

**Session 1**

# Finding My Boldness

by Sarah S. Henrich

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## The Story of Deborah

### Judges 4:1—5:31

**Please read Judges 4:1–6.** We meet our first leader, Deborah, under a palm tree in the faraway hill country of Ephraim, north of Jerusalem. The stories of Deborah come from the oldest part of the Bible, yet she is introduced simply and straightforwardly. It seems no comment was required to explain or justify a woman judge in ancient Israel. Identified as both prophetess and wife, Deborah works from home: “. . . the Israelites came up to her for judgment” (Judges 4:5).

It is important to underline how naturally these remarkable facts are presented. It seems that those who put together even these oldest stories accepted the judges whom God sent without quibbling about gender. This does not mean that gender was not important in the thinking of the ancient Israelites; in fact, just a little later in this story of Deborah, she announces to the military man Barak that his God-given success will not lead to his glory because God will give his opponent “into the hand of a woman” (4:9). Yet the fact that Barak takes orders from Deborah does not seem to bother him or diminish his importance. How does Barak understand the role of this remarkable woman, prophetess, judge, and wife? How do we?

Let’s begin with the idea of a judge. In our language and place, judges are connected to the

legal system, hearing cases and making decisions in accordance with that system. Judges are well trained in the theories and practices that make up the law. Whether it is a Supreme Court justice or Judge Judy on television, we know what the judge’s job should be and how much authority he or she has. However, this contemporary picture is far from the biblical word that is translated into English as “judge.” The biblical judges were gifted leaders of the people, called by God to save the people in times of need. God pitied the people’s misery and found leaders who would help them. The Bible tells us that whenever this happened, the Lord “was with the judge,” and the judge was empowered to serve God among the people.

As for Deborah, we have no information about how or why she became one of Israel’s trusted leaders. When we first encounter her, she is already seated under her palm tree and meeting with those who come for her inspired wisdom. Deborah, a married woman who continued in this work, breaks down many of our stereotypes about women in ancient Israel. Our greatest stereotype concerning women’s lack of power and authority is overturned by a few simple words in verse 6: Deborah sends, summons, and then delivers the command of the Lord God of Israel to Barak. With no hedging, no apology, no defensiveness, she simply declares to him what he must do and

what she will do, according to God's command. They both follow through.

How easy to imagine Deborah saying something like, "I hate to bother you, Barak. I know how busy you are, but God has told me to ask you this. I'm not sure why. . . ." Deborah does not do this. Her power is acknowledged as coming from God. She has wielded this power with care over time, so she is trusted. She says what she must say and puts herself on the line to back up God's requests. Neither seeking power nor afraid of it, she trusts that God is indeed with her for the sake of Israel.

### **Please read Judges 5:1–9**

In Judges 5, believed to be the oldest part of the Hebrew Bible, it is Deborah and Barak who together sing the story of God's victory; God was indeed with them. Deborah "arose as a mother in Israel" (Judges 5:7), though her mothering is far from the ordinary image of it. She is the mother of warriors, of victory given to the "commanders of Israel who offered themselves willingly among the people" (5:9). For this, the only response is "Bless the Lord" (5:9).

Deborah's activities seem far from those of our ordinary lives. Yet we may find similarities across millennia and across cultures. Deborah lives a simple life; her work is before her as are her family obligations. She lives among her people until duty calls her to bold action.

It is important for us to ponder her call. The Bible gives no hint of how Deborah comes to know God's command for Barak and the people. Does she have a vision, hear God's word in a dream, or simply sense that the time is right and there is only one person who can command? However she comes to her understanding, she has

to place enormous trust in God to take these very risky steps. She trusts that God is indeed with her. She believes that God will continue in God's promise to be with the people in times of peril. Then she acts upon that with a boldness that can come only from such trust.

Many of us can remember other women and men we have known who have shown this kind of boldness, which springs from steadfast trust in God's presence among us. Most often these are not the people we find interviewed on television or in magazines. Their lives are not dramatic, filled with excitement, danger, or daring. Rather, their lives are marked by persevering faith in the service of God's people, somehow, in some way. Then at some point, that quiet confidence demands a step down a less ordinary, more risky path. Boldness is required to imagine our ordinary lives as lived in the presence of God; it is also required to step out to serve God in more radical ways.

Think, for example, of Rosa Parks going about her work, living a modest life and for long years accepting injustice and harassment. But Parks' deep and abiding faith in a trustworthy, just God led her to a step that changed the face of a nation. Parks was not an aggressive person, but she showed the boldness that springs from faith and the power of God's Holy Spirit.

How does this bold gentleness—the simple, unapologetic strength that springs from confidence in oneself as a child of God—come to life for us and among us in our own days? What messages can we trust? What hopes spring from God's Spirit and not simply our own desires? These are important questions in a time when so many people who hold contradictory views call upon God as the guarantor of their beliefs.

## QUESTIONS TO PONDER

By considering again Deborah's roles—wife, prophetess, judge—we can begin to imagine our own boldness and what calls it forth.

1. The roles in which we live boldly are multiple and varied. How might boldness look different in one's role as wife, daughter, friend, worshiper, student, worker, employer?
2. From whom did you learn boldness rooted in confident faith?
3. Who inspires you today?

