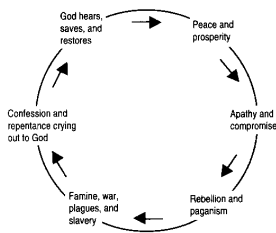


Samson
#theriddler
Read Judges 13-16

Background Information for Study Leaders:

The Book of Judges:

Judges covers the time between the death of Joshua and the first King of Israel. During this time, the nation of Israel was a loose confederation of tribes rather than a nation state with a central government. The book consists of a series of stories of the judges, who not only provided wisdom and guidance to the tribes but also were warriors who rescued them from their enemies.



The stories show a pattern of behavior on the part of the people, the judges, and God. It begins with the people forgetting so they begin to do what is evil in God’s sight. Therefore, God hands them over to their enemies. They cry out to God for help. God hears their cry and raises up a judge to deliver them. Then the judge dies and the cycle begins over again with the next judge being of lesser character than the one before. And usually, God’s choice was a bit surprising to the judge and to those who knew the judge.

Samson is the last of the judges of Israel and clearly demonstrates the downward spiral of the nation of Israel and of their judges. Samson’s story contains at least 16 allusions to other stories in Judges. Samson embodies the worst traits of Israel’s judges. He does what is right in his own eyes rather than God’s. He breaks covenant vows. And he exacts revenge with no thought of God or of the people of Israel. And he lusts after foreign women, which is consistently used in the Old Testament as the image of Israel’s worship of other gods.

In addition, the story of Samson breaks the typical pattern of a judge. In this story, the people of Israel continue to do what is “right in their own eyes” to the extent that they don’t even have the sense to call out to God. Instead, God sees their situation and grants a childless couple a baby who will begin (but not completely) rescue Israel from the power of the Philistines and, as a result, there is no period of peace resulting from Samson’s leadership.

And while we, for some strange reason, teach children the story of Samson and Delilah, this story does not appear in the Revised Common Lectionary (the three-year cycle of Scripture used by many denominations to structure preaching throughout the Christian year) and you will rarely hear it preached from the pulpit. This is a story that at first brush seems depressing and not particularly relevant to the 21st Century Christian. However, this story has many layers of meaning and contains a message of hope that speaks strongly to those of us living in an age of pandemic and social and political unrest.

The Birth of Samson

The situation in Israel was growing decidedly worse. The people continue to do “what was right in their own eyes,” worshipping other gods and becoming more and more violent. While the Lord continued to send judges to rescue them, each succeeding judge was, for the most part, less righteous than the one before. Finally, things get so bad that the people of Israel fail to recognize their need for God and this time they don’t bother to cry out to God. But God sees their situation and decides to act.

As always, despite the unfaithfulness of Israel, there is a faithful remnant and among that remnant was a barren couple, Manoah and his nameless wife. And in the Old Testament, when you meet a barren woman, you can be assured that God is about to do something amazing! So God sends an angel first to Manoah’s wife to tell her that she was going to have a son and the messenger informs her that her son will be a Nazarite from birth and that he will “begin Israel’s rescue from the power of the Philistines” (Judges 13:5). Like Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Mary Magdalene at Jesus’ tomb, she seems to simply accept the angel’s message as true. But like Joseph, the father of Jesus, and the disciples after the women declared Jesus’ resurrection to them, Manoah is skeptical and so he asks God to send the messenger to come back once more and confirm what his wife has shared. God grants his request and sends the messenger, who repeats the message, and miraculously disappears as Manoah offers a sacrifice to God.

One can only imagine the excitement of Manoah, his wife, and anyone close to them that was aware of what God accomplishes through miraculous births! Expectations must have been high!

What is a Nazarite? To fully understand the story of Samson, it is important to know what it meant for him to be a Nazarite. The word “Nazarite” from Hebrew *nazar*, “to abstain from,” or “to consecrate oneself to” and the requirements to be a Nazarite are found in Numbers 6. Nazarites not only didn’t drink wine, but they were supposed to stay away from vineyards and grapes as well. They were not supposed to eat unclean food or touch anything unclean, including a corpse. And they were not supposed to cut their hair. Usually, this was a vow that men took for a limited time (such as committing to fast for Lent or for the period of Manoah’s wife’s pregnancy) rather than a lifelong commitment. And from what we can tell, Manoah and his wife raised Samson properly, teaching him to keep the vows. We are told that the Lord blessed him and then God’s Spirit began to move him.

