

Indispensable Wit(h)nesses: You Need a Back-Coverer*

Judges 4:4-9, 12-14a

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Last Saturday, I came into the church as I usually do to get ready for Sunday. Remembering that I had left something in the car, I grabbed my keys to dash outside. Just as the outside door clicked shut, I looked down and realized I had grabbed the wrong set of keys.

I was locked out of the church and out of my car, stranded with no money and no cell phone. I said a few unholy words, then recovered and offered a quick petition for God to save me from my own stupidity. I walked over to one of the condos across 66th Street, and a very nice lady let me use her telephone. Now, who could I call that had a set of keys? Paul Welsh, I figured, was the closest, and praise God, he was at home. Within ten minutes he was at the church and I was back inside.

Now I have long thought Paul was a fine Christian, but that morning no knight in shining armor could have looked better! When you are a damsel in distress, you need someone to gallop to the rescue. It was comforting to know that someone had my back.

As we continue our discussion of indispensable witnesses, those important persons we need to travel with us on our spiritual journey, our next key witness is a back-coverer.

Leonard Sweet, whose writing provides the basis for this sermon series, says, "Everyone who has made a dent or difference for God in history has had 'protectors'—people who have said to them, 'I've got your back.'

A young Augustinian friar named Martin Luther was only 34 years old when he inadvertently began the Protestant Reformation by pounding his 95 Theses to the chapel door at Wittenburg. These 95 Theses listed the areas within the church that Luther believed needed to be reformed. When the Roman Catholic hierarchy lashed back at him, Friedrich, the powerful Duke of Saxony, pulled him aside and said, “Marty, I’ve got your back.”

While Luther probably would have forged ahead no matter what, we have to wonder if part of the reason he accomplished so much was that he had the confidence of knowing someone had his back. We all need to know that someone is providing cover for us. That’s our Deborah. (Sweet, p. 135)

Deborah was a remarkable woman. In the history of Israel, only three people combined the offices of prophet, judge, and military leader: Moses, Samuel, and Deborah.

Deborah lived during the period of the judges. This was a period of transition for the Israelites. Moses and his successor Joshua are dead; the kingships of David and Solomon are yet to come. The Israelites are not yet truly a nation, but a loose federation of tribes. They are ruled by a series of charismatic leaders called “judges.” These judges do offer judicial opinions, but they are also civil and, more importantly, military leaders. It is beyond astounding that Deborah, a woman, ascended to this high position in a very male-dominated world. She must have been someone of many gifts, great wisdom, and enormous courage.

We meet her in Judges, chapter 4. Please turn with me in your pew Bible to page 220.

4 At that time Deborah, a prophetess, wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel. 5 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. 6 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. 7 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.' " 8 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." 9 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. ... 12 When Sisera was told that Barak son of Abinoam had gone up to Mount Tabor, 13 Sisera called out all his chariots, nine hundred chariots of iron, and all the troops who were with him, from Harosheth-ha-goiim to the Wadi Kishon. 14 Then Deborah said to Barak, "Up! For this is the day on which the Lord has given Sisera into your hand. The Lord is indeed going out before you."

In the mode of a prophet, Judge Deborah delivers an oracle (a message from God) to General Barak, commanding him to organize troops from two tribes to fight the Canaanites on Mount Tabor. But Barak is reluctant; he certainly does not live up to his name, which means “Lightning.” The Israelites would not seem to have much of a chance against Sisera’s 900 iron chariots. Finally, Barak agrees to go, but on one condition. Deborah has to come along and cover his back. (Sweet, p. 135)

Barak knew the battle would be difficult and that he would need all the help he could get. He needed someone to cover his back. We all need a Deborah. We all need someone a back-coverer.

We’ve all seen the cop shows on television. The cop, realizing that he or she is about to get into a dangerous situation, calls for back up. Someone to come and provide help when things get hairy. Well, that’s not just true for cops, real or fictional—it’s true for all of us. We all need to be able to call for back up, like I sent out that call to Paul Welsch last Saturday.

