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Sermon: Samson

The First Old Testament Reading: Judges 16:4-12

⁴ After this [Samson] fell in love with a woman in the valley of Sorek, whose name was Delilah. ⁵ 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.” ⁶ 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.” ⁷ Samson said to her, “If they bind me with seven fresh bowstrings that are not dried out, then I shall become weak, and be like anyone else.” ⁸ Then the lords of the Philistines brought her seven fresh bowstrings that had not dried out, and she bound him with them. ⁹ While men were lying in wait in an inner chamber, she said to him, “The Philistines are upon you, Samson!” But he snapped the bowstrings, as a strand of fiber snaps when it touches the fire. So the secret of his strength was not known.

¹⁰ Then Delilah said to Samson, “You have mocked me and told me lies; please tell me how you could be bound.” ¹¹ He said to her, “If they bind me with new ropes that have not been used, then I shall become weak, and be like anyone else.” ¹² So Delilah took new ropes and bound him with them, and said to him, “The Philistines are upon you, Samson!” (The men lying in wait were in an inner chamber.) But he snapped the ropes off his arms like a thread.

The Second Old Testament Reading: Judges 16:15-22

¹⁵ Then [Delilah] said to [Samson], “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.” ¹⁶ Finally, after she had nagged him with her words day after day, and pestered him, he was tired to death. ¹⁷ 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^[c] 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."

¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ 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, [\[d\]](#) and his strength left him. ²⁰ 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. ²¹ 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. ²² But the hair of his head began to grow again after it had been shaved.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church.

Sermon: Samson

The Samson stories are designed to go viral.

No matter what else you think of them, I think we can agree that they have all the ingredients of contagious storytelling – secrets, sex, intrigue, violence, betrayal. It's no wonder that poster on your bulletin looks like pulp fiction. A hero with enormous potential and even bigger flaws. A tragic conclusion worthy of the Greek gods.

These are wild and amazing stories from the Bible and not a single one of them is included in the lectionary. So, if your understanding of the Bible is largely defined by the sanitized canon of texts we tend to preach week to week, you may not know much about Samson – or the entire Book of Judges, for that matter.

But – like most viral stories – the Samson stories have a way of getting around the censors. I, for one, relied upon them as a desperately bored teenager, forced by my parents to sit through endless worship services with their droning sermons and seven-verse hymns. I entertained

myself by doing things like counting the pages of the hymnal until I found the exact middle. When that was over, I would troll through the Old Testament, finding the most salacious and outrageous stories. The two adulterous sisters of Ezekiel. Balaam's talking donkey. Ehud, the evil king who was assassinated while using the restroom. I eventually located and read all these stories with delight, all while looking like the most devout member of the youth group. (Take notes, high schoolers. Believe it or not, sometimes the most interesting thing in the room is taking place in your Bibles.)

Anyway, Samson makes a strong impression on the young people, which is precisely what was intended. To really understand the Book of Judges, where these stories live, you have to understand that they are, in their most ancient form, folk tales. They were campfire stories, told at dusk with great fanfare, legends passed down from generation to generation.

The Book of Judges tells stories from what was known as the Era of Judges, this ambiguous adolescent period between the Exodus and the Era of Kings, roughly 1200 to 1000 BC. If the Exodus tells the story of journey from slavery to freedom in the Promised Land, Judges tells the messy next chapter: the inconvenient truth that Promised Land was already inhabited by a lot of other people.

If you can imagine, the Israelite people were not yet a nation – they don't have an army. They are more like a constellation of family groups. They made alliances and enemies with their various neighbors. They sometimes intermarry with other tribes. They sold and bought goods from each other. They are just trying to make it work.

One thing that has to be kept in mind is that between the tribal wars and the intermarriage, the Jewish people were constantly afraid of disappearing. That their people and their faith would dissolve into this Mesopotamian melting pot. You can feel this anxiety running through the Book of Judges. And the "judges" themselves were not really judges at all. They are really more like folk heroes - freedom fighters, even,

who got a reputation for standing up for the Israelite people during a very uncertain time.

The stories were *designed* to go viral, to lodge in the minds of young people to give them hope and courage. When you despair, they might say, remember the wisdom of Deborah, remember the cunning of Gideon, remember the strength of Samson.

