

**November 19, 2023**  
**Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost / Proper 28**

**Meditation:** "A Risk Worth Taking"

Ehud, the second judge of Israel, had died and Shamgar became the next judge of Israel. But Shamgar was either ineffective, or he worshipped the gods of the Canaanites. Either way, under Shamgar Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord sold them into the hand of King Jabin.

Nobody really knows how long Shamgar was judge over Israel, but it's a good guess that he didn't last long after Israel came to be ruled over by the Canaanite king. Yet even under Jabin, another judge arose in Israel, Deborah – the bee. Of the twelve judges who ruled over the Israelite tribes from about 1360 BCE to 1020 BCE when Saul was anointed the first king of Israel, Deborah was the only female. And not only was Deborah a judge, but also a prophetess. She sat under the palm tree of Deborah, between Ramah and Bethel, in the hill country of Ephraim, and people travelled from far and wide to Deborah to hear God's word.

Like the Pharaoh that the Israelites had escaped in Egypt, Sisera, the leader of Jabin's army, had oppressed the Israelites cruelly, and, as they had in Egypt, they cried out to God for salvation. God spoke to Deborah, and she summoned Barak, and instructed him to assemble a force of ten thousand from the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun and go to Mount Tabor. Deborah said she would draw out King Jabin's army, led by Sisera, to meet the Israelite force by the Wadi Kishon, where Sisera and his men would be delivered into the hands of the Israelite force.

Now Barak was quick. His name means lightning. And in a flash, he figured there was no profit in listening to Deborah. Sisera had an army of 900 iron chariots and a standing army of about 39,000, giving him a force of 40,000 trained and battle-hardened soldiers. And Deborah wanted him to oppose that force with only 10,000 civilians. There wasn't even any risk to be calculated. It was certain to be a slaughter.

This year I have presided at far too many funerals, a couple of baptisms, and a wedding – all major life events. The baptisms were about risk avoidance. The parents didn't want to take any risk with their precious babies, and they wanted them to be baptized as God's children, presumably so they could go to heaven should an unforeseen tragedy befall them.

The wedding was somewhat of a risk that the partners were taking, yet after being in a committed relationship for almost two decades, there was very little they didn't know about one another, or what they were getting into.

It's in the preparation for the funerals that I heard the stories of lives, mostly well lived, that caused me to think about all of the risks that get taken over the course of a lifetime. Heck, life itself is a risk, and nobody should know that better than the One who created us and then gave us freedom of choice to be, or not to be in relationship with our Creator. Some risks work out in our favour, and some don't. Sometimes the risks we take are because they are the right thing to do, like stopping and helping someone in an emergency, or standing up against an injustice. The question I have is, 'is a life lived in a bubble where we are protected from every risk a life worth living?'

Like many before him and since, including Moses, Barak initially resisted. Deborah told Barak that because of his reluctance to follow her instruction, which was really God's instruction, Jabin's army would still fall to the Israelites, but Sisera would fall at the hand of a woman. Oh the shame of it all.

I wonder, are we, the church, like Barak? Are we reluctant to follow through because we value security and certainty over risk? Do we seek to maintain the status quo over change? Do we seek the perpetuation of the church as an institution above service? I've heard lots of churches say they want to grow, but growth brings change and many don't really want to change. What they really want is more people who look and think and act exactly like them to join the church so that things can continue operating the way they always have, in the present, and into the future. Truth be told, what they really want is to avoid closing, to avoid death. In the process of trying to preserve things, they hasten its demise. They may not do it consciously, but here are some things that many churches do.....

- 1) Remember the 'glory days'
- 2) Make sure you fill the back pews.
- 3) You are in my seat
- 4) Rush right out after the service, or better yet, during the final hymn
- 5) If you do stay....
- 6) When someone new stays for coffee....

Over the years I've seen and heard all of these efforts to preserve the status quo. The fear of change and the risks involved with change is like a cancer that is slowly killing churches all over. The fear of taking the risks associated with standing against systemic injustices is detrimental to the Kingdom of God, and yet it is this very kingdom that we as Christians are called to help build. We are called to consider and care for the marginalized and the vulnerable. Sometimes that means doing something that makes us feel self-conscious and uncomfortable, like taking a stance against a racist joke told by a friend. Sometimes, taking a stand for the kingdom of God, for justice and righteousness, can seem risky in this world, yet that is exactly what God calls us to.

The question is, are you willing to take the risks associated with promoting the kingdom of God, with standing against systemic injustices, with growing and changing? In short, are you willing to take the risks associated with living, or would you rather die due to fear of taking a risk? Would you rather be safe, yet lost to the world, or at risk, yet found by the kingdom of God? Which is riskier?

Barak was half right. It was a rout. But it was Sisera and his army that fled in disarray with the Israelites in hot pursuit. And, Deborah was right. Sisera was not felled by Barak and his men. Instead he ran to Jael, the Kennite woman, and it was Jael who struck the fatal blow.

Like Barak, God calls us to do what seems like the impossible, yet it is a risk worth taking because with God nothing is impossible and what looks like a risk is really no risk at all.