

Text: Judith 8:1-17,24

Sermon Title: *Judith, faithful and fierce*

Judith 8:1-17,24

Now in those days Judith heard about these things: she was the daughter of Merari...²Her husband Manasseh, who belonged to her tribe and family, had died during the barley harvest. ³For as he stood overseeing those who were binding sheaves in the field, he was overcome by the burning heat, and took to his bed and died in his town Bethulia. So they buried him with his ancestors in the field between Dothan and Balamon. ⁴Judith remained as a widow for three years and four months⁵ at home where she set up a tent for herself on the roof of her house. She put sackcloth around her waist and dressed in widow's clothing. ⁶She fasted all the days of her widowhood, except the day before the sabbath and the sabbath itself, the day before the new moon and the day of the new moon, and the festivals and days of rejoicing of the house of Israel.⁷She was beautiful in appearance, and was very lovely to behold. Her husband Manasseh had left her gold and silver, men and women slaves, livestock, and fields; and she maintained this estate. ⁸No one spoke ill of her, for she feared God with great devotion.

⁹ When Judith heard the harsh words spoken by the people against the ruler, because they were faint for lack of water, and when she heard all that Uzziah said to them, and how he promised them under oath to surrender the town to the Assyrians after five days, ¹⁰she sent her maid, who was in charge of all she possessed, to summon Uzziah and the elders of her town. ¹¹They came to her, and she said to them:

‘Listen to me, rulers of the people of Bethulia! What you have said to the people today is not right; you have even sworn and pronounced this oath between God and you, promising to surrender the town to our enemies unless the Lord turns and helps us within so many days. ¹²Who are you to put God to the test today, and to set yourselves up in the place of God in human affairs? ¹³You are putting the Lord Almighty to the test, but you will never learn anything! ¹⁴You cannot plumb the depths of the human heart or understand the workings of the human mind; how do you expect to search out God, who made all these things, and find out his mind or comprehend God's thought? No, my brothers, do not anger the Lord our God. ¹⁵For if God does not choose to help us within these five days, God has power to protect us within any time God pleases, or even to destroy us in the presence of our enemies. ¹⁶Do not try to bind the purposes of the Lord our God; for God is not like a human being, to be threatened, or like a mere mortal, to be won over by pleading. ¹⁷Therefore, while we wait for the Lord's deliverance, let us call upon God to help us, and God will hear our voice if it is pleasing.

²⁴ ‘Therefore, my brothers, let us set an example to our kindred, for their lives depend upon us, and the sanctuary—both the temple and the altar—rests upon us.

For Reflection:

Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive and go do it. Because what the world needs is more people who have come alive.

-Howard Thurman

In the stillness of the quiet, if we listen, we can hear the whisper of the heart giving strength to weakness, courage to fear, hope to despair.

-Howard Thurman

Intergenerational – St. Francis & the wolf of Gubbio

I'm going to tell you the story of someone else who helped save a city – his name was St. Francis and he saved a city called Gubbio.

In Italy there was a town called Gubbio. The people who lived there had been having problems with a wolf – the people were becoming scared to leave their city, especially at night, because the reports of a giant wolf were growing and growing. Late at night they could hear the wolf howling louder and louder, and sheep and pigs were disappearing from their farms. So, because they were afraid, they sent out some hunters to track down and kill the wolf. But when the hunters came together the wolf broke their spears and fought them off. And so the people didn't know what to do.

The town council came together and decided to send out for St. Francis, he was a smart follower of God, and it was even rumored that he could talk to animals. They thought that he would know what to do. So, they sent out three people to find St. Francis. When they did, they told him all about their situation – about the wolf, how they were scared to leave the city at night, and how if they couldn't leave to hunt and fish and farm soon, they would starve. So, St. Francis decided he would go with them back to Gubbio and see if he could help. There, he met with the town council, and after doing so, he decided that he would go out and try to find the wolf and speak with him. The council urged him to take a weapon, but he declined. He went out to the woods and called to the wolf, but there was no answer.

