

Proper 28A: Judges 4:1-7; Psalm 123; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11; Matthew 25: 14-30

When was the last time you just burst out into a spontaneous cheer or song, or maybe a combined cheer song because you could not help yourself? Maybe you were alone, whooping or singing at the top of your lungs in the car, or maybe you were with others. We are coming up on a big week for cheer songs. (Stomp-stomp-clap. Stomp-stomp-clap. We will, we will rock you.) In Oregon right now, just about everything is building up to the Civil War, the annual rivalry game between Oregon State and University of Oregon. Thanksgiving is important, but the really big day is Friday, the day after Thanksgiving, when the game kicks-off. Here in Washington, this Saturday's game might be the last Apple Cup (such a healthy, crispy name, quite unlike the Civil War) and people are getting ready. Bow down to Washington, bow down to Washington. Mighty are the ones who wear the purple and the gold. Joyfully we welcome them within the victor's fold. Washington State's song gets straight to the point: Fight! Fight! Fight! For Washington State!

I remember sitting around the Thanksgiving dinner table in Knoxville, Tennessee, many years ago, with Stewart's parents, his siblings, and their families and friends—about 16 of us gathered around the table. I was meeting most of them for the first time. The UT - Vanderbilt game was coming up and just as I took a big bite of turkey, mashed potatoes and gravy, I was asked to sing Rocky Top, right then and there. I swallowed nervously, looked around, opened my mouth and...(Molly stands and sings) Wish that I was on ol' Rocky Top. Down in the Tennessee hills. Ain't no smoggy smoke on Rocky Top. Ain't no telephone bills...Rocky Top, you'll always be, home sweet home to me. Good old Rocky Top. Rocky Top, Tennessee. I am pretty sure that is exactly how I sounded. Somehow I passed the test and we received the family blessing.

I went to a women's college and our cheer song was in Latin, *Gaudeamus Igitur*, which means So Let Us Rejoice. The tune dates back to at least the 13th century and for a long time I thought it was a song about the joys of scholarly learning. Although Brahms and Strauss both included it in some of their compositions, centuries later, it is basically a European pub song that would have been sung while everyone was hoisting and drinking from their stein krugs. Stein krug (which we usually shorten to stein) means stone jug. So the tradition of these cheer songs calling for and celebrating victory, while raising stone jugs, goes way, way back.

In fact, one of the oldest pieces of writing in all of scripture—if not the oldest—is a cheer-fight-victory song that was probably first sung at a feast where stone jugs were hoisted. And then sung over and over and over again, until it was written down. I'm talking about the Song of Deborah in Judges 5. Now, this morning's reading from Judges 4 is very, very old, but it is not quite as old as Judges 5, which we don't hear this morning. They tell the same story, albeit in completely different ways: the Judges 4 version is prose, while the older, Judges 5 version is a beautifully written heroic song.

Deborah is incredibly important, someone who is known and honored as a wise prophetess and a judge. In fact, she is the only woman among the twelve judges of Israel. As a prophetess, she articulated how God was calling people to live. As a judge, at least in peaceful times, she helped settle disputes and interpret the law. That part resonates with what judges still do. But during non-peaceful times, the judges took on a different role; they became the inspirational leaders of the people. The prose version we hear today tells the story of how she gathered and led the tribes to victory over their opponent Sisera and his army.

The song came before the sole focus on military might. The Song is presented as a duet between Barak (Beh-rak the general) and Deborah (the leader of Israel), but it is known as the

Song of Deborah. She and another woman, Jael (Ya-el), play central roles in the epic encounter with the Canaanites at Mount Tabor. Like the Song of Miriam and the Song of Mary (aka the Magnificat), the song is filled with praise for God's abiding presence and liberating ways. These songs shaped the way people understood who they were—their identity—as the people of God and the ways in which they understood community. The Song of Deborah begins this way: When the people offer themselves, bless the Lord; and ends this way: may your friends be like the sun as it rises in its might. A song of how God was present with them—day in and day out, in good times and in hard times.

In one stained glass depiction of Deborah, she stands with both hands stretched out open, like this, holding a lyre, representing that song of praise, in her left hand. (Designed by John Francis Bentley, c. 1892-3, Corpus Christi Catholic Church, Brixton, London) She is facing outward, with a direct gaze and steady stance. Her pose reminds me of the graphic that has been on the cover of our worship bulletin throughout this time of stewardship: the bodies that make up the tree of life are stretching out with their whole bodies, extending love, sharing joy. While they don't have any facial expressions (it's a graphic, after all), if they did, I imagine mouths wide open, singing a song of God's abiding presence. Although the words of the Song of Deborah, the Song of Miriam, the Song of Mary, and all the other songs that have been sung throughout time are particular to a place and time, particular to a situation and context, they all share the same tune of God's liberating, loving and life-giving ways. We stand thousands of years from the place and context of all of our readings today, weary of violence and all too aware of how, over the centuries, the church has readily identified enemies to slay, subjugate and defeat. We read the news and weep. Now, more than ever, we are called to sing of God's ways.

And so, as I've thought about the Song of Deborah, the song we are singing at St. A.'s is particular to who we are as a people, seeking to be and become even more fully Beloved Community in this time and in this place known as Whidbey Island. The Song of St. Augustine's-in-the-Woods is not a song about victory in battle: it is not a song about who is right and who is wrong; who is inside and who is outside; who is favored and who is not. Those are very popular songs, but that isn't our song. We are creating our song together and while I don't know all of the words yet—they are still being written—I do know that the tune has been, is and will be a proclamation of God's abundance and generosity, a song of inclusion and belonging for all; a song that holds all suffering with tenderness and care; a song that speaks of healing, rejuvenation, and restored relationships with and for all people and all of creation and all people. And so much more. A joyous, raucous and full-bodied cheer song that involves all of who we are—our clapping and our stomping, our voice, our hearts, our minds, our bodies, our souls. A song about how Love brings life. While I am looking forward to our brunch feast, it is this feast that we share together here, the Eucharist, that is at the heart of who we are. May we raise our stone jugs and voices, in song, to the God of Love.