As we journey with the children of the Exodus, generations after gaining their freedom at the hands of the Lord, we have entered a new era. Joshua, protege of Moses, has gone the way of the ancestors. In the wake of Joshua's death, the Israelites manage to follow the Lord but only while the contemporaries of Joshua are alive. Once they have also been gathered to their people, a power vacuum emerges. There is no one left to lead them. The time of troubles begins.

For the very next generation does not know who the Lord is or what the Lord has done for them. And so they do whatever they please. They stray, very far, very fast, and commit evil in the sight of the Lord. They do not live into the covenant established so many moons ago, nor the commands given so many moons ago, which had gathered and guided their forebears so well for so long. They decide, instead, very deliberately, to bow down before other gods.

They abandon the Lord.

The Lord is not happy. So the Lord allows the enemies of God's people to prevail against them. Much distress ensues. Yet the Lord sees and the Lord considers and the Lord decides to rescue them once more. The Lord raises up a new type of leader. A fierce type of leader. The time of the judges commences.

One might think the people would notice and turn around and live differently. But even the judges have a hard time reaching this wayward group. And so the Lord, figuratively, emits a deep sigh, and allows their time of testing to continue. A cycle of suffering, beseeching, hearing, delivering, forgetting, abandoning, suffering, begins in earnest. Seemingly without end. For we are a stubborn people.

Until, a new day. A new leader. When, after hundreds of years of this nonsense, God raises up another. Someone different, someone unexpected, someone with great gifts. A woman. Deborah.

Talents are a funny thing, if you think about it. Sometimes readily apparent from birth; sometimes a lifelong, under the radar cultivation; sometimes willingly developed; sometimes only welcomed and adopted when needed.

In our second reading, the talents a wealthy man gives to his workers are unexpected and unexplained and unprecedented. They are also money in the form of a balance, weights, representing coins, something of great worth established by someone else, somewhere along the way. (https://biblehub.com/greek/5007.htm)

But talents may also be seen another way. What lies beneath or behind them. What they reveal in each person, who, without any guidance, have to figure out what to do with such a treasure, bestowed by a master to whom they belong, in the form of a gift they didn't ask for and may not necessarily want.

Something of value which may be a burden. Which will certainly be an inconvenience. Which will require something of them. Which will always upend their plans in a mighty, mighty way.

What do we do with these? they likely wondered. We didn't ask for them! No one prepared us for this! What does the Master expect? And how, exactly, am I supposed to get my other work done now that I have this added responsibility? What will the Master do when he returns?

I'd better invest them, boldly! thinks one. That way I can participate in the Master's work!

I'd better increase them just a little more! thinks another. That way the Master will know I recognized their value and attempted to make something of his riches!

I'd better hide them so I don't squander them or have them stolen from me! thinks the third. That way I can return exactly what I was given! Won't the Master be pleased I didn't lose them!

Three different ways of receiving and responding to the call of God. A summons by our Creator who has designed us, God's children, to embrace and expand the life we have been given and entrusted with. A life full of gifts and talents, time and treasure, limited and unlimited, mundane and miraculous.

We have a choice. But there are repercussions to our decision. We begin with some questions. What do we do with the God-given talents granted to us? Do we fear them? Reject them? Bury them? Look at them, somewhat askance, and say, let someone else answer the call! Let that person identify and expand their talents! Let another take a chance to fulfill this crazy claim upon our lives!

Or do we open our hands, receive them, consider them, accept them, live into them, risk them? In order to increase them? A little? A lot? Marveling, for anyone around us to hear, see what God has given to me. Look at what God has asked of me. May I be able and willing to be faithful as I seek to develop them in ways only God could increase, and return them brighter and bolder and greater than I received them.

And may I never limit, or criticize, or begrudge, any other's giftedness or call. For theirs is God-given, too.

Theirs is God-given, too. And only God knows what God gives and asks and expects of us all, and why, and when. For God calls every one of us to a holy task. And God will equip and send every last one of us into the world to accomplish God's will for all of God's creation. No matter how remarkable it is. No matter how underestimated we are. For God specializes in surprise. And God's will will be done, no matter what.

Because it is God's will, not ours. How can we be sure?

There once was a woman named Deborah. As the wondrous Elie Wiesel, writer, professor, Holocaust survivor, described her, Deborah was a political leader, a military adviser, a prophet, a poet, a wife, a judge. A sage who would sit under a tree, waiting for any who sought her verdict on whatever case they presented. Until the day she was summoned by God to speak for the Lord to secure a military victory when God's people suffered so under the Canaanite king, ushering in decades of peace. (https://www.92ny.org/archives/elie-wiesel-in-the-bible-a-judge-named-deborah)

This is all we know about her.

Except for what is written between the lines. And in the *Midrash*, Jewish rabbinic stories based upon the Hebrew scriptures.

We know from our reading that Deborah is married to Lappidoth, which, Elie Wiesel notes, could also mean she is from Lapidot. Meaning torch, fire, flame. Knowing this, Wiesel asks, "Are we to imagine Deborah, a woman with a burning inner life? A strong character, an irresistible passion? Or someone who quietly, but with resolve, knows how to light a fire in man and lead them to action?" (Ibid.)

Perhaps. God only knows. And so God, only, calls. And equips. And sends. There is no arguing, not when God wills what God wills, when God wills it. There is only saying yes. Just like Deborah. The unlikely heroine, sitting under a tree, until the moment the call of God arrives. There is no hesitation. There is no arguing. There is no bargaining. There is only getting up and going.

To a battlefield. In a war. Which is fearsome.

Deborah finds Barak, the military general, so she may live into her call and share the word of the Lord. And, after hearing it, when Barak implores, "If you will go with me, I will go, but if you will not go with me, I will not go," (Judges 4.8) well, Deborah does that, too. She goes so Barak will go. And do.

Saving the people of God from certain demise, and uniting them in the process. All because the Lord, as the *Midrash* tells it, knows Deborah, endows Deborah, sends Deborah. She who said to her husband, "Let us go together to the holy temple in Jerusalem. I shall make candles with thick wicks to bring light to good and pious people in darkness."

She to whom God said, "Since you sincerely brought light in this world, I shall increase your light, which will have the intensity of that of all the tribes of Israel." She of whom the Lord speaks to the Israelites by way of an angel, reassuring them that "I will send a woman unto them, and she will shine for them, as a light for 40 years." (Ibid.)

Deborah will shine for them, just as the Lord will shine through us. Using whatever gifts and talents and time and treasure and everything else God throws at us to do as God asks of us to make a difference in this world God crafted. No matter who we are, where

we are from, what we think we can do, what we are sure we cannot do. No matter what. For God alone.

Because God is love. And we are God's children. And we are meant to be fearless. And we have been designed to be faithful. And we have been invited to shine. As Jesus, the Light of the World, has shown us.

All we are asked to do is say yes. And then go and do. Let us be bold, and let us respond. For we are obedient because God is the judge.

Thanks be to God. Always and forever. Amen and Amen.