So, he then walked down to the stream, and while he was walking he had the feeling he was being followed. He turned around and it was the wolf. He showed the wolf that he had no weapons and did not mean the wolf any harm. He said he just wanted to talk to him. The wolf, seeing Francis did not mean him any harm, sat down. And Francis sat down too. And then they began to talk.

Francis asked the wolf: why have you been terrorizing this village? Why have you been eating their sheep and pigs, and attacking their hunters, and howling all night to scare them? The wolf said, "Francis, you have to understand my perspective. I am a wolf and I have to eat. I need those sheep and pigs to stay alive. I used to be part of a pack, we hunted sheep and rabbits, but a few years ago I was injured and could not keep up with them. I would prefer to still eat sheep and rabbits, but because of my injury I can't catch them anymore – they are too fast – so I must eat the sheep and pigs to stay alive. And as for the hunters, I didn't want to hurt them, but they attacked me – I was just trying to stay alive. And the howling, well, I am a wolf. I howl. And I have been doing this closer to the town to try and scare them away from sending any more hunters after me. You see, Francis, I am just trying to survive."

Francis could see that the wolf was only trying to fulfill his needs. But he knew that the villagers also needed to live without fear and they needed to be able to leave their village to farm and hunt in safety.

So Francis convinced the wolf to with him back to Gubbio. When Francis walked into the gates with the wolf, the people screamed in fear – some ran for their spears and pitchforks. But, Francis got everyone to calm down. And once they were calm, the wolf told the villagers all that he had told Francis, about his injury and about how he was just trying to survive and how he didn't want to hurt them. Some of the villagers were still angry and wanted to kill the wolf right then. But Francis said, “remember Jesus, how he taught us to love our enemies? How he taught us to forgive?”

Then Francis said, “This wolf could be your wolf. If you agree to not harm him, he will not harm you. And if you agree to feed him, he will agree to defend your village as long as he lives.”

And this is what they decided to do. They would feed the wolf. The wolf would stay away from their sheep and pigs, he would not scare them at night, and he would protect them from other animals and warn them if anyone was coming to do them harm.

For five more years, this is how the wolf and the people of Gubbio lived – as friends, and taking care of one another.

Through listening to each other, they ended up as friends.

The love of God, it can turn enemies into friends.

The love of God, it means listening to what everyone needs, even a scary wolf.

This morning we turn our attention for one more Sunday to a story from the *Apocrypha*, stories from the last few centuries before the birth of Christ – stories found in the Catholic and Orthodox Bibles, but not in our Protestant Bibles.

We chose to do a few *Apocrypha* stories on the Worship Committee these Sundays before Advent because they help to set-up the Christmas season – they help us to consider the world into which Jesus was born: a world occupied by foreign powers, a world in which Jesus' people were not in control of their own land, their own religion, their own government – these stories give us a glimpse into some of the Israelite imagination nearest the time Jesus lived and walked the earth.

What we find in our story for today, the book of *Judith*, is a story of liberation. It is liberation theology thousands of years before there was a term “liberation theology.” It is an allegorical story of an occupied people, a way they could speak about resistance to the Greek empire without being accused of treason – a story created and told by an occupied people longing to be liberated – to be free to once again have control over their own destiny. The story is familiar, and yet it is strange.

So here is the story, the Reader's Digest condensed version:

King Nebuchadnezzar has been offended and so decides to take over the known world. His army, led by General Holofernes, is too numerous to be counted. They march out, city by

city, wiping out all who do not surrender. Making those who do surrender the slaves of Nebuchadnezzar.

The people of Israel decide to stand their ground. They send word to the mountain town of Bethulia where they have their best strategic chance of victory – the pass through the mountains, says the author, is so narrow there that only two people can pass through at one time. Holofernes learns that these Israelites are not going to bow to him and so he and his allies surround the city and decide, instead of fighting through the pass, they will cut off their water supply and wait them out – for them to surrender or die of dehydration. And when their water supply is getting so low that the children and elderly are getting faint, the people long for surrender, they go to their leader Uzziah and ask why he did not just surrender, for it would be better to be a slave to Nebuchadnezzar than to die here from thirst. At this most desperate moment, when they are about to give up, we meet our heroine, Judith.

