

“If God Can Use Samson, There Is Hope for Us All”

Rev. Susan Laney preaching  
South Highland Presbyterian Church  
Sunday, August 28, 2011 Rally Day

Today is Rally Day at South Highland. For those who are wondering the purpose of Rally Day, it is a day in the old Southern Presbyterian tradition that celebrates Christian Education. The Rally Days of my youth which are filled with good memories, almost always centered around a Biblical character. So today in that tradition, I am preaching on Samson.

As a child I lived in a little white house on Camp Circle and attended the Huffman Presbyterian Church which my father help start. Right behind that Presbyterian Church, to be precise in its backyard, was a drive-in-movie theatre. You would now know it as the new Wal Mart in Roebuck. Many Saturday nights, my brother, sister and I would take a bath, put on our p.j.'s and pile into the car with mom and dad to spend an evening at the drive-in. There was always a double feature. The first movie was geared for the children and the second movie for the adults. My goal on these Saturday nights was to make it through the “adult” feature without falling asleep but I never made it.

I have vivid memories of the movies that I saw at the drive-in. One of the most unforgettable was Samson and Delilah starring Hedy Lamar and Victor Mature. Now for all you young ones out there who have no idea who that is...you can keep that to yourself...it's a good memory that doesn't need to be tainted with you reminding me how old I am getting.

As a child, after seeing this movie, Samson became by favorite Biblical character. He was so strong and handsome and Delilah was so beautiful and so much in love with him. What a wonderful Biblical story. You can imagine my shock when I revisited this story as an adult to find out that my Samson, my hero was a selfish bully who had a problem with women and abused the gifts given to him by God.

Samson was part of a very popular theme in the Old Testament. The birth of a child to a barren couple in their old age. In ancient Hebrew culture, women had no status at all other than that of bearing children. If you could not bear a child, especially a son, you were of no importance to the world. John Calvin, the great reformer went so far as to say that bearing children was so significant that a woman can actually achieve salvation from giving birth. Now I have given birth to two children and all I can say is it is obvious that Calvin hasn't ever birth a child but that is a theological discussion for another day.

As often found in the Old Testament, Samson is born of Manoah and his wife in their old age. An angel revealed to Manoah that Samson should be a Nazarite dedicated to God from birth as God had for him a special purpose—he was to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines.

A Nazarite was one consecrated to God by the taking of special vows for life. He could not drink wine nor strong drink. He could eat nothing that was unclean and no razor was to touch his head. From the lifestyle of Samson recorded in Judges, it is apparent that Samson failed miserably as a Nazarite.

As a young man, Samson fell in love with a Philistine woman from the city of Timnah and instructed his father to get this woman for him. Not only were the Timnahites Philistines the hated enemy of Israel but intermarriage was strictly forbidden by law. Despite the protest of his father, Samson would have no other. It was on his way to his wedding that the famous story of Samson killing a lion with his bare hands takes place. Samson was only able to kill this lion because of the magnificent strength he received as a gift from God but Samson used the death of the lion for his own selfish purposes.

Many days after killing the lion, Samson observed that a swarm of bees had made honey in the carcass of the lion. Since no Timnahite had witnessed Samson's slaying of the lion, Samson bet thirty linen garments that they would not be able to solve a riddle about the lion and the honey. Samson did not win this bet. As becomes typical of our hero, his wife seduces him and he tells her the answer to the riddle. Being a faithful Timnahite, she divulges the information to the people involved in the wager and Samson has to pay off the bet. With a man of Samson's strength, this is not a problem however. Judges 14:19 tells us that Samson called upon the spirit of the Lord which came mightily upon him and killed thirty men of the town and then took the spoils which included the 30 garments.

Samson's strength was mightier than any man's because it came from the power of God. Samson used this gift from God and killed 30 men in a near by town, took 30 garments as spoils from his victory and use them to pay off his bet. Needless to say, he was not pleased with his wife and leaves her. With the passing of time, he has second thoughts and wants to return to her only to find she has married the person who was the Best Man at Samson's wedding. This angers Samson and he seeks revenge once again using the strength that had been given him by God. Judges 15:4

“So Samson went and caught three hundred foxes, and took torches and he turned them tail to tail, and put a torch between each pair of tails. And when he had set fire to the torches, he let the foxes of into the standing grain of the Philistines, and burned up the shocks and the standing grain, as well as the olive orchard.”

