

**Davidson College Presbyterian Church**  
**Davidson, North Carolina**  
**Scott Kenefake, Interim Pastor**  
**“Women to the Rescue”**  
**Judges 4:1-7**  
**November 19, 2017**

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Just before the Jewish High Holy Days this fall, Judge Rachel Freier was rushing around her kitchen, as she perpetually is. She had just cooked a salmon dish for Sabbath dinner. She was talking to her daughter in Israel on her headset. She was at a countertop, cutting apples and wrapping tuna salad sandwiches to take to work, because at night court in Brooklyn, where she presides, there’s little to eat that’s kosher.

Stepping outside her townhouse in Borough Park, Brooklyn, she climbed into her purple and white minivan emblazoned with the emblems of the female volunteer emergency medical service she founded in her ultra-Orthodox Jewish community. A trained paramedic, she keeps her medical bags in her vehicle, just in case.

“My car is like my second home,” she said.

This is Ruchie Freier, as friends call her, a 52-year-old Hasidic Jewish grandmother who has blazed a trail in her insular religious community with so much determination that the male authorities have simply had to make room. Eleven years ago, she became one of the first Hasidic female lawyers in Brooklyn, and last November, she was elected as a judge to civil court, making her almost certainly the first female Hasidic elected official in the country. She has done so not by breaking the strict religious rules that govern ultra-Orthodox women’s lives, but by obeying them so scrupulously that there are limited grounds for objection.

Most Hasidic women do not pursue high-profile success in the outside world. They are taught their most sacred role is to maintain the religious sanctity of their home and raise their children. “What a woman does in order to enhance her glory is not put herself out as an example to other people in the public domain, but rather in private, in the home,” said Samuel Heilman, a professor of sociology at City University of New York and an expert on the Orthodox and Hasidic communities.

Women are generally permitted to work outside the home to support their families, so long as they comport with religious rules. And Judge Freier felt she could do all that was expected of her as a Hasidic woman — and be a judge, a paramedic and a voice for change, too.

“Everyone was waiting to see, ‘What is she going to do?’ Judge Freier said of the wary attitude toward her after she became a judge. “And I’m the same. I dress the same, I still cook and I still bake and I do whatever I always did. Whatever we consider important traditional Hasidic values, I didn’t let go. So I guess it was an eye-opener for everyone.”

“She is a good barometer of how this community is going through a *transition*,” Mr. Heilman, the sociologist, said. “It might seem glacially slow from the perspective of the outside world, but clearly she is a sign of the growing power of women, of the impact of democracy and an open society.”

There are precedents for what Judge Freier has accomplished, but not many. In Israel, a small group of ultra-Orthodox women have formed a political party to run for office, despite opposition from rabbis who still disapprove of women entering public life. In 2013, a Hasidic woman in Montreal ran for a local City Council seat and won. And in the Bible, there is a female judge in the Book of Judges: Devora, or Deborah, a prophetess who calls the Israelites to battle. But there has not been a female ultra-Orthodox judge for centuries, certainly not within the Hasidic movement, which was founded in 18th-century Eastern Europe.

Judge Freier recalled that her rebbetzin told her, “If God gave us Devora, the judge, if we have that in our history, that means that Ruchie Freier should be a judge. That’s it!”<sup>1</sup>

I share this with you because it ties in with our more than 3,000-year-old scripture reading for today—the story of Deborah—a time of *transition* between the Exodus and entry of the Jewish people into the Promised land (the time of Moses and Joshua) and the time of the Israelite Kings (Saul, David, Solomon, etc.). It was an unsettled, fluid time in which the Israelite tribes were organized in a loose confederation under the leadership of their God, Yahweh, trying to maintain a foothold in the land of Canaan while neighboring/competing groups were trying to push them out. It was a time in which religious and political traditions were in their infancy and were as yet mostly unformed.

And into the midst of this chaotic time stepped Deborah—a woman with natural leadership ability who faced a lot of the same kind religious and cultural issues as Judge Freier.

Let’s take a brief look at the text and its place within the book of Judges.

There are several female characters in the book of Judges, at least twenty-two individuals or groups of women. They include Deborah, Jael, Gideon’s concubine, Gilead’s wife, Samson’s mother, Samson’s wife, Delilah, Micah’s mother, and the young women of Shiloh.

To be sure, some of these are minor characters; however, no less than ten have speaking parts. And, of course, Deborah, is one of the judges.

Now, the major place occupied by women in the book of Judges may be surprising to you, given the patriarchal orientation of ancient Israelite society. But it may not be as surprising as it first seems.

For example, the major role played by women in the book of Judges likely reflects the origin of the stories in *pre-monarchic Israel*, an era significantly more egalitarian than *monarchic Israel* would later become.<sup>2</sup>

So, who was this Deborah?

We are told that she “was judging Israel” and that “the Israelites came to her for judgment (or justice).” In other words, Deborah participates in bringing what God intends—that is, deliverance from oppression, or in a word, justice.

But she is also a “prophetess” and the prophetic role aims at justice, as well. In fact, Deborah’s name contains the same consonants as the Hebrew root for “speak” and “word.” So, it’s at least possible that Deborah’s name suggests the prophetic role of speaking God’s word.

So, let’s see how all of this fits within the pattern of the story (a pattern that is repeated throughout the book of Judges):

A judge dies, and the people do “evil” (they break covenant with God, 4:1), they are “sold” to an enemy (oppressed by a foreign power, 4:2), and they cry out to God for help (4:3).

