

**“Akeelah and the Bee”**  
Judges 4: 4-10; Luke 2: 36-38  
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## **I. Introduction**

The fourth chapter of the book of Judges that Rob just read for us is an unusual and in many ways remarkable story about the Judge Deborah. While there are certainly no commandments in Israel at that time of forbidding a woman from taking leadership, during this period Deborah is the only one that we know about. And it was clearly unusual and uncomfortable enough for the writers of scripture that this is the only place that Deborah is mentioned. Interestingly, Barak, who she empowers to be the general in this great battle, is mentioned in two different lists in the Bible of great Hebrew heroes. He's mentioned in I Samuel, he's mentioned in the book of Hebrews as this paragon of heroism, and Deborah interestingly is forgotten from the story.

We're in the midst of a sermon series looking at themes of redemption as they run through the movies. We often do this in the summer as a way of sort of doing something a little bit lighter and more invitational and we kick this off looking at some of the redemption themes in the movie *Frozen* and followed that up last Sunday looking at *Groundhog Day*. And today we're going to take a look at a wonderful little film called *Akeelah and the Bee*, about an 11-year-old girl who like Deborah finds her way outside of the conventional expectations of her.

## **II. Akeelah**

Akeelah Anderson is an 11-year-old African American girl who attends Crenshaw Middle High School in south Los Angeles. And it's a tough neighborhood and she lost her father sometime previous to the movie to gun violence there. She's the youngest of four children with a mom that is quite harried and spread too thin to provide her with the support that she needs, in part because two of her older siblings are struggling so much with the lures of the neighborhood. Her oldest brother has made it out of the neighborhood by enrolling in the Air Force and is a very positive influence on her although sort of intermittent.

But Akeelah is an incredibly bright girl who's got a particular gift around spelling. But because she's bright in an academically under-performing school, she ends up finding ways of hiding her intellectual giftedness because it's been something that has ostracized her from her friends in the school and has made her the object of taunting and bullying.

But her teacher notices that she never, ever misses a word on a spelling test and mentions this to the principal who's eager for some sort of academic success that he can show, and so he pressures Akeelah to participate in the school's spelling bee.

So, very grudgingly she agrees to do this and she wins the bee easily, and in doing so comes to the attention of a colleague of the principal's, Joshua Larabee, who is both an educator and has some expertise in spelling bees and having won one himself, and he volunteers to coach Akeelah as she works towards the Scripps National Spelling Bee. And the movie is the story of their journey to get her to this place.

### III. Actualization

*Akeelah and the Bee* as a movie is a reminder that redemption for us often has very much to do with our ability to answer the call that God has laid on our lives and to live into the giftedness that God has given to each of us, fulfilling who it is that God intends each of us to be.

Wonderful Presbyterian pastor and author, Frederick Buechner writes in a phrase that every seminary student knows that call, God's call for us is -- this is Buechner's words -- "the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." Where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet. That's the place where our lives find meaning. That's the place where we encounter and experience God's redemptive power in our lives. And the thing that Akeelah notes is that that deep gladness may involve gifts that are not necessarily honored and celebrated by the people around us. They may not be the gifts that our parents value, as in Akeelah's experience, or even the gifts that our teachers value or the gifts even the church values so that part of the process of redemption for each of us is figuring out where those places of deep gladness for us are in spite of the feedback that we may be getting from the people around us.

Now, I want to take just a moment and note that for those of us in a Metropolitan sort of congregation, it would be very easy to see this as a story of an under-performing, predominantly African American school and a student who claims that academic giftedness in spite of that. But I want to encourage us to look at it a little bit more broadly because what this is about is expectations and all of us have expectations that can be limiting. In a place like this, like Metropolitan, the expectations are almost extraordinarily very high but they're also fairly narrow.

When Janet Craswell was preaching about *Frozen* a couple of weeks ago, she mentioned to me that the comment that she got most feedback on was the idea that success did not necessarily mean academic achievement. Well, a statement like that can get you thrown out of this church in a heartbeat, right? Because we're all about academic achievement. We're all about the letters after our name and making sure we get into the best schools and performing in that very specific way.

Now, that's great and in this movie, that's exactly how Akeelah breaks out of her neighborhood. But I want to suggest for us that there may be an opportunity for us to reflect on the fact that sometimes people's giftedness is not in that particular area, that there are all kinds of giftedness that have to do with artistic expression, that have to do with craftsmanship, would have to do with all kinds of other ways that God may gift us

and that maybe our invitation here is to broaden a little bit how we invite people to embrace that.

Akeelah excels in this one very narrow area that is all of our comfort zone, but the reality is if we're serious about this idea of call, that it is where our deep gladness meets the world's deep need, hunger, that can involve a broad range of places to engage and to thrive, and that part of our role then as a community, as parents, as mentors, is to help young people not embrace what we think success necessarily looks like but where God may be calling each of them.

Deborah is a great example of that because Deborah was a profoundly unusual character for her world. She lived in an age of Israel's history where there was no national state, the composition of the community of Israelites was very tribal, but that periodically when there was a military crisis, God would call a judge to lead the unified people against whoever their opponent was. So, Deborah is called to lead the community but there are several things that make her unique. One of course is that she's a woman and she's the only woman in this entire book that fills that role of judge. And she leads the people into battle which was completely unknown in that community. She's also the only judge in the book of Judges who actually judges.

