

Under the Palm Tree

It was one of the first skills we learned as chaplains - getting centered. Creating space for the thinking self to be available to the feeling self - and vice versa - that's how our supervisor talked about it. And they made us practice - a lot. In the conference room across from the chapel we would sit in a circle as a group, feet firmly on the ground - feeling the chair supporting us, recognizing our connection to the ground that held us, exploring the images that might help us be open, aware, thoughtful and in touch with our emotions. Some people connected to an image of a wheel - with spokes that connected the inner circle and the outer. We would spend long minutes focusing on our breathing. I found that the image of breathing up through my toes was meaningful after a while...(breathe)...up through my toes and into my center. Making space, being centered - it became a learnable skill. A tool that could be practiced again and again until it became more natural.

When I first saw the art for this week's sermon, this painting of Deborah - and as we read the scripture together as a staff. I kept imagining her sitting under her palm tree breathing through her toes.

But it's not always the picture that pops into our head when we think of a strong leader, is it?

Deborah lived in a time of upheaval. The book of Judges as a whole is a primer on what NOT to do - and how NOT to live. As the book unfolds, Israel spirals further and further from what is good - from what God wants. Over and over, the people are said to do what is right in their own eyes. And it gets them into trouble. They are conquered by a neighbor because their society has become chaotic. And then they are oppressed. After a while - they cry out to God, God hears them and raises up a judge: a leader who often guides them out of occupation and into freedom and hopefully peace for a time - before they begin to do what is right in their own eyes once more and the cycle continues - worsening each time.

The scripture says that Deborah was a judge AND a prophet. So not only was she making legal judgments and giving military advice, she was also a spiritual leader. So people would come to her for help when they were in conflict - but also when they had a religious concern. I suspect she got quite busy sitting under that palm tree, quieting herself and then listening to the issues of an entire community. And this is a community that was being oppressed - for twenty years they lived in fear.

Given that, I can imagine how easy it might have been to have a knee jerk reaction. To rush in and try to make it all better. But Deborah seems to know that there is wisdom in waiting for the right time. Wisdom in thoughtfulness and intentionality. Wisdom in prayer and meditation. And when the time is right - she does act - clearly and bravely. She leads the people out of oppression. And then she leads them in peace-time for 40 years - presumably keeping up her practice under the palm tree, in chaos and in calm.

I remember meeting with Bill, my chaplain supervisor about a verbatim of a visit where I had not done awesomely. I was frazzled and it was hard. He asked me if I was centered. No, clearly I was not. The pager had gone off and someone had coded and I had to find my way there quickly and the family was upset and so no, in all the chaos I was not centered. I remember him smiling at me - gosh he was kind. And telling me that I needed to learn to center on my feet. It is one thing in the safety and the calm of the conference room - surrounded by 6 people who were all also trying to

practice centering - to get to a place of openness...to a posture of listening - a frame where I could access my thinking self and my feeling self at the same time. It is another thing entirely to do all that while it feels like everything around you is scary or awful or new or chaotic. Which makes me love Deborah even more for her to do it.

My chaplain supervisor had me practice - not just in the conference room. Walking down the hall. Right after I read the pager. Before I walked in a room - I paused...I breathed. I remembered that for almost everything- my taking a moment for myself did not negatively impact who I was supposed to be helping. I practiced centering on my feet.

Because the reality is it does take practice. It is not easy. We have to do it again and again.

It is easy for us to get fired up and then fade out. To cycle our emotions around with the current news cycle. To get caught in the chaos that sometimes invades our lives. To get carried away by the latest call to indignation. To just be busy. And tired.

The wisdom of Deborah is in the practice of silence - the practice of thoughtfulness - the practice of listening - to God and others --emphasizing the practice part of it. As in creating a rhythm, a habit, something that you can learn - that you can get better at by doing it again and again. You don't have to be still necessarily - maybe you will want to practice thoughtfulness while riding your bike or gardening or knitting or running or doing yoga or washing dishes. Some of you will need to be still - and seated...but all of us have to find time to practice.

And if your schedule is anything like mine - if your calendar has as many colors on it as mine does - carving out that space and that time may seem impossible - out of the question, even.

Yet here we are. You have this time. We have this place. And we have people to practice with.

In a moment, the choir is going to set the tone for a period of silence. Use it to listen, to pray, to center - whatever that means to you. Resist the urge to make your grocery list. Maybe you will choose to count your breaths - I find that four beats in, hold for 7, and breathe out for 8 is quite calming. Maybe you will empty your mind completely - or maybe you will write. Or try putting your feet flat and firmly on the ground and breathing in through your toes. Probably none of us will be perfect at silence - most of us are out of practice. But try with me. Trust the moment...and God...and these people.

Make sure you are comfortable...relax your shoulders, your jaw, sit up straight...breathe and pray...