

*Judges 16:4-6, 15-22, 28-31 (NRSV)*

[Samson, the great judge and hero, is pursued by Israel's enemies, the Philistines. They are unable to defeat him in battle, so they use his weakness for women against him.]

<sup>4</sup> After this he fell in love with a woman in the valley of Sorek, whose name was Delilah.

<sup>5</sup> The lords of the Philistines came to her and said to her, "Coax him, and find out what makes his strength so great, and how we may overpower him, so that we may bind him in order to subdue him; and we will each give you eleven hundred pieces of silver." <sup>6</sup> So Delilah said to Samson, "Please tell me what makes your strength so great, and how you could be bound, so that one could subdue you."

[Samson tries to keep his secret, but Delilah won't relent.]

<sup>15</sup> Then she said to him, "How can you say, 'I love you,' when your heart is not with me? You have mocked me three times now and have not told me what makes your strength so great." <sup>16</sup> Finally, after she had nagged him with her words day after day, and pestered him, he was tired to death. <sup>17</sup> So he told her his whole secret, and said to her, "A razor has never come upon my head; for I have been a nazirite to God from my mother's womb. If my head were shaved, then my strength would leave me; I would become weak, and be like anyone else."

<sup>18</sup> When Delilah realized that he had told her his whole secret, she sent and called the lords of the Philistines, saying, "This time come up, for he has told his whole secret to me." Then the lords of the Philistines came up to her, and brought the money in their hands. <sup>19</sup> She let him fall asleep on her lap; and she called a man, and had him shave off the seven locks of his head. He began to weaken, and his strength left him. <sup>20</sup> Then she said, "The Philistines are upon you, Samson!" When he awoke from his sleep, he thought, "I will go out as at other times, and shake myself free." But he did not know that the LORD had left him. <sup>21</sup> So the Philistines seized him and gouged out his eyes. They brought him down to Gaza and bound him with bronze shackles; and he ground at the mill in the prison. <sup>22</sup> But the hair of his head began to grow again after it had been shaved.

[Samson is put on display by the Philistines and chained to two pillars in the center of the large building. Thousands gawked at him.]

<sup>28</sup> Then 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." <sup>29</sup> And 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. <sup>30</sup> Then 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. <sup>31</sup> Then 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.

*In Peter's comeback story we saw God working with great power on Pentecost. In Naomi and Ruth's story we saw God working quietly behind the scenes. In today's comeback story, we see God bring someone back who has made a mess of things.*

I couldn't help myself. I just had to put a question mark beside "hero" in the title of this study. I know that Samson is supposed to be one of God's great heroes, but what is there heroic about his story? (The page three text box summarizes his story for you).

Granted, he has supernatural strength given to him by God. But what does he do with it? He kills a lion with his bare hands. Then, he kills thirty Philistines and takes their money to pay off a lost wager. Then, he uses his strength to subdue 300 hundred foxes, using them to destroy Philistine fields. Later, he uses his superhuman strength to kill a thousand Philistines. (Ok . . . I guess the hero part is getting clearer; at least if Rambo, the lone warrior able to best all comers, is what we mean by hero.)

In the end, Samson uses his recovered strength to wreak a martyr's vengeance on whole bunches of Philistines. Is this what makes a hero? Where are the stories of his faithfulness

to God or of his wisdom or even his leadership? In each case, he uses his strength to settle a personal grievance, imagined or otherwise. Samson never sees himself as being on a mission from God to free Israel from its oppression. It isn't even like all this havoc gets Israel back on track. By the end of Samson's time as the judge of Israel,<sup>1</sup> the people are further from God than they'd ever been.

#### Ancient Canaan & the Israelites

The book of Judges is set more than a millennia before Jesus, during the time when the tribes of Israel were consolidating their conquest of Canaan (ancient Palestine). It was a time when survival often seemed doubtful. The tribes were not ruled by a king, for God was to be their king. Instead, their chief administrators, such as Deborah and Samson, were known as judges.

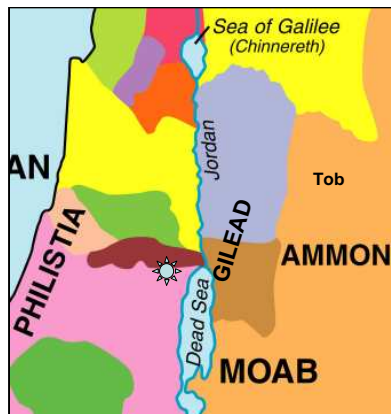
Dennis Olsen notes that:

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. By the end of the book of Judges, Israel is in a state of chaos.