So that's the first layer of the story of Samson. Samson, the folk hero. Kids love it.

But there is another layer to this story, a theological cross-current which has to be told if we are going to understand Samson the *anti*-hero. The other side of the story involves the editor of the text, a person whose true name is unknown, but we call him the Deuteronomic Editor – let's just call him Ed. Ed is the theoretical person who actually composed the Book of Judges. While the *stories* of Judges take place in 1200 BC, most scholars now agree that Ed actually composed the Book much later – maybe 600 years later. So Ed knows some things that are influencing how he pieces together the story. He knows, for example, that the Era of Judges ended very badly. That the tribes became more and more violent and extreme in their behavior that they eventually ended up battling each other. He knows that Israel – the nation charged by God to be a holy, dissolved into so many kinds of sin that they ceased to be recognizable. He knows that they eventually demanded a king, so that they could be like other nations. He know that their kings, although some were better than others, could not stop Jerusalem from being destroyed by the Babylonians.

In 587 BC, the Temple and the City were destroyed and the Israelite people were scattered across the region. That's the dark moment in which Ed picks up his pen and begins to write the Book of Judges.

And what he does – this clever editor – is really fascinating to me. He takes the heroes of the Israelite people – the folk stories that everyone knew by heart – and weaves into this larger narrative of a people wandering *away* from God.

As you might imagine, the effect of this strategy is very subversive, and maybe helps explain that queasy feeling you might have when you encounter Samson, the folk hero, the over-sexed buffoon, Israel's great hope, murderer of thousands, champion of the people, sex addict, martyr, terrorist.

In short, he is the quintessential Biblical antihero. He's the best of times and the worst of times.

Samson's birth story will probably sound familiar. His mother had been childless for many years, to her dismay. But one day she was visited by an angel who gave her good news – she would soon give birth to a very special son. He was to be different from other children. He would be holy and set apart. He would never cut his hair. He would never drink alcohol. He would be the one to *begin* to deliver the Israelite people.

There are echoes here of Isaac, son of Sarah, and Samuel, son of Hannah. There are hints of Mary and Gabriel and of course, Jesus. Samson was to be one of the greats, a Savior of the Israelite people.

And it is indeed without a doubt, he *was* different from the others. He was incredibly strong and repeatedly the Book of Judges says that the Spirit of the Lord was with him. His physical strength and fearlessness gave him a reputation as a great defender of the people – this is the folk hero that everyone remembered. However, Judges also won't let us forget his impulsive appetite for power, his obsessive lust, and his foolish love. He was associated romantically with three different Philistine women – even as he killed hundreds of Philistine men. His actions were almost never governed by thought, prayer, or principle. Samuel was led by his gut.

As one commentary puts it, Samson is what happens when weak people *receive* power instead of *growing* powerful. He had the strength to exert control over lots of other people and no ability to control himself.

We don't get too much information about Delilah – only that she was a woman from Sorek and that Samson was in love with her. Her name is Semitic but she was likely a Philistine like his other lovers. She may very well have loved Samson too, but in the end she took the money and set about betraying him to his enemies.

It's easy to point out the obvious – that Samson seems incredibly dumb to allow himself to be manipulated by Delilah no less than four times before he's captured. "What were you thinking?" you might want to cry out. But then again, that's the same comment you might make to your friend who returns to an abusive relationship time and again. The same comment you might make to your brother who has promised for the umpteenth time that he is done drinking. The kind of comment you might make to yourself when you just can't stop yourself from saying the thing that will wound a person you love.

Yes, Samson seems incredibly dumb but *man* is this the stuff of sin. We do exactly what we know we shouldn't. Samson has incredible power but he binds it to all the wrong things and the results are devastating.

There are lots of reasons why these stories didn't make the lectionary. For one, they don't work well as religious propaganda. It's a messy, sordid story that doesn't really roll into a tidy moral takeaway. If anything it's *demoralizing*. The mighty Samson ends his own life by knocking down the temple of the Philistine god Dagon, killing three thousand other people at the same time. He is the original religious suicide bomber, killing in the name of a holy war. It's horrific.

But today's text in particular – we steer away from it in worship because it's complex and also because who wants to field questions in the family van about why Samson allowed himself to be tied up on your way to Sunday lunch?

