

The First Reading is from Judges 4:4-10:

⁴ At that time Deborah, a prophet, wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel. ⁵ She used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim; and the Israelites came up to her for judgment. ⁶ She sent and **summoned** Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali, and said to him, ***“The LORD, the God of Israel, commands you, ‘Go, take position at Mount Tabor, bringing ten thousand from the tribe of Naphtali and the tribe of Zebulun. ⁷ I will draw out Sisera, the general of Jabin’s army, to meet you by the Wadi Kishon with his chariots and his troops; and I will give him into your hand.”*** ⁸ Barak said to her, *“If you will go with me, I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go.”* ⁹ And she said, *“I will surely go with you; nevertheless, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the LORD will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman.”* Then Deborah got up and went with Barak to Kedesh. ¹⁰ Barak **summoned** Zebulun and Naphtali to Kedesh; and ten thousand warriors went up behind him; and Deborah went up with him.

The Second Reading is from Jeremiah 1:4-10:

⁴ ***Now the word of the LORD came to me saying,*** ⁵ *“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”* ⁶ Then I said, *“Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.”* ⁷ But the LORD said to me, ***“Do not say, ‘I am only a boy’; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you.*** ⁸ Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you,

says the LORD.”⁹ Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the LORD said to me, *“Now I have put my words in your mouth.”*¹⁰ *See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.”*

The Message is entitled *Summoned*

Do you have memories of being summoned as a child? Maybe by your parents or grandparents, a school teacher or principal, a pastor or a Sunday school teacher? Were you able to discern whether the summons was something delightful or not? I know every Sunday morning I summon the Young Disciples forward and it is with hope that my time with them will be a delight. What memories do you have of being summoned as a child?

As a young girl, I knew immediately whether or not I would respond without hesitation and delight or whether I would respond with reluctance and trepidation when my dad called. It not only had to do with the tone of the summons, but with the name I was called! If my dad called out, “Cheryl,” I bounded in his direction with delight, but if he called out, “Cheryl Ann,” I knew that whatever I had done that I should not have done had been discovered! When my sister and I were pushing the limits with our parents a summons of a drawn out, “Girls,” would signal we had better quit whatever it was that we were doing.

Of course, as we grow up summons come in other forms, too, like in the mail for jury service or to the boss’ office for a meeting, like the summons of an IRS audit or of a nurse calling you into the doctor’s office. We are called to respond to all sorts

of summons, with delight or otherwise, yet what are we to do with those summons we hear from God?

Now Deborah was the fourth of the judges who ruled over the Jewish people after the death of Joshua. She was the first female judge of Israel, yet her summons or call story is not recorded in scripture. We only know that prior to her call the Jewish people were doing evil in the sight of the Lord. They were under the oppressive and cruel rule of King Jabin of Canaan, whose army commander was Sisera. Now Jabin reigned in Hazor, where the Israelites cried out to God, for Sisera with his nine hundred chariots of iron (envision the most sophisticated tanks for this time period) had oppressed the Israelites cruelly for twenty years!

Commentator Rick Morley suggests that we stop and take in the enormity of the twenty years, for that is half the time of the forty-year wilderness journey. During this twenty-year period the Israelites cried out – as they had done in Egypt under Pharaoh’s oppressive hand and God heard their cries once again. God’s response to these cries was to summon Deborah to be judge.

Now when we entered the text this morning, we heard that Deborah was already at work. She was judging Israel, for the Israelites were streaming to her to hear her wise words. Although, we don’t know her call story, we do know that she paid attention and listened for God’s word. And doing so, she heard God say to her, “Summon Barak son of Abinoam.” When Barak arrived she delivered God’s word to him, “The Lord, the God of Israel, commands you. ‘Go, take position at Mount Tabor, bringing ten thousand from the tribe of Naphtali and the tribe of

Zebulun. I will draw out Sisera, the general of Jabin's army, to meet you by the Wadi Kishon with his chariots and his troops; and I will give him into your hand.'" Barak had been summoned by God through Deborah the judge.

And what about Jeremiah? His summons was directly from God. It was clear and precise. Scripture records it this way, "The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah saying, "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.'"

Now, I have to admit that my summons from God have never been so clear and precise. Even so, my natural response has often been "Who, me?" Or something like Barak and Jeremiah's responses, for I either whined or made excuses as to why God couldn't possibly mean me.

Barak rejected the weight of Deborah's words, obviously questioning as to whether or not they really came from the Lord. Why else would have Barak whined, saying, "I don't want to do this by myself, so if you don't go with me, I won't go!" Jeremiah made an excuse about his youth saying, "I, too young, I am just a boy!"

