

### **Debora's victory song with that second glance**

(This Sermon was preached in German on September 1. 2024 in the Mennonite Church of Hamburg, Altona)

Some time ago there were two songs that belonged to a special genre and were quite popular on the radio

"I can buy myself flowers" by Miley Cyrus was one of these songs, and the other song by the Colombian singer Shakira also made waves because they had a special feature. They were so-called "revenge songs". Both songs have one important quality in common that makes them so successful: they deal with their respective broken relationships.

Now, there are many songs that sing about a broken Heart - but these two stand out in a completely different way. There is no lamenting and mourning over the suffering here. Quite the opposite - it's about settling accounts...

Cyrus for example sings: "I can buy my own flowers, write my name in the sand... yeah I can love me better than you can".

In her global hit, Shakira alludes to the betrayal of her former partner, but does so not out of self-pity. On the contrary, she sings that he swapped a Rolex (herself) for a Cassio - a Ferrari for a Twingo.

In two lines, she manages to Insult a car brand, a watch brand, her ex-partner and his new girlfriend. Quite Impressive, what you can do with Art!

These artists could have shared their experiences in a book or interview, but instead they put them into songs that are real earworms and have the ability to play over in your head day and night. It's possible that this choice enabled them to have a completely different effect on the general public. That is the power of good art.

At the time when these songs were so popular - I came across a song in the Bible that really grabbed me. It's possibly the oldest song in the Bible and much like Cyrus and Shakira, it deals with one of the most intense experiences in Israel's life.

THIS song was also written by a woman, and the climax of the song is about another woman getting even with a man, just in a much bloodier fashion.

### **The song of Deborah**

Allow me to take you into this song, because it has been on my mind a lot, especially in relation to the war in Ukraine, which is now two and a half years old. Back then, when this lyric first struck me, it had only been a year since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Tragically, the war continues and these biblical words continue to bring out amazing parallels.

We find the song in question in the book of Judges chapter 5 under the title: Deborah's Song of Victory. It tells of an incident in which the people of Israel, who are still very disorganized and tribal at that time, are attacked and oppressed by the neighboring nation of Canaan.

The face of the enemy force is army commander Sisera, who leads an impressive army.

*“The Israelites cried out to the Lord, for he (Sisera) had 900 chariots of iron and oppressed the Israelites by force for 20 years” (Judges 4:3)*

After 20 years, the conditions in the land were deplorable: the people's courage had vanished and their ability to defend themselves with weapons had significantly diminished:

*In the days of Shamgar the son of Anath, in the days of Jael, the roads were deserted, and those who were to walk on roads walked on untraveled paths.*

*Strong men were lacking in Israel until you, Deborah, stood up, until you stood up, a mother in Israel. Judges 5:6-7*

In the week that marked the anniversary of the war in Ukraine, the news and social media were full of images of destroyed villages and streets where dignified life was made impossible.

Israel's situation at the time was similarly tragic. But the people had an experience that they had were making frequently in those first centuries of their history: a rescuing God intervened and liberated them.

It did not happen immediately.

They were oppressed for 20 years. But it was clear to Israel that deliverance ultimately came from God.

*O LORD, when you came out from Seir, when you went forth from the land of Edom, the earth trembled, the heavens also trembled, the clouds also trembled with water.*

*The mountains trembled before the LORD - that is, Sinai - before the LORD, the God of Israel. Judges 5:4-5*

God made the difference in this emergency.

A weakened troop takes new courage

But then this song also sings of the weak tribes who set out to fight the attackers in the name of God.

*My heart is with the commanders of Israel, with those who were willing among the people. Praise the LORD!*

*Arise, arise, Deborah! Arise, arise and sing a song! Arise, Barak, and capture those who captured you, son of Abinoam! Judges 5:9,12*

Barak was the commander of Israel's army, the one who was supposed to be the hero in this ancient patriarchal logic. In this story, however, he only plays a supporting role. The main protagonists are to be found elsewhere...

And so Deborah sings on:

*Then descended what was left of glorious ones among the people. The LORD came down with me among the mighty men.*

*They came down from Ephraim, whose roots are in Amalek, after you, Benjamin, with your troops. From Machir came down rulers, and from Zebulun those who hold the scepter. The princes of Issachar were with Deborah, and Issachar followed him, Barak, on foot into the plain. Judges 5:13-15*

These nations were not mighty and strong. They were poorly armed and really didn't stand a fighting chance against the attackers led by Sisera.

### **A harsh word for those who didn't join the fighting**

Some of the tribes were probably aware of the slim chances of success so they decided not to join the fighting, and Deborah has not forgotten these tribes in her song.

