

December 5, 2010
2nd Sunday of Advent

Judges 4:1-9, 12-24
Luke 1:39-56

“Trusting in Teamwork”

Leo Lionni, in a collage-illustrated children’s book, tells the story of a little minnow-sized fish named Swimmy. Swimmy is like all the other fish in the minnow school, except they are all reddish-gold and he is pure black. The school swims along happily until any larger predator fish comes along. Then, whoosh, they all, including Swimmy, scatter.

Swimmy sees how the bigger fish bully and eat the small fish. What could he do about it- as one tiny misfit fish? Then he gets a great idea. It requires his unique solid black coloring, and depends on the teamwork of all his minnow schoolmates.

Swimmy organizes his friends so they are swimming in the shape of a large fish. Swimmy himself, his dark body flashing, creates the “eye” of this giant fish illusion. In the last scene of the book, a huge predator fish takes one look at this intimidating creature, then races away.

This is a “David and Goliath” kind of story, where the weaker underdog triumphs over a Big Guy. But there is one major difference: the victory came through TEAMWORK.

The story of Deborah, from the book of Judges, which we read as part of the Grand Sweep this past week, gives us a Biblical example of teamwork. The key players are Deborah- a judge and leader of Israel, Barak, the leader of the military, and Jael, a foreign woman who acts as an instrument of Jahweh, the Lord of the Israelites.

Two or three hundred years pass between the conquest of the Promised Land (after Joshua’s death) and the rise of Saul in 1050 B.C., Israel’s first king. This is the time of the judges. During these years Israel was a loose confederation of scattered tribes. The Bible describes a cycle they experienced:

1. The people go astray to the Canaanite culture and religion—THEY had kings!

2. God raises up foreign oppressors to chastise his people.
3. A cry of distress rises from the Hebrew people
4. God raises up a judge who delivers the repentant people and then leads them.
5. The people obey as long as the judge lives. Then they fall into disobedience and the cycle begins again.

Deborah was Israel's fourth great judge. She was the wife of a prophet AND a judge for her people. The Canaanite kings oppressed the Hebrew people for TWENTY YEARS before they asked God for help! The king at that time was Jabin.

Deborah calls on Barak to lead the armies against the king's forces. At his request she goes with Barak to the scene of the battle. They act in tandem, as a team. One more key team member, Jael, kills the escaped enemy leader Sisera. King Jabin falls and Israel wins freedom.

Much of what we are currently reading in the Old Testament seems so distant from our current experience, we have to stretch to find ways to relate these ancient stories to our own lives. What does this story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael offer us?

Black preacher Buster Soaries says whatever problem exists in your life, which stands between you and your Promised Land, is your personal Goliath, your personal King Jabin. This can be any barrier to the abundant life God intends for us. We need to ask God to help us identify the team that will battle Goliath and Jabin with us.

A mule named "Jim" was being driven by his owner. When everyone got on the wagon, the driver yelled, "Giddyup, Jim. Giddyup, Sue. Giddyup, Sam. Giddyup, John. Giddyup, Joe." As the wagon started to move, one of the passengers asked, "When Jim is the only one there, why did you call all those other names?" The owner replied, "If Jim knew he was the only one pulling this wagon, he'd never budge an inch!" It takes teamwork.

As we face problems and pain, it can seem like we're facing Sisera's 900 chariots. We feel defeated before we even begin. It can seem like we're the

mule, Jim, pulling a wagon all alone. The story of Deborah reminds us we don't face any opponent alone. We have a great team: the community of faith surrounding us and a cloud of witnesses watching and helping from above.

There is another truth we must recognize. We are not called to battle opponents in our lives ALONE; this is true. But it is also true that God helps us battle for the benefit of others in addition to ourselves. Both of today's Scriptures reveal that God cares about MORE than just the individual. God cares for the entire community. Mary's obedience to God in giving birth to the infant Jesus is supported by her cousin, Elizabeth. Mary doesn't journey through her pregnancy alone. AND Mary understands that this child coming into the world is not just a child for her alone, but a child for all the world. Mary looks back to the history of her people to remember that God has always been like this---- acting for the entire community's benefit, with special concern for the oppressed and suffering.

Take heart! Don't despair! In the world you will find trouble, Jesus tells us. But then he says, "But don't be afraid, because I have OVERCOME the world!" Weakness and power in the world's eyes don't match the way God works.

In the published diaries of Nazi Joseph Goebbels, minister of propaganda for the Third Reich, there are references to Gandhi. In each case Goebbels treats him as a fool and a fanatic. He intimates that if the Indian leader had sense enough to organize militarily, he might be able to win the freedom of India. Goebbels was certain Gandhi could never succeed by following the path of non-resistance.

Who turned out to be right? India obtained her independence. Nazi Germany was destroyed. How often do we mislabel weakness as strength, and strength as weakness? What chariot army is trying to convince you that you are weak and helpless, puny like the little fish Swimmy?

Don't buy it! We are part of a TEAM. God, who is actually a team himself: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, GOD is part of our team, and all of our brothers and sisters in Christ as well. Believe in the power that is available to us through TEAMWORK. Trust it! And watch the victories as they come day by day, month by month, year by year. Praise God from whom all blessings flow!