We learn that Judith has been a widow for 3 years and 4 months, her husband Manasseh died of heat stroke during the barley harvest. We learn that she has done all the law has prescribed of her as a widow: she has worn sackcloth around her waist and the clothing of a widow; she has fasted all the days she was to fast; and she has lived in a tent on her roof with only God as her companion. “No one spoke ill of her, for she feared God with great devotion.”

Judith calls the leaders together. She tells them that they must stay faithful to God – she reminds them that they cannot know the mind of God. She prays a great prayer to God. And then, she puts a plan into action. She leaves the city and gets an audience with Holofernes who is taken with her great wisdom and her beauty. For three days she stays in his presence, each night, seeking the guidance of God in prayer. And on the third night, while Holofernes is passed

out from partaking in too much alcohol, she cuts off his head. And in doing so, saves her people. This is the story of Judith.

It is strange, we have not heard it before (likely), and yet it is familiar. This is true for us, and it would have been true for those who first heard it. And for the same reasons. It is familiar and strange at the same time because it sounds quite similar to other stories of the Old Testament, stories like Gideon, Samson, Esther, and Deborah – stories in which God liberates the Israelites from the hand of an oppressor through the actions of one faithful person – one hero or heroine who delivers all of Israel through strange and bizarre acts. These stories remind the people that God is with them, that God continues to hear their cries: the people are near destruction, they cry out to God, God hears their cry, and God raises up one willing and faithful person to be God’s agent of deliverance. Judith is one of these willing and faithful deliverers, she stands in the long line of Israelite Superheros.

And this is likely what those Israelites would have thought some 2300 years ago when they first heard it. “Judith? I don’t better listen, as I don’t remember my Grandmother telling me this story at bedtime.” And so perhaps, a new story of liberation enables the people to hear in new and fresh ways – to hear, essentially the same story of deliverance, but in a new setting with a new character, the people perhaps hear it new once again.

We know that the stories we tell and how we tell them, they shape our view of the world, they shape our collective imagination:

- They form us in what we believe is possible and what is impossible;
- they can build up our hope, or cause us to say, “there is nothing we can do;
- they shape our values and help us to consider what options are available in any given situation.

In the telling of the story of St. Francis and the wolf of Gubbio, our imaginations are shaped ever so slightly to remember our value as peacemakers, to seek understanding of those we see as our enemy (of “the other side”); in telling this story together, our imaginations are shaped to remember that the one who we consider to be our enemy likely has reasons behind their actions (that they might actually be doing the best they can for their own survival); this story shapes our collective imagination to consider that through the love of God, the impossible may be possible, that enemies might become friends – that, in seeking understanding, we might become stronger.

I want us to consider the story telling technique of *Judith*, of how it is being used in the Israelite imagination, of how it might be shaping their view of reality and their sense of hope and faithfulness.

In black preaching, another form of liberation theology, there is a preaching technique called a “roll call.” A roll call is a form of remembering, it is naming people in succession of one another – linking them together. It can go forward in time or backward in time. It functions to link the current person or situation with a past situation; it puts a current person in the line of others who have come before; someone who is working for justice and peace now is linked to those seeking liberation a generation back, and another, and another – until that history has been traced back to the Bible. Through this line of names, the preacher reminds their congregation of

how God continued to raise up a faithful person to further the cause of liberation and justice. And in black preaching the list of liberators discussed are generally other people of African descent – not only linking the present situation with the past, but also affirming the power and beauty of one’s own community – affirming that we do not have to look outside for liberation, but that justice and liberation comes from within. Let me give you a little taste – an example of a roll call from the Rev. Dr. Otis Moss III, in a sermon from March of this year:

****Black Lives Matter: start 34:49; end 37:16**
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ct2ee14tj-I>

This is a roll call, connecting a present time to the Biblical story. And we see, in his ending with President Obama, how important that event was and is in shaping the imagination of young African Americans in his congregation – it is not about political parties, but about shaping the imagination of what is possible for a young black man or woman sitting in those pews – the election of a black president, before Obama, was probably not in a collective imagination before this event.