As you can imagine the Timnahites were furious that their entire crop had been destroyed. A back and forth feud follows that soon has Samson battling the entire Philistine nation.

Finally after many attempts, Samson is captured and taken in heavy bondage to the Philistines leaders. Judges 15:14

“When he came to Hehik, the Philistines came shouting to meet (Samson), and the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon him and the ropes which were on his arms became as flax that has caught fire, and the bonds melted off his hands. And he found a fresh jawbone of an ass, and put out his hand and seized it, and with it he slew a thousand men.”

If you will recall, it was revealed at his birth that Samson would deliver Israel from the Philistines, and this divine power was being carried out but Samson was not defeating the Philistines as a loyal servant God, he was defeating them to serve his own selfish motives.

You would think that Samson would have learned his lesson with the Timnahite woman but that was not to for into our story enters Delilah. Her name has become a synonym for deceit and treachery. Three times Delilah asks Samson to tell her the secret of his strength and three times Delilah betrays him. At this point in the story you are not only thinking of what a low-life character Samson turned out to be but also what an extremely stupid person our hero has turned out to be.

As a Nazarite, Samson was not allowed to cut his hair. Apparently it was the only part of his Nazarite vow that he kept. It was through the obedience to God of keeping his long hair that Samson received his strength. When he revealed this to Delilah, to Samson’s amazement, she betrayed him. His hair was cut; his eyes were gouged out and was bound to the grinding mill where he was forced to work day after day.

For any one else this would be a fit ending to a person with the morals and lifestyle of Samson, but this is not to be for Samson is no ordinary person. Samson had been chosen by God. It is at this moment that Samson

becomes the real hero to me. Samson becomes my kind of hero because Samson is me.

The Samson from the movie although wonderful, was not a Samson I could relate to. The real Samson, as now described in the book of Judges, weak, imprisoned and blind suddenly becomes a real person—a person just like you and me. A man who although strong physically, is very weak inside. A person who has been given a gift from God but continuously manages to misuse the gift and this is where the real miracle of the story of Samson occurs. If God can use Samson, weak, disobedient and selfish as he is than God can also use me. I do not have to be perfect to be a servant of the Lord. And when I fail to do what is right before God—and I do fail so often—it is not over. My failure does not mean that God no longer wants me. My failure does not mean that God does not need me for just like Samson, God can still use me. It was not just the gift of strength that God needed from Samson but also his weakness. It was through his weaknesses that God was able to use Samson to defeat the Philistines. And just like Samson, God can use not only my strengths but also my weaknesses. I can be Samson.

As Samson labored in prison, his hair began to grow and as it grew the power of God was once more upon him. Samson was carried to the temple of the Philistine god Dagon and was chained to the pillars which supported the temple. The temple was full of three thousand men and women, who looked on while they made sport of Samson. The death of Samson as record in Judges is definitely our heroes' finest hour.

“Then Samson called to the Lord and said, ‘O Lord God, remember me, I pray thee, and strengthen me, I pray thee...and Samson grasped the two middle pillars upon which the house rested, and he leaned his weight upon them, his right hand on the one and left hand on the other’. And Samson, said, ‘Let me die with the Philistines’. Then he bowed with all his might; and the house fell upon the lords and upon all the people that were in it.”

This is why Samson is one of the heroic figures of the Bible. He is not a hero because he is the Biblical version of Hercules...he is our hero because in his final moments he used the gifts that God had given him, including the gift of his humanity, not for himself but in total service to the one he truly loved—in total service to God. Again from the book of Judges:

“so the dead whom he slew at his death were more than those whom he had slain during his life. He was buried in the tomb of his father Manoah.”

So we have come to the end of our story but before we leave, I think Samson has one more thing to say to us. Instead of leaving you with a “they lived happily ever after”, I leave you with a question instead. Have you been humbled before God? Are you using your gifts for yourself in the name of God or are you using them for God?

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.