And this pattern has theological significance: it affirms that God hears the cries of those who have “missed the mark” and that God ultimately pursues justice by grace.

<sup>1</sup> Sharon Otterman, “Judge Ruchie, the Hasidic Superwoman of Night Court,” New York Times, November 17, 2017

<sup>2</sup> J. Clinton McCann, *Judges*, Interpretation, John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2002, pp. 21, 22

So, each new deliverance throughout the book of Judges is, in effect, a new exodus—oppression is precisely what the Israelites experienced in Egypt, where they cried to God for help. Sisera’s chariots recalls Pharaoh’s chariots—and the description of deliverance, especially in the poem in chapter five, recalls the exodus account.

And Deborah accomplishes this deliverance from oppression of the Israelite people from the hands of the Canaanite King without the help of a man—and it was a radical and unusual act for the time.

She alone delivered the orders (spoke the word) and “went with” (and stood with) those who went forth to battle.<sup>3</sup>

Now, I’m sharing this with you because this church—Davidson College Presbyterian Church—is also in a time of *transition* and I have been hired to be your *Transitional—or Interim—Pastor*.

I’m not a Judge—like Judge Freier or Deborah—but I do have a law degree.

I’m not a woman—like Judge Freier or Deborah or Lib, your previous Senior Pastor, although like a lot of Ministers, I do frequently wear a robe that some think looks a lot like a dress!

What I am is a Midwestern, middle-aged, over-educated, white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant—who happens to be Presbyterian and I’m very happy to be Presbyterian.

Let me tell you a little bit more about myself and my family and my ministry over the past 30 years and then I’ll close with some brief thoughts about why Interim—or Transitional Ministry --is so important.

To start, I have an unusual and rare last name. It is pronounced, just like it is spelled: Kenefake

It’s an old Anglo-Saxon place name in the south of Wales, just across the Irish Sea from Cornwall. It’s a real town right on the coast, but rising sea levels are swallowing the Castle that dates back to the Norman Conquest in the 11<sup>th</sup> century.

There are about 300 people in the world with variant spellings of my surname and we are all related. Some of us live in the U.K. (England, Wales, and Scotland), others in Ireland, and the rest in North America and Australia.

I ran a marathon about ten years ago, but now I’m pretty much a couch potato and I’m perfectly OK with that. I’m also a sports fan and especially like tennis.

My wife, Gail, and I have been married for 33 years and she is a graduate of the University of Virginia, although she grew up in Pakistan in the 60’s and 70’s in a State Department family. She has worked in various administrative positions at Colleges and Universities for the past (almost) 20 years. Currently, she is a Software Trainer for Evisions—a company that provides software services to Colleges and Universities. She works from home about half the time and travels the other half—sometimes to exotic (but mostly to not very exotic) places. She does go overseas on occasion.

We both come from families of four children; I’m the second oldest and Gail is the youngest.

We have two children: Mary Elizabeth is 26 and is a 2013 graduate of Wellesley College. She works for an Investment, Research, and Management firm called *Morningstar* where she does Corporate Communications. Our son, William turns 24 today and is a 2016 graduate of Bowdoin College and is a 2<sup>nd</sup> year Law Student at Brooklyn Law School.

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 49, 50, 51, 52

We are blessed that both sets of our parents are still living, although Gail's parents are both currently facing difficult health challenges in Florida. My parents still live in a suburb of Kansas City, called Overland Park, which is my hometown.

My ministry has been varied and interesting and we have lived in a number of places around the country, including the south, (even in Scotland!) but most of my ministry has been spent in just two states: Kansas and New York. I've been an Associate Minister, a Campus Minister, a Solo Pastor, a Head of Staff/Senior Minister, a Presbytery Executive, a New Church Development Pastor, a Hospice Chaplain, and an Interim/Transitional Pastor.

Why is Interim Ministry important? Primarily because we in the church have learned (mostly the hard way) that it is important to have some space between installed pastorates, so that congregations can have an opportunity to reflect on their recent history, understand how their community and congregation are changing, and make some thoughtful decisions about the kind of leadership they need to do effective ministry in the future. And I'll be assisting you through this process. It's tailored to the needs of every congregation—there is no "one size fits all" way of doing this. Every church is different and unique.

The Interim Pastor also serves as a set of "fresh eyes" with regard to the ministry of a particular congregation. I'm not eligible to be considered as your next installed Senior Pastor, so I don't have any incentive not to be perfectly honest with you—in a pastorally sensitive way, of course.

I'm here to do two important things at the same time: to do all the things that your previous Senior Pastor did (supervise the staff, share in the pastoral care work of the church, help to plan worship, preach, teach on occasion, be visible in the community, etc.), but also to shepherd you through the Interim process which usually takes about a year. We're going to walk and chew gum at the same time!

My tenure will largely be determined by how long your candidate search process goes—sometimes it goes quickly and sometimes it doesn't!

But regardless of how long an eventual search goes, I want to say clearly, that even though times of transition can sometimes be stressful, they can also be times of great growth and discovery.

My only goal is to do everything I can to "prepare the way" so that your next installed Senior Pastor can have a fruitful and meaningful ministry with you in this place for years to come.

So, blessings to you. I'm honored and excited to walk with you through this important transitional time. We'll have some fun, try some new things—and (hopefully) grow in faith. Amen.