But if we stop painting Samson as a hero and let him be the antihero I think he is, we can see this story as an incredible parable about power and vulnerability. Part of what makes Samson so tragic is that from the beginning he has this gifted future. He's got parents who love him, a

God who has proclaimed him chosen and given him incredible strength. But rather than seeing himself as a signpost, pointing to the grace and love of God, he very quickly begins wielding his power in the service of his own ego, his own appetite. He accepts the dominant cultural narrative that power is for possessing, rather than serving. In the end, his downfall comes packaged as one more thing he simply wants to possess. And he is so used to having what he wants that he doesn't see the danger until it's too late.

This is not the story of Samson who made the mistake of engaging in premarital sex – although it is certainly often painted that way. This is the story of a man who was driven by a hunger for love but had no idea how to be vulnerable in the ways that make for love.

Now – the Deuteronomic Editor seems to be whispering in the margins of this text – now what if Samson serves as something of a metaphor for Israel? A gifted, chosen people – set aside for greatness, set aside to demonstrate the truth of who God is? A people who hunger for love of God and love of neighbor but nonetheless bind themselves again and again to the idols of their culture? A people who wield power as a way to possess and control their neighbor? A people who see violence as a path to righteousness?

Can't you see, the Book of Judges seems to whisper, can't you see that this project is doomed? Can't you see, the Book seems to say without saying, that this is a dangerous exercise in missing the point?

As a folk hero, Samson is a dangerous one. He sells the mythology of redemptive violence. He's a symbol of might-makes-right, bolstered by the intoxicating notion of God's will. Sadly, I don't really have to remind you how relevant that particular religious poison remains in our world.

How genius, then, is the Book of Judges, for carefully defusing that bomb by letting the story play out to its own tragic end?

On Wednesday evening of this week, two Palestinian men walked into a café in Tel Aviv. They were dressed as orthodox Jews – black suits and white shirts – and they lingered at a table briefly before firing guns concealed in their bags, killing four Israelis and wounding several others. The attack is the latest round of violence between Israelis and Palestinians that has killed 12 Israelis, 2 Americans, and 200 Palestinians since last October. ¹

The story of the attack shocked me for several reasons. Maybe most obviously - I just returned from Tel Aviv. I walked through the shopping district where the attack took place. So it feels a little too real in that way. But even more so, it shocked me because I've been thinking all week about Samson. I've been thinking about this tragic story of a man with God-gifted power who then worshipped power as though it were God. The gunmen disguised themselves as orthodox Jews, who are easy to spot because they do not cut their hair, as they believe it is a sin. Israel and Palestine are dead-locked in a conflict over land that they believe should be theirs and theirs alone.

There are those who would say that religion is at the heart of this problem. They would say we must root out zealots by rooting out religion itself. I can certainly see where they are coming from.

But I hardly think the problem is about religion. The problem is about our human nature. We are foolish to project this onto the Middle East or any religious group. Look at Orlando. Look at our city. It's a sin of our nature, bound to us in ways we scarcely even see. To the extent that religion cuts deep into our hearts and our identities as humans, it has the power to fan the flames of violence and it has the power to heal. It is so important that we, as people of faith, continue to claim that healing power for the world.

As troubling as some of these Old Testament texts can be, I find solace in the subtle but growing critique of the Book of Judges. There is an increasingly urgent cry from the people of God for a new way of being the church. It is no less relevant today than it ever was.

¹ "Palestinian Gunmen Open Fire In Tel Aviv, Leaving Four Dead."
<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/09/world/middleeast/tel-aviv-shootings.html>.

But we do not rally around Samson. Or David or Solomon or Herod or Caesar. We don't rally around the military might of the United States of America or the Almighty dollar. We don't rally around a fundamentalist ideology of God.

We gather today around the table of Jesus Christ. A boy born to a woman who could scarcely contain her joy. A boy born holy, a prince of peace. A child who would grow into a man of great power. A man of great power who time and again crossed boundaries of race, gender, class, and ability, not to incite hate but to incite love. A man who poured out his power into a cup of suffering love, so that we might not miss the point of what it means to follow God.

We follow that One. God knows we lose our way. But we follow that One.