We see here how Dr. Moss connects the present liberation movement of “Black Lives Matter” to the civil rights movement, to the abolition movement, to the Jesus movement, to the Exodus movement. In doing so he reminds those in the congregation that what is happening now is not new, but a continuation of this same story. It empowers the congregation to remember that faithful people have continued to emerge and follow the call of God, and the world was never the same. It reminds the congregation that God is with them, just as God was with Martin Luther King, and DuBouis, and Rosa Parks, and Tertullian, and Paul, and Jesus, and Deborah, and

Moses. And it grounds the present struggle for justice and liberation and peace in the ancient story of liberation, the Bible. A storytelling technique of liberation theology preaching.

This is, I am arguing, what the story of Judith is – a 2nd century BCE roll call of sorts. In telling a story about this liberator Judith that echoes of Deborah, Moses, Gideon, Jael, and Sampson – the storyteller is reminding them of their history. The book of *Judith*, remember, it too is a story of liberation. A story written under the Greek occupation – the Israelites speaking covertly in story about their desire for liberation; telling covert and metaphorical stories to one another about liberation, and in their own way, offering a roll call. Telling a story in this form connects the people to the liberation stories of their past. And if this seems too subtle for you, the author of the book of *Judith*, in chapter 5, recounts the story of salvation history of the Israelites, put in the mouth of the character Achior, a Canaanite mercenary. He retells the story with the high point of their past history, the ultimate moment of liberation in the Exodus event.

In this story of liberation, the storyteller puts this new heroine Judith, in the line of the liberators before. In reminding the people of the Exodus story, the people are reminded of the seminal moment of their history – the high point of their history. They are reminded of another time when they were living under occupation, the Egyptian occupation, and God heard their cry. God delivered them. In this story of Judith, the Israelites of the Greek occupation are being reminded that God has seen them through such a time before – that God rose up a Moses and Miriam before and saved them. *So, keep hope alive*, the story says. *God will raise up another liberator. Keep looking around you*, Judith says, *new faithful people of God are still at work. The new liberator may not be who you imagine*, the story says with a liberator who is a widow

that has been grieving for 3 years and 4 months. *Do not forget that I am with you*, the story says, *just as I have always been with you! My Spirit is still on the move*, the story says.

So, when we are telling our stories, let us not forget the roll call – let us not forget to tie our stories back to our seminal moment as Christians, the Jesus event. As we consider our own present situations and struggles: ISIS, mass world migration, drones dropping bombs from the sky, a divided and hurting country – we must always retrace acts of liberation and justice and peace back to Jesus – we must ground our speech, our actions, and our responses back to our high point, the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. In doing so, we remind ourselves that in each action we take and each word we speak: it must be done with love; in connecting our current difficulties back to Jesus we remember that each action must be done through non-violence; in connecting our stories to our seminal moment of Jesus we are reminded that each word and action must seek the liberation of the oppressed and the oppressor; in connecting our stories back to Jesus we remember that it was not hate or fear that transformed the world, but God’s great love; in grounding our pursuit of justice and peace in Jesus we remember that we must seek understanding of one whom we considered enemy.

How are we telling the story of our times: of ISIS, of migration, of homelessness, of technology, of busyness, of the presidential election? What words are we using? What actions are we taking? Are we connecting those to our ultimate hope in Jesus Christ? Are we tracing those stories back to our primary loyalty? Are we seeking understanding?

Next Sunday we will begin the journey of Advent, of the story of the most impossible event in human history, the story of God-with-us. The ultimate story of hope. The ultimate story of impossible becoming probable. May the God of love of hope continue to guide us in our telling and hearing, in the shaping of our imaginations that healing and hope might flow through us and into the world. Amen and amen.

Sending Blessing

And now as you go from this place, may the God of history go with you – helping you see that whatever your story is, it is part of God's story. May this knowledge empower us, that we may be a people formed and guided by the love story of liberation – that healing and hope might flow through us and into the world. Go in peace. Amen.