

***"Bible Heroes: Samson"***  
**Reverend Bill Gause**  
**Overbrook Presbyterian Church**  
**14<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**  
**July 9, 2017**

**First Scripture Reading: Judges 13:1-5**

<sup>1</sup>The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord gave them into the hand of the Philistines forty years. <sup>2</sup>There was a certain man of Zorah, of the tribe of the Danites, whose name was Manoah. His wife was barren, having borne no children. <sup>3</sup>And the angel of the Lord appeared to the woman and said to her, "Although you are barren, having borne no children, you shall conceive and bear a son. <sup>4</sup>Now be careful not to drink wine or strong drink, or to eat anything unclean, <sup>5</sup>for you shall conceive and bear a son. No razor is to come on his head, for the boy shall be a nazirite to God from birth. It is he who shall begin to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines."

**Second Scripture Reading: Judges 16:4-30**

<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." <sup>7</sup>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." <sup>8</sup>Then the lords of the Philistines brought her seven fresh bowstrings that had not dried out, and she bound him with them. <sup>9</sup>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. <sup>10</sup>Then Delilah said to Samson, "You have mocked me and told me lies; please tell me how you could be bound." <sup>11</sup>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." <sup>12</sup>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. <sup>13</sup>Then Delilah said to Samson, "Until now you have mocked me and told me lies; tell me how you could be bound." He said to her, "If you weave the seven locks of my head with the web and make it tight with the pin, then I shall become weak, and be like anyone else." <sup>14</sup>So while he slept, Delilah took the seven locks of his head and wove them into the web, and made them tight with the pin. Then she said to him, "The Philistines are upon you, Samson!" But he awoke from his sleep, and pulled away the pin, the loom, and the web. <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. <sup>23</sup>Now 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." <sup>24</sup>When 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." <sup>25</sup>And 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; <sup>26</sup>and 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." <sup>27</sup>Now 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. <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.



### **Sermon: "Bible Heroes: Samson"**

This is the part of Samson's story that most people know. When you hear Samson, you almost automatically think Delilah. As a matter of fact, most people probably don't realize there's more to Samson's story. And because of this story's tragic ending, we often think of Samson as a hero. Betrayed by the woman he loved, Samson used his super-human strength one last time to pull down the pillars of the temple, killing the Philistines and himself. The author of the story tells us that Samson killed more Philistines in his dying than he ever did during his lifetime. And considering that the Philistines were the great thorn in the side of the fledgling nation of Israel, we tend to see him as a hero.

But maybe he's not. Heroes are characters we admire because they exhibit the attributes we all strive for: strength, wisdom, courage. Atticus Finch, Harry Potter, Ellen Ripley - these are heroes. But a popular figure in film and literature, especially in recent years, is the anti-hero. The dictionary definition of an anti-hero is one "who is characterized by a *lack* of traditional heroic qualities, such as idealism... courage"<sup>1</sup> or "being morally good."<sup>2</sup>

These men and women don't necessarily have good intentions. They're deeply flawed. They aren't uplifting or righteous. They're out for themselves and yet somehow, they wind up on the side of good, maybe even against their own will. At the beginning of the movie *Schindler's List*,<sup>3</sup> Oscar Schindler is a member of the Nazi party, and a profiteer looking to make a fortune off the war effort, but by the end of the film, he is actively hurting the Nazi war effort and saving hundreds of his Jewish workers from the

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<sup>1</sup> "Anti-hero." *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2017. Web. 10 July 2017. <<https://www.ahdictionary.com/word/search.html?q=Antihero>>.

<sup>2</sup> "Anti-hero." *MacMillan Dictionary*. MacMillan Publishers Limited, n.d. Web. 10 July 2017. <<http://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/anti-hero>>.

<sup>3</sup> *Schindler's List*. Dir. Stephen Spielberg. Perf. Liam Neeson, Ralph Fiennes, Ben Kingsley. Amblin Entertainment/Universal Pictures, 1993. Film.

Nazis. That's an anti-hero. Han Solo, the scoundrel who shoots first,<sup>4</sup> is an anti-hero. Walter White (Breaking Bad<sup>5</sup>), Michael Scott (The Office<sup>6</sup>) and Severus Snape (Harry Potter<sup>7</sup>), are all anti-heroes. I would argue that Samson is one too.