*They pondered back and forth in Reuben's droves.*

*Why did you sit between the hurdles, listening to the herds playing the flute? In Reuben's multitudes they pondered to and fro.*

*Gilead remained beyond the Jordan. And why did Dan stay by the ships? Asher sat on the shore of the sea and remained quiet at its bays.*

*Curse the city of Meros, said the angel of the LORD, curse it, curse its people, because they did not come to the aid of the LORD, to the aid of the LORD among the mighty. (Judges 5: 16-17,23)*

Do you know that moment when you're reading the Bible and you suddenly feel quite uncomfortable? This is such a moment for me.

When I read these verses, I can't help but think of the issues that have plagued and preoccupied politics and society in a special way in recent years. Before our eyes was this unjustified war of aggression by Russia. In our ears were the pleas from Ukraine for support, especially in the form of arms deliveries.

If we needed a biblical text that could legitimize sending weapons, that could even compel us to support Ukraine with all forms of armed force, then we would find it in these verses from the Song of Deborah.

And it even goes one step further. It speaks of the LORD God, who needed help in the battle against the evildoers, help that was denied to him by the tribes and especially by the city of Meros.

Phew – this is one of those texts that you prefer not to read in a peace church - or if you do, then it's best to explain it away nicely. But I think I'll resist the temptation at this point and leave the text as it is for the time being...

### **The battle**

Instead, here is a little insight into how Deborah described this battle:

*Kings came and fought; at that time the kings of Canaan fought at Taanach by the waters of Megiddo, but they did not win silver.*

*From the heavens the stars fought; from their courses they fought against Sisera. The brook Kishon swept them away, the ancient brook, the brook Kishon. Go forth, my soul, with strength! Judges 5:19-21*

It was clear to Deborah that it was not the manly courage and superior weapons of the Israelite tribes that made the difference in these battles, but the forces of the non-human creation: water, stars, floods all stood against the attackers, fought for Israel and made the decisive difference that confused the enemy army and put them to flight.

### **Jael**

And then - a woman appears - the woman at the climax of the story. Jael!

Sisera, the tyrant, is on the run and ends up in the tent of a Kenite called Heber, who is well-disposed towards him. Kenites and Canaanites were friends!

Tired and exhausted, he wants to rest for a moment in a place he considers “safe”. There he meets Jael, the wife of the Kenite, of whom Deborah writes the following:

*Blessed among the women is Jael the wife of Heber the Kenite; blessed among the women in the tent is she! She gave milk when he asked for water; she offered cream in a beautiful bowl. Judges 5:24-25*

Jael was praised - and in high tones. We don't yet know exactly why. As far as we can tell, she was an excellent hostess, which is quite commendable.

Sisera asked for water - but she gave him thick milk, which fills his stomach and makes him tired - so he fell asleep...

And then we discover why Deborah celebrates this Jael as highly praised:

*She seized the peg with her hand and the sledgehammer with her right hand and struck Sisera, crushed his head, crushed and pierced his temple.  
He collapsed between her feet, fell down and lay there. Between their feet he collapsed; where he collapsed he lay slain. Judges 5:26-27*

Listen to these strong verbs used to describe Jael in contrast to the mighty Sisera:

She **seized** and **struck**, **crushed**, **crushed** and **pierced** Sisera.

He, on the other hand: **collapsed**, **fell down**, **lay there**, **collapsed**, **lay there slain**.

We can be sure that this song was sung many times in later generations in Israel.

They sang of a strong woman who grabbed and struck, smashed and crushed. It was sung about an “O so mighty tyrant” who collapsed, fell down, lay there - slain there... Between YOUR feet.

Yes - I can imagine it became a real catchy tune. Maybe even an earworm

And let's be honest: there's something satisfying about the story. We feel for the people who are unjustly invaded. We rejoice when those who have been unjustly oppressed achieve victory and liberation. That's how I feel in most of the movies I watch. And if the tyrant is then eliminated at the hands of a supposedly "weaker" opponent (the underdog), then the heart of this pacifist also leaps here and there. Whether this tyrant is called Sisera or Putin.

It doesn't necessary leap when liberation comes by a Tent Peg that is hammered through the head – but still...

### **The second Glance**

It is interesting that Deborah does not end her song here. A few verses are still missing and I would like to read one of them here, which I find very surprising:

*Sisera's mother peeped out of the window and complained through the lattice, "Why does his chariot delay in coming? Why are the hooves of his steeds hemming? Judges 5:28*

In an unexpected twist, Deborah turns her gaze in a different direction. Suddenly, Sisera is no longer simply the tyrannical army commander. Suddenly there is a mother behind him, waiting for her son. A grief-stricken mother who will now mourn a son who has been brutally slain.