### Acts 4:1–31

**Please read Acts 4:23–31.** Let's look at one more biblical story together to see if we can find any more clues about God-given boldness. In this long story, Peter and John have healed a 40-year-old man who has been lame from birth. This they have done in Jesus' name to the glory of God. But this bold public action has gotten Peter and John into trouble with the local authorities. The two disciples are ordered to cease to “speak or teach” in the name of Jesus. They refuse to make this promise, but they are released anyway because of the support of the people. After returning to their friends and fellow believers (Acts 4:23), these early Christians pray together for the power of the Spirit to “speak your word with all boldness. . . .” At the end of their prayer, God's presence is made amazingly clear to them by a “spiritual earthquake.” The Holy Spirit's

presence is also made clear by the ability they all had to speak the word of God “with boldness.” There it is again!

Ordinary people gather together to pray, share stories of God at work among them, share their hopes, and study Scripture. What happens? They are filled with the Spirit, given confidence to speak based on God's presence with them. Barriers of status and gender fade before the Spirit's empowerment to serve God's people—and serve they do. Knowing that the cost may be great, these women and men—some whom we know, some whom we don't—go forward with boldness to share the Good News of God's presence and power for us all.

## QUESTIONS TO PONDER

1. Are these people so different from us? They do the same kinds of things that we, baptized in the name of Jesus, also do. How might we participate in this kind of boldness?
2. What does it mean that we can do this?
3. How is boldness connected to the idea of taking up one's cross?

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## Materials and preparation

It is useful to have writing materials and Bibles (a variety of translations can add interest to the discussion) available for participants. For at least the first session, name tags are helpful as well. If possible, participants should sit in such a way that they can see one another's faces; this will encourage conversation. For the closing, you will need copies of the Lutheran *Book of Worship, This Far by Faith*, or another hymnal.

## Overview

This study focuses on how two quite different biblical characters came to be bold witnesses to God in their daily lives. We can glimpse the sources and the outcome of this boldness in their stories. We read about Deborah in both story and poetry in the Old Testament book of Judges. The song of Deborah is one of the oldest portions of the entire Bible. Peter's story is told in the Acts of the Apostles in the New Testament, which comes from a much later time. These two stories together remind us that God has been inspiring women and men with confident boldness from the beginning. Whatever our circumstances, as different as we may be each from the other, we are called to live confident of God's presence and work among us. We never know when our lives may become witnesses to God's power.

You may want to read the introduction to the study together. Take time to point out the ques-

tions at the end of the first introduction (page 30) and remind participants to keep them in mind as they move through the study. Before moving on, ask participants to recall a time when they felt particularly confident in a decision or action. Offer just a few minutes to share their recollection with one other person.

## The Story of Deborah

Point out the straightforward way in which the Bible tells the story of Deborah. In this ancient story, a woman of Israel holds a very responsible position of public authority. Encourage participants to think about women in such positions today (including themselves). What are some of the difficulties that women face in such roles?

The story also makes clear that Deborah is a wife. In Deborah's society, husbands had authority over their wives both legally and by custom. What kinds of conflict might Deborah have experienced between her calling as judge under God's authority and her calling as wife under her husband's authority? Are such conflicts different for men and for women?

Ask your group to imagine some ways in which Deborah may have begun to understand her call to her work. Participants may draw their ideas from other biblical stories or from their own experiences. Participants might compare the call of Moses (Exodus 3:1–4:17) or of Mary (Luke 1:26–38) or of Paul (Acts 9:1–19). These calls are all very

different in terms of witnesses to the process, the appearance of special signs, the giving of a clear message from God, the response of the one called. God does not force an acceptance of the call, though God or God's messenger is persistent.

These examples of various divine calls and various human responses should open our eyes to the plethora of ways that God engages us and guides us into lives of service. Ask participants in what ways each of us might experience a call from God today. Such calls often come from the recommendation of others, our own perceptions of a need that must be filled, family expectations, or personal experiences of many kinds. Lutherans believe that God sets us in a variety of roles in which we are called to live our Christian lives. You might ask each participant to jot down how she is called by God in her own life.

### **Paul and John in Acts**

The story in Acts 4 speaks directly to us of the connection between the power of the Holy Spirit and our own boldness. In Acts 2, we hear that it is Jesus who pours out the Holy Spirit from his place at God's right hand (Acts 2:33). In this assertion, the author of Acts tells us that the Holy Spirit is God alive and at work among us as Jesus was. Believers could trust that they were not on their own, but that God's power for good would work through them just as it had through God's people for so long. This power is also for us, the baptized children of God who have received the promised Spirit. Your study group may want to think about how we experience and recognize the Spirit in our midst.

### **Questions to Ponder**

The questions on page 33 are designed to encourage participants to make connections between boldness based on God's call and the different

calls we experience in our lives. As leader you may have to choose one or two questions for discussion in the group. There are many ways to approach these questions. Participants may want to jot down answers and share them. Groups of just two or three can share responses briefly. Some participants may keep an informal journal of responses to questions. Be sure to encourage everyone to speak or write responses. When responses are shared aloud, help the group focus on hearing from each person. Discussing or correcting responses will discourage conversation. Make sure that no one feels forced to respond if she is uncomfortable.

Don't be afraid of your creativity. Boldly try ways to foster discussion for participants in your time and place. Group members may wish to discuss particular questions. If the group discovers a topic or question of interest, participants are likely to benefit from discussion.

### **Closing**

Keep the closing simple. You may wish to sing a hymn, read the prayer from Ephesians 6:14–17, or pray the Lord's Prayer together. Some possible hymns include *LBW* 383, 393, 403, 406, 436, 486, or *TFFB* 225, 232.

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