

Sit on it: Judges 4:1-7

Deborah, a wise woman who sat.

by [Talitha Arnold](#) in the [October 23, 2002](#) issue

Deborah: Judge. Prophetess. Wife or “spirited woman,” depending on how you translate the Hebrew. Powerful woman who advised generals and led troops into battle. Creative woman who composed songs of victory. Wise woman who “sat.”

As a seminarian, I was impressed by Deborah’s many roles and responsibilities. She was a leader of men when women could only be wives, sisters and mothers. A judge, when a woman’s testimony never counted as much as a man’s. On the front line, when a woman’s place was in the home.

I am still impressed by all that. But 20-plus years later, as a minister with a considerable number of roles myself, I’m equally impressed with the phrase: “She used to sit.” I think it’s the most radical thing she did, especially as a leader. We leaders organize, plan, execute, strategize. We *lead*. We don’t sit.

My mother used to sit. As a widowed parent to four children, a science teacher and a volunteer for church and 4-H, she had little time to sit. Yet every morning before we got up, she’d sit in her chair in the living room, a cup of coffee in one hand, the Bible in the other. If the afternoon permitted it, she did the same, although with a cup of tea or a can of beer (if the day had been really long), and with the newspaper instead of the Bible. We kids knew the time was sacred and did not disturb her with “What’s for dinner?”

I think we knew that sitting made all the other activity possible. It didn’t solve all our problems as a family, of which there were many, or guarantee order out of chaos. But sitting offered my mother a chance to catch her breath, to remember life was more than the task at hand, and to tap into some sense of peace in the midst of the maelstrom.

I suspect that was true for Deborah as well. Leaders need wisdom and courage and can’t find those qualities if they’re always out front leading the charge. Sometimes

they need just to sit.

Sitting is usually the last thing I want to do, or that I think others expect me to do. As the minister of a growing church, I've spent the last 15 years as a strategic planner, organizer, cajoler, counselor, preacher, even construction supervisor. Those roles grow as the church grows.

Although I value those roles and take my responsibilities seriously, I increasingly yearn to sit in silence. There are even times when I wonder if I have any word to offer, which is almost blasphemous for a United Church of Christ minister. Sitting in silence is for Quakers, not UCC pastors. But then I remember Deborah under her palm tree and my mother with her morning coffee. And I remember Joan Forsberg.

Joan, a UCC minister, was dean of students at Yale Divinity School during the '70s and '80s, a time when women were finding their voices and leadership in the church in new ways. As a mentor and role model for women students, Joan was a top candidate to speak at the first women's reunion at YDS. As Women's Center coordinator, it was my job to talk her into it.

We met over supper at a neighborhood café. After I affirmed the importance of her preaching, however, Joan told me that she couldn't accept the invitation. "You can't preach if you don't have something to say," she said. "You have to have some word to offer. Right now, I don't have one."

"I feel silenced," she explained. "Maybe it's simple weariness. Maybe it's feeling overwhelmed by all the demands. There have been too many changes--in my life, this world, everywhere. The old answers don't fit any longer, and I don't have the words for new ones. It almost feels like the words have been taken away. I need to sit in the silence. I'm sorry."

We sat, I stirring my coffee, she dipping her tea bag. Part of me couldn't believe what I had heard. How could this strong, competent role model feel silenced? Another part of me knew she was telling the truth, not just for herself but the rest of us. "Maybe you could talk about that," I ventured. "About not having the answers or even a good word, not acting or preaching or leading, but just sitting."

"Every woman of your generation would know what you were talking about," I added, "and most of the men too. And those of us still in school need to hear that word, too, because sooner or later, we'll find ourselves sitting in that silence."

Joan did decide to preach at the reunion. She talked about being silenced by one's life and having to sit without words or answers. She urged us not to fight the silence nor to castigate ourselves for it, but to let it teach us what it would. Except for sighs and sniffles, there wasn't a sound in the chapel after she finished.

I don't know how old Deborah was when she was a judge in Israel, but I'm now the age my mother was when I was a teenager and the age Joan was when we shared dinner that night. The longer I stay in ministry, the more grateful I am for the example of powerfully wise women who lead, counsel, advise, preach—and sometimes just sit in silence.