If you’re like me you may be wondering where the good news is in today’s gospel reading. Any gospel that ends with “there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” does not sound like good news to me. This parable just doesn’t seem to make a whole lot of sense unless it’s supposed to be a cautionary tale. What kind of a leader would leave those enslaved to him what is today’s equivalent of millions of dollars? How could he expect them to multiply his obscene wealth? Some have said that the leader is God. However, the God I know and love does not value wealth and would not reward wealth with even more financial gain when so many people are without including the three slaves. In the parable. This leader in the gospel also abandoned his enslaved people to be on their own for an unspecified amount of time. I think this parable should be called the story of the irresponsible leader who valued wealth above all else. We have to be wary of leaders though. I think we know that from both history and current events. There have been many leaders who have sought personal gain over community needs. There have been many leaders who have oppressed people, started wars (sometimes for personal gain) and been power hungry. Some of them may even have started off thinking they were becoming leaders because they cared about the needs of the greater good but the desire for more and more power, wealth etc. took root and they went astray. History has seen the likes of Hitler, Mussolini, Lenin, Duterte, and many others who have the blood of thousands on their hands and have left a negative mark on this world on a vast scale. Whenever someone takes the role of leader as an authoritarian function where they are the only ones calling the shots and not seeking advice or taking advice from others it is not a healthy system and likely not going to help the community grow. Deborah, the judge and prophetess has a reputation for being a leader that others come to for help. In fact the reading describes her as sitting outside giving advice/help/judgement to people who waited in line to see her. Sounds like a blend between a modern day spiritual director, a lawyer, a teacher or doctor…a wise woman, perhaps even a mystic. She is also the first female judge and prophetess we hear about in the Bible. There are four distinct characters in this reading. Deborah, the judge and Israelite; Barak, the military general and Israelite, Jael a non-Israelite woman and Sisera head of the Canaanite army and the enemy. The first three listed here all worked together to help end the captivity of the Israelites which had now lasted 20 years. These three unusual partners in the story came together despite their obvious differences to accomplish something for the greater good. An interesting thing to note here is that Barak refused to go out to battle without Deborah who he obviously regarded as being an incredibly strong person who he needed in order to accomplish his mission. It is very unusual to read about a woman of strength in the Bible. Now Jael comes in right after these verses to drive a stake in the temple of Sisera…notable because it was not known which side she would take in this scenario as her husband supplied the Canaanites with iron chariots and she was not an Israelite. I want to be clear; I am pro non violence. The main point here is that these are an oppressed people seeking an ending to their predicament and these three unlikely people came together to free the Israelites. I’m wondering what other unlikely groups have formed for a common purpose to bring freedom in this world. I think of the mutual respect and regard held by many for Martin Luther King Jr. and the many different kinds of people from different religions that supported the civil rights movement. King made it clear that no one was free as long as one group was held captive and that our fates depended on one another. A couple issues that illustrate this when it has not happened, are climate change and the Covid crisis. Climate change is a real threat to our society and our country and is largely caused by greed to consume and use more than we need. We are depleting our natural resources and it is leading to the earth’s destruction. Unless we change our ways and work with the rest of the world this earth will be uninhabitable. This is a fact and ignoring it and calling it a hoax will not cause it to disappear. Another area humanity is suffering from a lack of leadership and a real need to care for one another is with the pandemic. I continue to see and hear people say that they feel this is a hoax. People who do not wear their masks indoors when they are in public places when wearing a mask can literally save someone else’s life. It is incredible to me that this so called hardship of the simple act of wearing a mask is preventing people from caring about the greater good. I feel certain that good leadership can go a long way in helping with all these issues. When I think of King devoting his adult life to the cause of civil rights and many other great leaders leading millions to a greater good I know that it is possible. We must do like Paul says and encourage one another. Dwelling on death and destruction and giving up is not helping the greater good. Our fates are in a very real way linked to each other across state and national borders. We must get along in order to accomplish anything for the greater good, even across vast differences. Like Deborah, Barak, and Jael we can work across humanly structured barriers to do God’s work in this world. Paul’s message is a little like what I heard said in a speech to America by our newly elected President: Keep the faith and know that God will raise us up and we in turn must raise one another up. There is much at stake in doing otherwise. Paul tells the Thessalonians to be awake for the coming of God in our midst. He is thinking of the apocalypse but we need not wait for that to see how God shows up to us right here, right now. Paul’s words about drinking reflect some wild parties held by non-Christians who held very crazy parties which took them out of the here and now and into some pretty unloving acts. We too have our own distractions that we must put aside to focus on the present and God’s presence in it. We have to be able to distinguish from leaders like the one in the gospel who intimidates, and use their power for evil, and care only for building their own wealth and those that care for the common good. True leadership is about building community and spreading the resources so all have access to the resources available. Putting politics aside, when I think of leadership I think of Barack Obama and Michelle Obama. These two led by example and by their convictions. They obviously have a loving relationship with one another and their words were never negative but life giving. I still remember Michelle saying when they go low we go high. Barack recently wrote a book and this quote is in it and it reminds us of the importance of doing and following what is true and good in this world and beyond, Obama says: As I recount in my book, A Promised Land, my mother, Ann Dunham, was strong, smart, and marched to her own beat. For her, the world offered endless opportunities for moral instruction. My sister Maya and I got early lessons about the struggle for civil rights, the impact of poverty on people around the world, and the importance of respecting other cultures and considering other points of view. My mother believed that power came not from putting people down but rather through lifting them up. And she was always certain that in the face of injustice and humanity’s more primal impulses, logic and progress would always prevail. “The world is complicated, Bar,” she used to say. “That’s why it’s interesting.”