In the passage that Steve Wedell just read<sup>8</sup>, Samson's mother learns that not only is she to give birth to a son, but that she is to consecrate him as a Nazirite. Nazirites were people who were set apart for service to God. They kept themselves especially pure out of devotion to God. The vows of the Nazirite included refraining from drinking wine, and coming into contact with any dead bodies, but perhaps most notably, a Nazirite never cuts his hair.<sup>9</sup>

This explains the instruction the angel of the Lord gave his parents that "No razor should come to his head."

Prior to the story of Delilah, we are told that Samson judged Israel for 20 years.<sup>10</sup> In the period between when the Israelites took possession of the promised land and the coronation of Saul, Israel's first king, the tribes of Israel were a loose alliance. At times of conflict or crisis, a judge would emerge to lead them.<sup>11</sup> Othniel, Deborah, Gideon, and Jephthah had all been judges who led Israel at different times. Samson arises as judge in response to the threat from their perennial nemesis, the Philistines.

Samson's story is contained within four chapters of the book of Judges. To read over all of it would take some time, so let's just hit the highlights.

Chapter 13 of Judges tells the story of his annunciation and birth.

Chapter 14 picks up the story with Samson as a young man as he finds the woman he wants to marry. He tells his father to go and make the necessary arrangements. The only problem is that she is a Philistine.

Ordinarily this would be a problem. Deuteronomy explains that when the people arrive in the promised land, they are *not* to intermarry with the tribes and peoples already living there. The reasoning for this rule is to prevent the people from adopting the gods and religious practices of people who do not know or follow God.<sup>12</sup> This law needs to be highlighted because in the book of Judges, which begins just a generation or so after the Israelites moved into the promised land, intermarrying with the local people has already become a problem.<sup>13</sup>

But Samson, a man whose life is devoted to God and therefore should be extra attentive to obeying God's law, decides instead to marry a Philistine because, as Samson explains to his father, "she pleases me."

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<sup>4</sup> *Star Wars: Episode IV - A New Hope*. Dir. George Lucas. Perf. Mark Hamill, Harrison Ford, Carrie Fisher. Lucasfilm/Twentieth Century Fox, 1977. Film.

<sup>5</sup> *Breaking Bad*. Creat. Vince Gilligan. Perf. Bryan Cranston, Aaron Paul, Anna Gunn. High Bridge Productions/American Movie Classics (AMC), 2008-2013. Television Series.

<sup>6</sup> *The Office (US)*. Creat. Greg Daniels, Ricky Gervais, and Stephen Merchant. Perf. Steve Carrell, Jenna Fischer, John Krasinski. Reveille Productions/National Broadcasting Company (NBC), 2005-2013. Television Series.

<sup>7</sup> Rowling, J. K. *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. NY, NY: Scholastic, 2009. Print.

<sup>8</sup> Judges 13:1-5, NRSV

<sup>9</sup> Cartledge, Tony W. "Nazir, Nazirite." *New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*. Vol. 4, Me-R. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2009. 241. Print.

<sup>10</sup> Judges 15:20, NRSV

<sup>11</sup> McNutt, Paula M. "Judges: Introduction." *The New Interpreter's Study Bible New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha*. Ed. Walter J. Harrelson. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2003. 343-44. Print.

<sup>12</sup> Deuteronomy 7:1-4a, NRSV

<sup>13</sup> Judges 3:1-8, NRSV

As it turns out, at least according to the author, God finds this to be acceptable because it will give God “a pretext to act against the Philistines,” who at that time “had dominion over Israel.” Essentially, God is allowing Samson to violate the law to put Samson in a place to provoke the Philistines and give God a good excuse for striking out against them. Why God needs a reason here, is not explained.

Maybe this was God’s plan in the beginning or maybe this is the authors way of saying that God is taking Samson’s bad behavior and bringing something good come from it. Either way, while Samson is on his way down to actually *meet* the future Mrs. Samson, he is attacked by a lion that he kills with his bare hands. Right away, students of classical mythology will be reminded of Hercules and his ten labors, the first of which was to kill the Nemean Lion which Hercules does by choking the beast with his bare hands. Samson’s literal Herculean feat of strength and courage contributes to his heroic aura.

Later, he returns to Timnah to marry her but on his way, he stops to see the carcass of the lion he killed and he finds that a swarm of bees have taken up residence there. He reaches into the carcass and scrapes out the honey, and returns to his journey, snacking on honey as he goes.

Apart from the stomach-turning image of eating dead lion honey, there is the issue of ritual cleanliness, here. Lions are among the animals that God declared to be unclean and therefore they are not to be eaten and their dead carcasses are not to be touched.<sup>14</sup> Because it was inside the lion’s carcass, the honey would be unclean, too. So, you can see how Samson’s little snack break was not just gross, it was a violation of the rules of ritual cleanliness and a major violation of his personal vows as a Nazirite. We’re starting to see a trend here.