The various shadings on this map represent the areas settled by the twelve tribes of Israel. You can see that the land of the Philistines is on the coast.

I've put a sun symbol on the map just west of the Dead Sea to mark the site of Jerusalem.



<sup>1</sup>Though five chapters follow Samson's story in the book of Judges, Samson is the last judge before the judge and prophet Samuel. Samson dies about 1050 BC. The last five chapters comprise a double epilogue: Judges 17-18 describe the Israelites' religious disintegration and Judges 19-21 describe a civil war. These chapters paint a stark picture of Israel's complete deterioration, setting the stage for the birth of Samuel. It may be, as Judges 13:5 puts it, that Samson begins the deliverance of Israel, but it is sure hard to see that in his story or what follows.

<sup>2</sup>Check out Judges 21:25. It is a simple but profound indictment. How well does it describe our own nation?

<sup>3</sup>from Dennis Olson's commentary on Judges in *The New Interpreters Bible*, Abingdon, 1998.

Everyone is doing what is right in their own eyes, not God's.<sup>2</sup>

Samson manages to be a hero and an anti-hero at the same time. Though his motives seem all wrong, he does defeat Israel's enemies. Perhaps it is a bit like that for many of us, even in our comebacks. We might want God to work in our lives with the same power displayed at Pentecost or perhaps bring us out of our trials more quietly, as God did for Ruth and Naomi. But often, it is much messier, with God leading us back through our mistakes, petty jealousies, and selfish motives.

*But here is the irony.* Samson also embodies "the kind of divine love that simply cannot let go."<sup>3</sup> 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!

*Brought back despite ourselves*

In the end, I find an odd comfort in Samson's story. How frustrating God must have found Samson to be. Even his prayers seem demanding and selfish. How frustrating God must find it to work in and through me. Yet God does. When things are going well and when I'm knocked flat. In the celebrations and in the comebacks. Isn't a great thing that I don't have to be good enough for God to love me. I guess that is why it is called amazing grace.

## Samson's Story

The story of Samson consumes four entire chapters in the book of Judges. This is an immense amount of space in the Bible and one arrives at these chapters about God's hero expecting to find lots of great stories about God and God's people. But Samson hardly seems like a hero at all, and yet God persists in working through him to deliver Israel from its enemies. Here is Samson's story in a nutshell.

The 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. And after the Israelites descended into evil one time too many, God allowed the hated Philistines to oppress them for forty years.

Even though the people seem to have accepted their subservience and do not cry out to God or pray for deliverance, God takes the initiative and steps in. God sends an angel to tell a barren Israelite woman that she would give birth to a son, Samson, 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 actual stories of Samson's life all the more jarring. Samson is no Moses!

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.

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.

## READING WITH HEART & MIND, MAY 25 – MAY 31

Next week, we'll be talking about Jonah. Here is his story and a couple of related readings.

**Monday, Jonah 1** Jonah is called to preach to Nineveh, the capital city of the Assyrians, but he ends up in the belly of a giant fish.

**Tuesday, Jonah 2** Jonah prays to God for rescue from the fish and his prayer is answered.

**Wednesday, Jonah 3** Jonah preaches in the city and they all actually repent! God changes his mind about destroying the city.

**Thursday, Jonah 4** Jonah gets angry that God didn't keep his word about destroying the city and God has to try to teach him a lesson.

**Friday, 2 Kings 14:23-29** Jonah was a prophet during the reign of Jeroboam II.

**Saturday, Matthew 12:38-45** The Pharisees come to Jesus asking for a sign. He talks to them about the sign of Jonah.

## Sermon Notes

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### ***Reading The Good Book Better***

#### **A new *Something Else* series begins this week**

Our series on creation and evolution revealed that the way we read the Bible shapes our understanding of evolution and other topics. Indeed, it shapes the way we see the world.

In this series, we'll look at various interpretational issues, as well as some keys to understanding the many translations that are available now.

This week: "Is the Bible True?"

Next week: "Whose version? The alphabet soup of translations"

**Taught by Scott Engle at 11:00 in Festival Hall on Sunday morning**

### **Questions for Discussion and Reflection**

1. This is a sermon series about comeback stories. Samson has a few comebacks, the biggest being the recovery of his strength after being tossed in prison and having his eyes gouged out. What do you find in Samson's story that might be helpful to someone who is going through a difficult time? God's faithfulness to Samson despite his selfish motives?
2. In Samson's story 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.