fewer and fewer wars that call for more and more of our sons and daughters to serve without glory, and suffer without reason.

Tonight we've gathered to honor the service of the veterans of the wars of our nations. But the truth is that they are still serving us tonight by being a reminder that in nothing we do, should we do it for our own glory. Perhaps there is glory somewhere to be had, but someone else must proffer it. Perhaps we will have our fifteen minutes of fame, but they will be fleeting. Perhaps our names will be remembered four thousand years from now, but probably not. But if we do what we do for the glory of God, we can be assured that nothing we do will be in vain, but rather be a testimony to the words that opened our worship tonight, "O God our help in ages past, our help for years to come, Our shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home." And with that assurance we can do mighty things, in the name of the one who truly is worthy of the glory. As we remember today those who fought without the expectation of glory, may it be as a reminder to all of us who serve to do it for the right reason, that God might be glorified. Amen.