I mean, when we think of judging, we think of moderating between people in their disputes, right, or helping guide people in the course of their daily lives. In the book of Judges, almost all of the other judges are simply military leaders. They get called in the moment of military crisis to form and lead an army against the Philistines or the Canaanites or whoever the opponent de jour was and then they go. But Deborah actually judges. And the book tells us that she sits under the palm that's called the Palm of Deborah and people would bring their problems to her. So, in addition to being a military leader, she's actually providing guidance and counsel to the forming Jewish community.

She's also the only judge in this book that's referred to as a prophet, which means that she is speaking for God and you see that also in the story when she's talking to Barak and tells him that they're going to defeat the opposing army but he's not going to be the one to do it, it's actually going to be a woman that defeats the opposing army, and she's referring to this character at the end of the story which we didn't hear whose name is Jael who actually kills the opposing general, Sisera, as he's fleeing the battle.

So, she fills all of these really interesting and profoundly unexpected roles for a woman in her day and age. And we don't have any of the background on this story, but if you let your imaginations play with it a little bit what would it have been like for that community to experience one of their women starting to talk about providing leadership for the whole community -- military leadership, counseling, guidance -- all of these traditionally male roles and somehow God's call on her life was so powerful and the openness of the community to hear a different sort of call was so powerful that it allows her to move into this role.

The writer and director of *Akeelah and the Bee*, Doug Atchison, says that the purpose of the film is to explore what causes children to doubt their own abilities. And the answer of course is all the people around those children who bring their own prescriptions of what success looks like or what possibilities there might be, and in doing so limit where God's call can be heard. Atchison said, "This is not a story about learning how to spell but about a kid who learns what she's good at, becomes proud of that and doesn't want to hide it anymore. It's about overcoming the fear of being great before you can become great." So, what would it be like for us to help our children learn what they're good at even if it may not be the things that we're good at or even necessarily the things that we value.

And dear friends, this is also not simply a message for children, because if we're serious again about this definition that call is where our deep gladness meets the world's hunger. Those pieces are going to evolve over the course of a life, right? Our giftedness, our areas of giftedness are going to evolve. The areas of the world's great need are going to evolve. And so, part of our invitation as we grow older is continuing to be sensitive and open to where the Holy Spirit may be leading us sometimes in some very unexpected again ways.

We've got this wonderful story of the Prophetess Anna at the beginning of the Gospel of Luke and we don't know much about Anna, we only have these three verses about her at all, but we know that she was married, she started off her life living a very conventional life as the wife to her husband, but it was a fairly short marriage because her husband dies apparently quite young after seven years of marriage. But instead of returning to her parent's home which would have been fairly traditional or finding a new husband to marry, Anna perceives a call to being a prophet herself and she attaches herself to the temple and spends the rest of her very long life worshiping and prophesying in the temple until her calling culminates in this wonderful moment when God gives her the blessing of seeing the Christ arrive in the child Jesus.

So, dear friends, all of us are being continually called to identify and discern where those areas of giftedness are and where those meet the world's great hunger.

#### **IV. It takes a village**

Now, Akeelah of course doesn't do this all by herself. She has her gifts identified by her principal and nurtured by Dr. Larabee, and she has the courage to answer that invitation and start again in a gradual way to claim where those gifts are. At the beginning of the film, she's very dismissive and discouraged about the community in which she lives. And then she realizes that Dr. Larabee also lives in that community and starts broadening her own perspective about what her community is about.

And then, in a wonderful moment in the movie when Dr. Larabee's own shadows and history catch up with him and he can't help Akeelah anymore, she finds

ways of engaging her community by helping them help her and she invites all of the people that are part of her life to start helping her train for this national event. And there's all these wonderful scenes where people who have never even heard of a spelling bee are quizzing her on all of these arcane and obtuse words to help prepare her for this event that all of a sudden their entire community has started to claim, so that she finds herself nurtured by this broad group of people and in that process helping them as a community transform. So, again, all of these folks that were limiting her options and ridiculing her for her gifts start to participate in this process of the national spelling bee and everybody starts to feel some ownership of this, and the whole dynamic of the neighborhood starts to change.

And of course, by the end of the film, Dr. Larabee also starts to claim who he is in a different way because of his interaction and tutoring of Akeelah so that the one who was mentor becomes the mentee in some respects and reclaims his own areas of giftedness as a teacher.

Likewise, Deborah's story of course is about one woman's claiming of her gifts, redeeming the entire community in which she lives as she saves Israel from a great military threat. But then, as you look at the story, even these handful of verses that we have, you see her nurturing and growing the people around her, so that when she calls Barak, a guy who clearly has no military experience, to assemble and lead this army, his initial reaction is, "I can't do this unless you come with me." And she says, "Okay. I'll come with you." And she starts to help guide him into his leadership role. Likewise, the woman, Jael, who kills the general, Sisera, as he flees the battlefield, is empowered by seeing a woman who is taking charge of who she is and where she is and starts to figure out, "Maybe I can contribute as well."

## **V. Conclusion**

*Akeelah and the Bee* is not a motion picture classic. It's a good story. It's well acted and engaging and fun to watch but it's quite honestly a little clichéd and predictable as well. But it's a wonderful reminder that even in a place like this where expectations can be so high, that those expectations can still be a little bit prescribed and that God's vision for us as individuals and as a community is broader than we can possibly dream of. God has placed in each of our hearts areas of deep gladness that are perfectly tailored to meet the deep hungers of the world around us. Where are those for you right now today and how can we engage in them together to change the world in which we find ourselves?

Amen.