One of the most important ways we call for back up is in prayer. Sometimes our Deborahs fight along side of us, but sometimes they cover us with prayer from a distance. I think of our prayer chain as a collection of anonymous Deborahs, quietly going about the work of covering folks with prayer every single day.

One of the most important ways we can *be* a Deborah is through prayer. Last week I talked about the trip my friend Diane and I took through France and the UK several years ago, including the travails of driving in Scotland. I remember the Sunday afternoon we picked up our rental in Glasgow and headed out. I was prepared for the challenge of driving on the wrong side of the road, but no one had told me that driving on the wrong side of the road threw your spatial orientation totally off. I couldn't figure out exactly where on the road the darn car was supposed to go. So we were driving north of Glasgow, along the banks of the gorgeous blue waters of Loch Lomond. But neither Diane nor I had time to admire the scenery. In Great Britain, they do not believe in sissy things like shoulders. Instead, there were a series of enormous stone walls about 18 inches off left side of the road. Because my spatial orientation hadn't adjusted, I was hugging what should have been the shoulder, constantly drifting dangerously close to these big old stone walls. Every few minutes Diane, with the wall flashing by just a few inches outside her window, would say nervously, "We're awfully close to that wall."

When we finally made it safely to our destination, Diane swore that God had to have been miraculously moving the walls out of our way. It was, she said, the only explanation for the fact we hadn't smashed right into one. I laughed, but later, when I figured up the time difference, I realized that both our congregations would have been in worship as we were making our drive, and that prayers were being offered for us at the

very moment we most needed them. I don't know that those prayers miraculously moved any walls, but I do believe that a community of Deborahs had our backs. Just as right now, I know many of you are keeping Rick in your prayers as he continues his bicycle odyssey along the Underground Railroad.

That is one of the greatest things about being a part of the church—it means we are a part of a community of Deborahs. Or sure, sometimes we in the church mess up. Sometimes we hurt each other. Sometimes it seems like we need protection against each other. But when times get tough, the church has our back.

My friend Barbara used to pastor in the bay area outside San Francisco, which despite all the people there can be lonely and anonymous. One day she was visiting with one of her elders, and he asked, “Barbara, do you know why I belong to this church?” Then he picked up the church directory and said, “It's because I know if I got into trouble, I could call any one of these people, and even if they didn't know me, if I told them I was a member of the church, they would be there for me.”

In the church, we are there for each other. We are Deborah for one another. We have each other's back. This church has provided food, helped each other move, helped pay folks' rent and utilities and medical bills. We have mowed lawns and cleaned out messy apartments. We visit and hold hands and laugh together and cry together. We are Deborah for one another.

But we are also Deborah for the community at large. People show up here to ask for help when they don't have anyplace else to go. Stranded and in need of gas. Three hungry kids and no food. Sick and need money to fill a prescription. About to be evicted and need help with rent. When folks have nowhere else to turn, they turn to the church.

We are their back-coverers. Usually we only have that one brief contact with them, but it's good to know that in their time of need, they discovered they weren't totally alone. They had a Deborah who was willing to stand behind them in some small way.

Who has your back? Who is your Deborah, and are you willing to be Deborah for others? Leonard Sweet tells the story of the friendship that developed between the French Prime Minister George Clemenceau and Claude Monet, one of the founders of French Impressionism.

When Monet died, Clemenceau came to pay his respects. He discovered his old friend's coffin covered in a black shroud and he was overcome with fury. In life there was nothing that Monet had loved more than light and color, and surely he loved them still, even in death. In life, Monet had banned black from his artist's palette, but now in death he was covered in black. Clemenceau saw that black shroud as a violation of everything Monet had lived for; a rejection of the beauty Monet had given his life to creating. Rushing to a nearby window, he ripped down a brightly colored curtain from its rod and covered the coffin with the colorful drape.

Even in death, Clemenceau had his friend's back. Don't we all need someone like that in our lives? Don't we all need to *be* that Deborah for someone else?