

True Strength

5th Sunday after Pentecost – July 4, 2004

Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passages (NRSV)

Judges 16:23-31

²³Now the lords of the Philistines gathered to offer a great sacrifice to their god Dagon, and to rejoice; for they said, “Our god has given Samson our enemy into our hand.” ²⁴When the people saw him, they praised their god; for they said, “Our god has given our enemy into our hand, the ravager of our country, who has killed many of us.” ²⁵And when their hearts were merry, they said, “Call Samson, and let him entertain us.” So they called Samson out of the prison, and he performed for them. They made him stand between the pillars; ²⁶and Samson said to the attendant who held him by the hand, “Let me feel the pillars on which the house rests, so that I may lean against them.” ²⁷Now the house was full of men and women; all the lords of the Philistines were there, and on the roof there were about three thousand men and women, who looked on while Samson performed.

²⁸Then Samson called to the LORD and said, “Lord GOD, remember me and strengthen me only this once, O God, so that with this one act of revenge I may pay back the Philistines for my two eyes.” ²⁹And Samson grasped the two middle pillars on which the house rested, and he leaned his weight against them, his right hand on the one and his left hand on the other. ³⁰Then Samson said, “Let me die with the Philistines.” He strained with all his might; and the house fell on the lords and all the people who were in it. So those he killed at his death were more than those he had killed during his life. ³¹Then his brothers and all his family came down and took him and brought him up and buried him between Zorah and Eshtaol in the tomb of his father Manoah. He had judged Israel twenty years.

This is the fifth week in our series, “Kids’ Stories All Grown Up.” Today, we take a grown-up look at the surprising story of Samson and Delilah.

Before writing this study, I don’t know that I had ever read the entire story of Samson in the book of Judges. I had always understood Samson to be a hero of the faith who had been betrayed by the beautiful, though evil, seductress Delilah. As it turns out, much of my portrait of Samson came from the opera, not the Bible!

A hero?

The story of Samson consumes four entire chapters in the book of Judges. This is an immense amount of space in the Bible and I arrived at these chapters expecting to find lots of great stories about God and God’s people. In truth, when I finished reading the four chapters the first time, I had trouble seeing God anywhere in the stories. Here is Samson’s story in a nutshell.

After the Israelites descended into evil yet again,¹ God allowed the hated Philistines to oppress them for forty years. But then, God sent an angel to tell a barren Israelite woman that she

God’s Purposes

It can be very hard to know what to make of many Old Testament stories and Samson’s story is a case in point. Though the writer of Hebrews lifts up Samson as a hero of the faith, I have trouble seeing that in the book of Judges. Certainly, Samson is born with high expectations, but he doesn’t deliver. Yes, the Spirit of the Lord comes upon Samson at key occasions, but he uses that Spirit to wreak havoc and vengeance. Even when Samson pulls the Temple of Dagon down and kills thousands of Philistines, he does so only out of vengeance for his blinding; there is no mention of God.

Samson lived during a period of Israel’s rapid disintegration. We see in these stories that God actually *does* work in mysterious and seemingly contradictory ways. The story reminds us that God is willing to enter into the sinfulness and rebelliousness of the world in order to accomplish God’s purposes.

¹The time of the judges was a dark period in Israel’s history. Time and again the people would turn away from God and be overrun by their enemies. Each time, God would raise up a new leader who would call the people back to God, after which they would soon sink to new lows and be overrun again.

would give birth to a son who would “begin to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines” (13:5). The child was to be raised as a Nazarite; i.e., set aside for God’s work. In all, Samson’s birth story is lengthy and conveys to us the momentousness of his birth; it is as if God was pulling out all the stops on this “deliverer.” The birth story prepares us for the arrival of a hero cast from the mold of Moses, which makes the stories of Samson’s life all the more jarring.

As his story unfolds, Samson turns out to be the reverse image of Israel’s first and model judge, Othniel. Samson never leads the Israelites into battle. He marries one Philistine woman and falls in love with another. He seems driven by his temper and his need for vengeance. He attends drinking parties with the Philistines and visits prostitutes. He kills thirty Philistines so that he can steal their clothing to pay off a lost wager. His fellow Israelites try to hand him over to the Philistines. Even the story of Delilah is filled with surprises.

