

Sisters of the Faith

Scriptures: Judges 4:1-5; Psalm 31:1-3; Romans 16:1-5

Reverend Dr. Louise Barger

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Recently there has been a series of commercials built around the heritage that we have from our mothers and grandmothers. The commercials end by asking, "Who are the strong women in your life?"

Today we salute the mothers of our nation, and I want to add to that number the women who may not have had children of their own but who served as teachers and mentors to many children whom they guided with love.

There are hundreds of women, named and unnamed in the Bible, and today we focus on three of them. They are women who were chosen by God to lead the people of God. They each demonstrated the power of a woman.

Deborah was a judge in a day when only men were judges. Phoebe was a deacon, or possibly a minister with Paul, in the church in a day when most deacons and ministers were men. Priscilla was a pastor, a new church planter, when women pastors were unheard of in that culture.

Let's go first to Deborah. Deborah was the wife of Lapidoth, a name which means "firebrand." He must have been a husband who supported his wife, who was not jealous of her accomplishments. Otherwise, God would never have been able to use her life to such benefit for the nation of Israel.

Deborah's gifts must have been many. As a judge in Israel she would have

- counseled those who came to her and
- settled disputes between people.
- She would have also been an influence in the wars that Israel fought.

She was the only woman in the Bible who was placed at the heights of political power by the consent of the people. Deborah became the keeper of the vision that would eventually deliver Israel from the oppression of the Canaanites. For twenty years, Jabin, king of Canaan, had oppressed the Israelites. His armies

- had destroyed the vineyards of Israel,
- had brought dishonor to the women,
- had slain the children, and
- had turned many of the Israelites to the worship of idols.

Deborah could no longer abide the oppression by the Canaanites upon her people. She called Barak, Israel's most capable military leader and prophesied to him that it was time for God's deliverance of God's people. While the military paled with fear, Deborah burned with indignation at the oppression of her people. She must have had fire in her eyes and assurance in her prophecy.

She drew up the battle plan. Her abiding faith in God carried the Israelites forward into victory. She sent Barak to recruit 10,000 men from the tribes of Israel. She put Barak as the General of the Army, but he agreed to follow the plan only if she would go with him. One could perhaps excuse Barak for his lack of faith in a victory, even in a battle ordained by God.

We learn more about the strength of the Canaanite army from the historian Josephus and indirectly from the song that Deborah sang after the battle was won.

Sisera, the General of the Canaanite army, came at the Israelites with 900 iron chariots. His strength became his undoing when God intervened. Josephus records that

- a sudden storm of sleet and hail burst over the plain from the East, driving into the face of the charioteers;
- the men on foot were disabled by the beating rain;
- the swordsmen were crippled by the extreme, sudden cold.

Deborah and Barak pushed on toward the enemy, unhindered by the sudden change in the weather that came over the Canaanite army.

The rain caused the flood waters to rush down the Kishon River and the ground became so covered with water that the heavy iron chariots sank into the mud and would not move, allowing the charioteers to be slain. All of the army was slain except for Sisera who fled and hid in a tent of a neighboring tribe. When he fell asleep from exhaustion he was killed by a woman of that tribe, thus fulfilling Deborah's last prophecy about the battle, that Sisera would be slain by a woman.

Deborah became known as "a mother of Israel." Her people were no longer enslaved. God used her in a mighty way. The last sentence of her biography in the Bible reads, "And the land had rest forty years. (Judges 5:31)

Our next sister in the faith is Phoebe. Paul introduces Phoebe to us as the courier of his letter from Cenchrea to the Church at Rome, our Book of Romans in the New Testament. Any private mail had to be delivered by a person. Paul was writing from Corinth so the trip would have been a long one. If she had traveled by ship, the journey would have been about 700 miles and would have taken 3 or 4 weeks. The journey would have been 617 miles if traveled by land. Traveling by land would have been the safer choice. The Roman Empire had put in paved roads and there were inns along the way. She may have stopped along the way at the homes of other Christians and taken advantage of their hospitality. Paul's commendation of Phoebe would have been a proper introduction of her wherever she would stop.

