

Blessed are Mary, Judith, and Yael

By [Lauren F. Winner](#)

December 17, 2015

To receive these posts by e-mail each Monday, [sign up](#).

For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page, which includes Winner's current *Living by the Word* column as well as past magazine and online-only content. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.

This story is full of echoes—most famously, Mary's song echoes Hannah's. But there is another echo: Elizabeth's praise of Mary, which gets taken up into the Hail Mary, is an echo of Deborah's song in Judges 5.

Deborah recalls the heroic acts of Yael. Sisera, a general hellbent on destroying Israel, comes to Yael, and she receives him with apparent graciousness: "He asked water and she gave him milk, she brought him curds in a lordly bowl." Indeed, Yael shows Sisera not just hospitality but a kind of maternal care, as signified by the milk.

And then she kills him, driving a tent peg through his head. "He sank, he fell," says Deborah, "he lay still at her feet; at her feet he sank, he fell; where he sank, there he fell dead." For this, Yael is proclaimed "most blessed of women."

By echoing Deborah's song, Elizabeth in a sense invites Yael into the room with her and Mary. And Yael is not the only woman thus invited. In Judith 13, Judith is praised in similar language for killing Holofernes: "O daughter, you are blessed by the Most High God above all other women on earth; and blessed be the Lord God, who created the heavens and the earth, who has guided you to cut off the head of the leader of our enemies."

It is commonplace to note the presence of Old Testament foremothers in the opening of Matthew--four interesting women, outsiders, stitched into the genealogy of Jesus. These four women, I have often heard in sermons, are laced through this genealogy exactly to help us see that Jesus is the one who laces outsiders into the

family of God.

What do Yael and Judith, unnamed but summoned by Elizabeth's praise, help us see about Mary? What are we shown about Mary once we notice that Luke has placed Yael and Judith in the room with her?

In an insightful essay called "Pugnacious Precursors and the Bearer of Peace," New Testament scholar Brittany Wilson suggests that what we see is a correction, a contrast. Yael and Judith protected Israel through killing, but Mary will protect Israel through the peaceable action of bringing forth life. "Instead of being portrayed as a woman warrior," writes Wilson, "Mary is presented as a woman disciple, a peaceful hearer and doer of God's word."

But in addition to showing us the differences between Mary and her violent foremothers, maybe Luke is also prompting us to consider similarities. To ask, *How is Mary a warrior?*

Patristic readings of the beginning of Luke suggest that Mary does indeed kill—in the *fiat mihi*, what she kills is her own will. And a long history of visual interpretation shows Mary killing the serpent. In many renderings of Our Lady of Guadalupe, the pregnant Mary is stepping on the serpent, killing it—specifically crushing its head, as Yael crushed Sisera's head with a tent peg.

Connecting Mary with a tradition of heroic, violent women drains some of the sororal sentimentality out of the Elizabeth-Mary exchange. Mary is, I think, more complex than we sometimes allow her to be. She is not just at the manger; she is also at the cross. And she is not just a peaceful disciple but also a warrior for the sake of Israel.