I remember my excuse to the first summons I received through Jerri Rodewald to consider this call. I said, "It's too far." Redlands is too far, for I imagined that my next pastoral call would be closer to my home of 32 years in Cerritos. My excuse to God's voice through Jerri, "it's too far," wasn't the first time I had an excuse. I remember clearly my very first excuse in relation to my summons to ordained ministry. It was when my brother-in-law said to me while I was visiting him and my sister on the campus of San Francisco Theological Seminary. My brother-in-

law and I were out for a walk one afternoon, given that my sister was under the weather and in the midst of our conversation he turned and said to me with deep conviction, “You belong in seminary, not me.” I was quick and sure with my response, “Not me. God needs people in industry.”

Jeremiah thought he was too young. Barak thought I not up to the task – remember the 900 chariots of iron against the ill-equipped tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun? Sarah was too old. Moses was slow of speech and not eloquent. And I said it was too far. Deborah... well, we just don’t know if she had an objection to her summons to become a judge, because it is not recorded in scripture!

Now the fact that Deborah was a woman is something to note this morning, but it isn’t the point of why I chose her story. The point of using Deborah’s story is that God has summoned her to be God’s response. Just like Moses in Egypt, Deborah was God’s response to the people’s cries in Hazor. Deborah was also the conduit of the summons to Barak.

All of the excuses recorded in scripture as well as all of our excuses along the way miss the point, for our excuses place the focus on us. Our excuses focus on the one being summoned instead of on God. God is the focus of calls, because God is the one who will do wondrous things through the called.

Maybe, that is why when Deborah said to Barak, “I will surely go with you,” her response wasn’t finished. She continued saying, “Nevertheless, the road on which you are going with not lead to your glory.”

I imagine Barak thinking, “What? Hey, I am doing what you want God, shouldn’t I get some of the glory?” Yet, we are not

privileged to hear Barak's thoughts. But don't you think if he were to lead the men of his charge to victory, he expects to be recognized? Especially, given the odds of the ill-equipped troops from Naphtali and Zebulun against Sisera's well-trained soldiers with 900 iron chariots.

Yet, being summoned by God for a particular task or vocation or opportunity isn't about our glory though. It is about being a willing vessel of God's wondrous works. Deborah and Barak sang a song in victory and these words were sung, "When the people offer themselves willingly, bless the Lord... When [the commanders] offered themselves willingly among the people. Bless the Lord." When we offer ourselves willingly for God's purposes something often happens beyond our expectations, for God is able to do wondrous things through us. "Bless the Lord," says Deborah and Barak concerning their victory. Bless the Lord, for all glory belongs to God, for God made the Israelite victory possible.

Yet, we all know that it is not easy to be a willing vessel for God, because God's summons often interrupts what we have planned. And God doesn't always summon who we might expect, hence our "Why me's!"

Think about God's track record: God summons the elderly, like Abraham and Sarah, Zechariah and Elizabeth. God summons the morally compromised like David and Saul. God summons the young, like Mary and Jeremiah. God summons that society often over looks, like Zacchaeus and the lowly shepherds. God summons without gender bias, like Deborah and Mary Magdalene. Given scriptures record, it is easy to understand why excuses abounded then and now. I imagine both Gayle and

Margaret had their excuses or at least some anxiety about being summoned to their respective opportunities this month.

Yet, God summons is persistent. Not just for pastors, Triennium delegates or PW USA mission participants, but for all of us. God summons, because God delights in partnering with us to do wondrous things. I firmly believe that God summons all of us in various ways – through others, through inner leadings, through clear and precise words. Then God waits patiently for us to willingly offer ourselves for the kingdom work at hand, even though at times the work is hard.

The summons Jeremiah received was not easy. Who wants to be the bearer of bad news – to pluck up and pull down, to destroy and overthrow? I can hear Jeremiah suggesting to God, “Can I just focus on the building and planting part?” Yet, when we willingly offer ourselves to God, we never really know the outcome.

I didn’t know that willingly responding to God’s summons to enter seminary back in 1992, would eventually move Paul and me to Redlands! Gayle and Margaret really don’t know the full impact of their “yes,” they only know at this point that they have willingly offered themselves for God’s purposes. What about you? Are you open to willingly offering yourself for God’s purposes? And if so, do you believe that God can do wondrous things through you?

I find that we all too easily limit God by taking ourselves out of the equation. We doubt that we can accomplish much of anything, and so we don’t willingly offer ourselves to God. We don’t spend time listening for God’s leading or if we actually hear a summons we discredit it, as God can’t possibly use us.

When we are unwilling, the focus is often on us. We make excuses and in turn make God very small and manageable.

When we are willing, but the focus is still on us, we tend to want the glory, because God has summoned us - the most qualified, of course!

When we unconditionally offer ourselves to God, I hear the words of Isaiah who said, "Here I am, send me." I hear Mary saying to the angel, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." I hear the humility of spirit that says, "God can use even me! Bless the Lord!"

In hearing God's words this morning, the question for all of us is this: Are we willing to unconditionally offer ourselves to God, not just once but again and again and again? I pray so, because God can do wondrous things even through us! Amen.