We can infer some things about her simply because she was chosen to make the journey.

- To be a Christian in Cenchrea was no easy matter.

The city was a seaport and seaports were notoriously wicked places. Paul refers to her as "sister," a common name for someone of the Christian faith.

- She must have been a woman of social standing and of wealth.

It would have been necessary to pay for her travel and for traveling companions, since no woman would have traveled alone.

- Paul calls her a servant of the church which is in Cenchrea.

Phoebe was a minister just as were Paul, Timothy, and others.

She gave much service to others in the church in that city and to the church in general.

- Paul calls Phoebe a helper of many.

In the early days of the church, it was difficult for people to live as Christians in a world that was filled with the worship of many false gods or no god at all. One of the most important ministries of the church was to care for the poor who were inside and who were outside of the church.

- Phoebe had also been a special helper of Paul.

It has been conjectured that Paul may have been ill at one time when he stopped at Cenchrea and Phoebe cared for him. We can imagine that Phoebe would have presided over a hospitable place where Paul felt at home, just as he did in the home of Priscilla and Aquila in Corinth, and as he did in the home of Lydia. Hospitality was one of the key gifts and ministries of the early church.

Phoebe's home may have been the place of a house church in the city of Cenchrea. It would have been a great honor to be chosen to carry such an important message from Paul to the Christians in Rome. She would have needed to physically protect the manuscript from moisture. She likely would have wrapped the manuscript in parchment and stored it in a box for travel. Once she arrived in Rome it was her responsibility to deliver the letter, but she would also have given the people an accounting of Paul's ministry and of his physical well-being. She would have given an accounting of the church in Cenchrea and of any churches that she had encountered during her travel to Rome. Paul identifies her as one worthy of being in the company of saints.

The third woman is one that Paul mentions in these few brief verses is Priscilla, the wife of Aquila. Her name was actually Prisca, but in Roman culture, the name Priscilla would have been a modification that was used by someone who was a close friend. This use of the name tells us much about the relationship of Paul and Priscilla and Aquila.

The couple was Jewish and had been expelled from Rome by Claudius. In his absolute power he had said, "Turn all these wretched Jews out of my city. I will not have it polluted with them anymore. Get rid of them!"

They traveled to Corinth and set up their tent-making business. Paul traveled from the East and stopped in Corinth. He financed himself by tent making. They joined in business and eventually Priscilla and Aquila became Christians.

When Paul went to Ephesus, the two joined him in his ministry. It was in Ephesus that Priscilla encountered Apollos and became his teacher in the faith. (Acts 18:18-28) One cannot begin to measure the powerful ministry that Apollos had as a result of the teaching of Priscilla.

Priscilla and Aquila traveled with Paul and from time to time stopped to plant churches. They were co-pastors. Paul was not a Pastor. Paul was an evangelist. Paul's ministry was bringing people to a decision to follow Jesus. Priscilla and Aquila established the churches.

We do not know the circumstances of Paul's describing the two as "laying down their own necks" to protect him. Paul was often in trouble with the local authorities because of his preaching. It may have been that Priscilla and Aquila stood between him and his accusers and saved his life.

The historian Tertullian records for us more than is found in the biblical account. He records: "By the holy Prisca, the gospel is preached." One of the oldest catacombs of Rome was named in her honor. A church, the Titulus St. Prisca was built in Rome. Her name often appears on monuments in Rome. A writing entitled *Acts of St. Prisca* was legendary in the tenth century.

Priscilla had entertained the stranger, Paul, and from him had learned to strive, as Scripture describes, to be "perfect in every good work..., working in her that which is well pleasing in God's sight, through Christ Jesus. (Hebrews 13:21)

Three strong women. Strong in faith. Faith that was living and led to action. Faith that has made a difference in even our lives that have come after them.

Who are the strong women in your life; women who have made a difference in the world, in the Church, in you? Today we say "thank you."

Amen.