Walter Brueggemann, who drew my attention to this text, calls this a "second glance" at the enemy. At first glance, Deborah rejoices that the enemy has been defeated, that he has not gotten away with his injustice, but that he got what he deserved for his brutal invasion and was also humiliated.

I would not condemn this first glance. I suspect it is even needed every now and then

That's what I find so beautiful about this story: it picks me up! I can empathize with it. With the injustice! With the joy that this injustice doesn't have the last word, but that the perpetrators of injustice really experience the consequences of their actions.

But then there is this second look - the look that somehow manages to lay a trail that allows us to see a common humanity. Every soldier, whether Israelite or Canaanite, Ukrainian or Russian, Israeli or Hamas fighter, has a mother who fears for him.

I believe that it is the task of the Church to keep sharpening this second glance in the conflicts of this world, whether they are military or interpersonal (in our neighborhoods, at work).

### **Jesus' temptations**

In the text reading today, we read the story of Jesus' temptation in the desert. The interesting thing about these temptations is that Jesus is asked twice to do very good and understandable things: to make bread out of stones and overcome the lack of food; to jump from the most frequented place in Jerusalem and give the crowd a clear sign of his divine

destiny, an obvious act of persuasion, so to speak. Then, finally, there is that third temptation - to exchange his loyalty to God for the opportunity to free all the kingdoms of this world from the destructive forces.

Jesus had a mission. It was similar, yet very different. I can imagine that the temptations helped him to sharpen his mission.

Jesus Christ came to live as the Son of God in this world. A central part of what it meant to be the Son of God had to do with this second look that was already present in Deborah. It had to do with seeing in the other person, in the neighbor and in the enemy, the person whom God wants to redeem from the entanglements of the powers and forces of this world.

And Jesus invites us to follow him in this mission. I think he is calling the Church in particular to this second look of Deborah - the gaze that tries to recognize humanity in everything.

### **Pavlo's experiences in the war**

Since the war started I've been in regular communication with my Friend Pavlo. He comes from a Mennonite community in Moloshansk. In April 2022, fled from his Russian-occupied Hometown in the east to the west of Ukraine in the middle of the night. Since then, he has been living with some of the congregation's brothers and sisters in the far west. There they have set up a kind of refuge center and accommodation for people who have fled internally. But they don't stay in the west, they drive all over the country even up to battlefield and bring relief supplies, food, stoves, clothes and all sorts of things to the people in need.

I asked him several questions. Firstly: "In your opinion, what good and hopeful things have happened in the past year?"

He told me about the many impressive people they had met during their travels to the most diverse places in Ukraine; people who served those in need with dedication. He talked about the many opportunities they had to do good and pass on the message of God's love. Through the war, he got to know so many corners of Ukraine, of which he only knew a fraction before. He talked about a hope that was given to him by God, which is inexplicable, but was there, nonetheless. He had seen time and again how God made good things come out of bleak situations.

But you don't have to romanticize it. When I asked how he was a few weeks ago, he said: "I'm exhausted! Exhausted! And I'm not even fighting on the front line."

With this statement in mind, I asked the next question: "What stopped you from joining the military and fighting for the freedom of Ukraine?"

At first he said with a grin: "I have a bad knee. With this knee, it's really hard to run away from the flying bullets. But on the other hand, I have the impression that God is asking me not to kill. I am called to give my life, but not to take a life."

I then asked Pavlo whether he sometimes feels the temptation to join the army after all?

“The temptation is always there! I have two hearts inside me. On the one hand, there's the Christian, who shouldn't kill. On the other hand, there's the Ukrainian who wants to fight for the freedom of his country. Again and again, I get the feeling that I should join the army to defend the country. It's particularly difficult when we don't have much to do and I'm writing back and forth with my friends in the army. Sometimes I almost go crazy here. But basically, I feel like I've found my place with our way of serving the country. We also go to the dangerous places. It's like a kind of golden compromise. I serve my country without violating the commandments of Jesus.”

As you can imagine, it was a very moving conversation for me, which I wanted to share with you here.

Pavlo and the crew cannot be blamed for not coming to the Lord's aid, like the city of Meros. I have the impression that they are trying to remain faithful to God's mission amidst all the chaos.

This mission to which Jesus calls us has something almost impossible about it at times. The mission of seeking humanity in the enemy again and again, especially at second glance, is often not achievable through sheer human willpower.

That is why we only live this mission out of the spiritual strength that is given to us. For the Spirit who worked in and on Jesus Christ is the same Spirit who is given to us and to whom we may reach out.

So let us do this, again and again. Amen.