In chapter 16, we are told that Samson falls in love with Delilah (though we are never told that she loved him!). Being a Philistine, Delilah is offered a fortune by the Philistine leaders (nearly \$3 million today) to be a patriot and find out the secret of Samson’s strength. Delilah is shockingly honest with Samson when she says: “Please tell me what makes your strength so great, and how you could be bound, so that one could subdue you” (16:6). The first time she tries this, Samson lies, telling her that he can be subdued with leather strips that had not been dried. Then she ties him up and the Philistines jump him, but Samson defeats them because he can break the ties. You would think that after this episode, Samson would abandon Delilah . . . *but he stays*. So, with a fortune hanging in the balance, Delilah tries again. But again Samson lies to her and avoids capture . . . *but he stays*. Delilah persists and tries a third time, but Samson concocts a new lie and evades capture again . . . *but he stays*. Finally, the relentless Delilah succeeds. Samson reveals to her that he will lose his strength if his hair is cut. There is no way that Samson can be surprised when Delilah then cuts his hair, enabling his capture and imprisonment . . . *but he has stayed with her through it all*. Later, in one last great act of vengeance (see 16:28), Samson pulls down the pillars of the Philistine temple, killing himself and thousands of leading Philistines. Why in the world would Samson have stayed with Delilah through all her transparent attempts to betray him?

Where is God?

What do we make of Samson? Where is God in this? Dennis Olson provides three helpful perspectives on the story of Samson.

(1) Samson embodies the nation of Israel in decline. He breaks his vows as a Nazarite (the drinking parties) just as Israel breaks its own obligations under the covenant of Moses. He chases after foreign women just as Israel chases after foreign gods.

(2) Samson represents the deterioration of the whole system of judges (Israel’s chief leaders and administrators under the kingship of the LORD God). Othniel, the first judge, had been obedient to God and a powerful leader of the Israelites. Samson was neither. Instead, Samson stood at the end of a long line of increasingly ineffective judges.

(3) *But here is the irony*; Samson also embodies “the kind of divine love that simply cannot let go.”² He loved Delilah and despite her obvious betrayals, he kept on loving her. She might not love him, but he would still love her. She might actively betray his love, but he would still love her. He would keep coming back, time after time. Samson’s love was relentless and, by worldly standards, foolish.

Samson is a window into the character of God. The world might see Samson’s strength in his bulging muscles, but we understand that Samson’s true strength lay in his relentless, irrational love. Much of the Old Testament is taken up with the story of God’s relentless, irrational love for his people. Generation after generation might run away from God, betray God, and chase after other gods, but the LORD would still pursue them, call them back, and try to help them see the hope and joy that lie in God’s love. We ought to be thankful for God’s seemingly irrational love for us!

²from Dennis Olson’s commentary on Judges in *The New Interpreters Bible*, Abingdon, 1998.

Daily Bible Readings

(*Samson – the whole story!*)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Day 1 Judges 13 The birth of Samson	Day 2 Judges 14 Samson the riddler
Day 3 Judges 15 Samson the avenger	Day 4 Judges 16:1-3 Samson and the prostitute
Day 5 Judges 16:4-31 Delilah and the death of Samson	Weekly Prayer Concerns

Sermon Notes

July Book Recommendation

The Screwtape Letters, by C.S. Lewis

This is turning out to be a C.S. Lewis summer. *The Screwtape Letters* is a Lewis classic. The letters are the instructional correspondence between a senior demon, Screwtape, and his wannabe diabolical nephew Wormwood. As mentor, Screwtape coaches Wormwood on how best to tempt his "patient" away from God! This is great stuff and will cause you to laugh, to think, and to pray!

Available now at *Inspiration*, the St. Andrew bookstore

The fourth "Fruit of the Spirit" evening lecture, *Joy*, will be this Tuesday, July 6, at 7pm in Piro Hall with Scott Engle.

Next Sunday is *SECOND SUNDAY!* 9am in Wesley Hall. Join us!!

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Before you begin to reflect on Samson's story, I urge you to read the whole thing. You might begin by reading it a paraphrase like *The Message* or in the *New Living Translation*. The narrative will jump off the page! After you finish, I suspect that you will be puzzled.

In Hebrews, Samson is one of the heroes of the faith (11:32), alongside Gideon, Samuel, and David. I have trouble finding much that is heroic in Samuel's behavior or his devotion to God. Perhaps he is seen as a hero because, in the end, things turn out reasonably well: Israel is safe (at least for a brief moment) after the Philistine leadership is killed, and God has been vindicated as the temple of Dagan is pulled to the ground. Perhaps Samson is seen as a hero because of his faith that God would empower him one last time as he stood chained to the pillars in the temple – despite Samson's only motive being personal vengeance.

Certainly, in these stories we are to see that God's purposes will be accomplished through humans, through all our weaknesses, hatreds, and failings. This was true in Samson's day, in Jesus' day and in our own. Jesus summoned his disciples, then and now, to be the ones through whom God's purposes would be accomplished. What do you think *are* God's purposes? Where do you see God's purposes being worked out in the world? How? You might share some stories of times when you were surprised at the way God worked in and through your own life. We live in anxious times, in a world seemingly given over to terror and violence. How do we cling to hope in such times? Can we find a message of hope for us in Samson's story? In the history of Christian biblical interpretation, Samson has often been interpreted as "pre-figuring" Christ; i.e., seeing Christ's story in Samson's story! How could this be? Discuss aspects of Samson's story that might lead Christians to this conclusion.