



MOTHER'S DAY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

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Stephanie Buckhanon Crowder, Guest Lectionary Commentator
Assistant Professor of New Testament, Belmont University, Nashville, TN

Lection - Judges 5:7 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 7) The peasantry prospered in Israel, they grew fat on plunder, because you arose, Deborah, arose as a mother in Israel.

I. Description of Liturgical Moment

Mother's Day began with Julia Ward Howe's establishment of a Mother's Day of Peace in 1872. The day was to honor peace, motherhood and womanhood and offset the turbulence following the Civil War. Howe not only wanted to highlight the role women played in the household, but their vital work in society and the political arena. It was not until 1914 that President Wilson heeded the voice of Anna Jarvis and officially signed into law the second Sunday in May as Mother's Day. Whereas such national recognition of motherhood was new to the United States, there was already a historical precedent in Egypt and within Greco-Roman cultures for honoring women in such roles.

In a tradition dating back to Jarvis, African American congregations distribute carnations and in some cases roses on this very special day. White flowers represent mothers who are deceased, and red symbolizes living mothers. It is not uncommon in African American churches for a woman to preach on this day. In many cases, the speaker or preacher is quite often the first lady of the church. In addition, there is usually recognition of the oldest and youngest mothers, the mother with the most children and grandchildren, and sometimes there is a mother of the year award.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Judges 5:7

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

I am a mother of two sons and married. My own mother committed suicide in 1998, and both of my grandmothers are deceased. Thus Mother's Day is a day of celebration and sorrow for me. I celebrate my life as a mother while at the same time longing for my own mommy and "granny." It is with such dualism that I have long had to approach preaching on Mother's Day. The day and the preaching moment call for something happy and uplifting while I have often felt far from such.

Within African American celebrations of Mother's Day, it is time for church leaders to come to grips with both the pain and praise of this day. For many, it is indeed a day of flowers, cards, dinner and much jubilation. For others, it is a reminder of what is now lacking or what never existed. Congregations must also find ways to include "nontraditional" images of motherhood on this day, i.e., teen mothers, women who have experienced miscarriages and women who have had abortions.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Judges 5 is the "Song of Deborah" after she and Israel have defeated Sisera and his army. The song dates back to 13th century BCE and is hymn-like in its structure. The narrative of Judges 4 provides a backdrop for the celebration the song describes. In chapter four, Deborah is a married judge whose responsibility it is to provide administrative and military oversight for the people of Israel during a time of transition. Joshua is dead, and no king is yet on the scene. However, God appoints six judges, including Deborah, in the interim.

Deborah summons Barak in order that Israel might fight against Sisera, the general of King Jabin's army. After much hesitance, Barak agrees and, in the end, Deborah leads her people to

victory. Another woman leader, Jael, kills Sisera by hammering a tent peg into his head. It is this story of war and triumph that Judges chapter five recounts.

The “Song of Deborah” specifically refers to Deborah as a “mother in Israel.” She protects “her child” at whatever cost. The hymn implies that, due to Deborah’s presence, the people prosper even by hijacking caravans and others who travel through their territory. In a time when her people suffered from economic, political and spiritual duress, it is Deborah, a woman with her own palm tree, the “palm of Deborah,” who comes to the forefront as an astute leader. Through her fiscal insight, the song implies that Deborah is able to maintain her community’s well-being and restore it during a difficult period.

Such is the extent of Deborah’s “economic stimulus” that even the “peasantry” prosper under her rule. What is unique is that whereas chapter four primarily focuses on the military might of this female judge, the hymn highlights Deborah’s fiscal acumen. She is not only able to lead by the sword, but she also able to help Israel survive materially. Ironically, the hymn does not portray Israel’s restoration via planting, harvesting or common labor. Instead, it is as if there is a “by any means necessary” approach to survival and sustenance.

The “Song of Deborah” speaks to the current contexts of mothering and motherhood, in that mothers today must not only be able to provide food, clothing and shelter for their respective families, they must also be able to defend and protect---at any cost. Being a mother not only draws on the emotional resources of women to love and nurture, but also draws on a woman’s ability to manage a household, delegate responsibilities, and plan a budget. Deborah’s duties were not limited to the political and social, but involved the financial well-being and prosperity of her people.

Additionally, Deborah’s example shows the current reader that such mothering is not limited to an individual’s specific household. Notice, the text does not state that Deborah is biologically a mother; yet, she is a “mother in Israel” in the socio-political sense. The idea of a “neighborhood” or “community” mother is rooted in a woman who seeks the well-being of not just her children, if she has any, but desires good for all children in her midst. Deborah goes to war and seeks the welfare of somebody else’s children. Scripture challenges us to do the same.

African American history is replete with “mothers” like Fannie Lou Hamer, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman and the many nameless mothers who risked life and limb in order that the community might be whole and be restored. Akin to Julia Howe’s effort to establish a Mother’s Day of Peace, the “Song of Deborah” reminds us that honoring motherhood is not merely about honoring a biological function or the ability to reproduce, but such a day it is rooted in affirming women’s service as repairers of the breach and restorers of the community.

Celebration

Mother’s Day is not simply about flowers and cards, but a reminder of the power of women to fight for what is right. It is a reminder of the passion of women to administer justice. It is a reminder of the prowess of women to help their people survive. It is a reminder of all of the

women in our lives, our communities and our world who have always risen to the task and continue to rise. Let the church say, Amen!

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in this passage include:

Sights: “Peasantry”- images of poor; those in need; tattered clothing; unclean; unkempt; “fat”- contrast of peasantry; well-fed; having enough; “mother”- contrast of plunder and peasantry; nurturing; loving; kind; having a mother of a nation arise to save a group of people (name the black women who have arisen); and

Sounds: “Plunder”- suggests violence or ill-gotten goods or good obtained in war.

III. Recommendations of Material to Use During this Lectionary Moment

Bible Study Discussion-

During a Young Adult Bible Study or church-wide Bible Study discuss what Mother’s Day means to teen mothers, women who have had abortions, women who are unable to have children who desire to have children and women who have had miscarriages.

Songs-

“Sometimes I Feel Like A Motherless Child.” By Sweet Honey in the Rock

“Sweet Sadie,” By The Spinners

“Dear Momma.” By Tupac Shakur

Poetry for church bulletins or to be read during worship-

“Mother to Son.” By Langston Hughes

“The Mother.” By Gwendolyn Brooks

Book Recommendation-

Parker, Lonnae O’Neal. I’m Every Woman: Remixed Stories of Marriage, Motherhood and Work. New York, NY: Amistad Publishing, 2005.