After arriving in Timnah, the text tells us that Samson “made a feast there as the young men were accustomed to do.” Old Testament scholars tells us this was more than a meal, it was a party or as one author puts it, a “drinking bout.”<sup>15</sup> That would not have been unusual for the celebration of a wedding. According to the gospel of John, Jesus’ first miracle was at a wedding feast in Cana where he turned water into good wine.<sup>16</sup> But as we noted earlier, Samson was a Nazirite. As such, he had taken a vow that he would not drink wine out of devotion to God. Here we see him violate his vows again.

During the wedding party, Samson challenges his Philistine guests with a riddle and he bets them 60 suits of clothes that they can’t figure it out before the seven days of the wedding feast are concluded. When his guests coerce his new wife into telling them the answer, Samson goes ballistic. He goes down to Ashkelon (because that’s where the guys he made the bet with come from), murders thirty men, and takes their clothes to pay off the bet.

Then he goes back home to his parents in a bit of a snit, completely abandoning his new wife. Later on, he returns only to find that, his father-in-law, thinking Samson had divorced her, has given his daughter to another man in marriage. This makes Samson even more angry. So, he ties thirty pair of foxes together by their tails, attaches a lit torch to each pair, and sets them loose among the grain fields of the Philistines.

And thus begins a cycle of killing and revenge, each side responding to the violence of the other. The Philistines murder Samson’s wife and her father. Samson answers back by slaughtering those who were responsible. The Philistines attack the city of Lehi in Judah. Samson seeks revenge by slaying a thousand Philistines with the jawbone of a donkey. Which, because he uses part of a dead animal, is also a violation of Samson’s Nazirite vows.

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<sup>14</sup> Leviticus 11:1-8. NRSV

<sup>15</sup> Boling, Robert. *Judges*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1982. 231. Print. The Anchor Bible.

<sup>16</sup> John 2:1-11, NRSV

Then, almost as an afterthought, the author tells us that Samson takes a break from all this to visit a prostitute.

And that brings us back to the story of Samson and Delilah, where we started reading today.

Even though Samson has always been a subject of fascination for Children's Sunday school classes, he really comes-off as more of a flawed person. He is not virtuous so much as he is out for himself. He is impulsive. He has anger issues and poor judgement in choosing friends and lovers. We see him commit murder, arson, theft, and solicitation of a prostitute. Most damning though is that he ignores his vows to God.

The three vows he takes as a Nazirite, to drink no wine, touch no dead thing, and not cut his hair, he breaks. In the case of the first two, he does so willingly. In the case of the third, it is done for him, but only because he puts himself in a situation where it is possible. And it is his broken vows that result in his ultimate downfall. Yet even in his weakness, God still hears Samson when he calls for one last show of strength. One could argue that Samson has not tried and failed; He has failed to try. And yet God does not turn away from him. God uses him as an instrument of God's will.

And that's good news for us, too. None of us is perfect. We all have flaws and shortcomings. Maybe you swear too much, or you judge people for trivial things or you always under-tip at restaurants. Maybe you've got something bigger in your past... maybe you regret something you did when you were younger or something you're doing right now. As the Apostle Paul writes, we've all sinned and fallen short.<sup>17</sup>

But God's love is unconditional. That's not to say God doesn't care what we do. God does. God knows exactly who and what we are, for better and for worse. But God loves us anyway. And God calls us, you and me, flawed, fallible, sinful people, to be partners in the work God is doing in the world, anyway.

As Old Testament scholar Dennis Olson writes, "The Samson story affirms God's willingness to enter into the full sinfulness and rebellion of humankind in order to accomplish the purposes of God in the world..."<sup>18</sup> Put another way, if God can use Samson, God can use you and me.

You see, God didn't call saints to do God's work. God called you and me. God didn't call heroes to do God's will, God called us.

The people we think of as saints and heroes are just the ones that said "yes" when the time came. They're as flawed as you and I; but they did their best. And God took that best and made something amazing come from it.

And God will do it again... and again... and again.

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

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<sup>17</sup> Romans 3:23, NRSV

<sup>18</sup> Olson, Dennis T. "The Book of Judges." *The New Interpreter's Bible: Volume 2*. Ed. Leander E. Keck. Nashville: Abingdon, 1998. 862. Print.