Spirit of God. At Pentecost, God poured out God’s Spirit upon the followers of Jesus. So we can now be assured of God’s Spirit present with us at all times. In the Methodist tradition, we speak of the work of that Spirit as God’s prevenient (or preparing grace), God’s justifying grace, and God’s sanctifying grace. In other words, God’s Spirit works to draw us into relationship with God and to transform us into the likeness of Christ. But in the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) God sends the Spirit to empower people to accomplish remarkable things (usually it appears to be feats of power) and then withdraws the Spirit.

Riddle Me This

The first story we have of the adult Samson sets the tone for the remainder of his life. While traveling, he sees a Philistine woman that he decides he must marry. The NRSV says that he

tells his parents “Get her for me, because she pleases me.” The Hebrew is actually translated, “She is right in my eyes,” echoing the constant problem of the people of Israel who are continually getting in trouble by doing what is right in their own eyes.

Despite their concerns, his parents agree to the marriage. But in the meantime, Samson breaks the first of his vows. On his way to talk with his intended bride, he kills a lion and when he returns, he discovers the carcass with a swarm of bees inside. Not being a particularly disciplined young man, he scoops out honey from the dead body of the lion despite that being a clear violation of the Nazarite vow. What’s more, he offers the honey to his parents without telling them where it came from!

Then he breaks a second Nazarite vow when he attends a wedding feast “as the young men were accustomed to do,” which implies a big bachelor party, complete with wine. And apparently, either because of too much drink or just plain stupidity, Samson decides to share a riddle, bragging about his encounter with the lion, with the men at his party. This riddle game sets in motion a very sad sequence of events. The men are unable to answer it, so they threaten his wife. She, in turn, manipulates Samson into giving her the answer. That in turn results in a cycle of vengeance and violence that results in their divorce, the death of her and her father along with numerous Philistines, and the betrayal of Samson by his fellow Israelites, who bind him and hand him over to the Philistines. This episode ends when God sends God’s Spirit to Samson and he is able to singlehandedly defeat 1000 Philistines and then God splits open a hollow place and provides water for Samson (just as God did for the people of Israel in the wilderness).

Samson and Delilah

Fast forward twenty years after an encounter with a Philistine prostitute that also concludes with violence, Samson meets the infamous Delilah (which appropriately means “flirtatious”) and falls in love with her. It is not clear whether Delilah was an Israelite or a Philistine, but she was definitely on their side! So when they asked her to find out the secret of his strength, she complies. Samson appears to understand and accept that his new love is not very trustworthy. Still it is hard to imagine why he continues to come back to her time and time again as she proves her unfaithfulness.

The first time she asks him the source of his strength, he lies outright and tells her if he is bound by seven fresh bowstrings he’ll be like anyone else. So she binds him with seven fresh bowstrings and calls the lords of the Philistines to capture him. Samson escapes only to return to Delilah, who whines and asks him yet again. Yet again, he lies and this time says that if he is bound with new ropes then he shall become weak. So, she binds him with new ropes and calls on the Philistines yet again. Again, Samson escapes only to return to her. This time in response to her whining and nagging, he comes dangerously close to telling her the true secret and tells her that if she weaves the seven locks of his hair tightly with the web and make it tight with a pin then he’ll become weak. As expected, she weaves the hair, thrust the pin in it and calls on the Philistines, but Samson escapes.

(It’s interesting to note here that the Hebrew here says that she should thrust a peg into the braid using the exact same words used when Jael thrust the tent peg into Sisera’s head in

chapter 4 of Judges. So early in the book, a foreign woman thrust a peg into the head of a foreign enemy while he was asleep to defeat him. Here a woman thrusts a peg into the head of a judge while he was asleep to hand him over to the enemy.)

One would have thought after three betrayals Samson would have given up on Delilah! Nevertheless, he goes back a fourth time and this time he tells her the truth—if his hair is cut, he will become like all other men. So, to no one’s surprise, she not only cuts his hair but she shaves it off!

The third and final Nazarite vow was broken! And Samson doesn’t even realize that the Lord has left him!

This time the Philistines do capture him. They gouge out his eyes, bind him with shackles, and emasculate him by assigning him to a job usually performed by women in the prison.

Samson’s Death

In the midst of this absolute tragedy, we hear a word of hope: “But the hair of his head began to grow again.” As his hair grew, so did his strength. And when the Philistines decided that they would celebrate their victory over Samson, but commanding him to entertain him, Samson decides that he will take on one final challenge and go out in a blaze of glory. When they stand him between the two pillars at the entrance to their god’s temple, he tells them that he is so weak that he needs to hold onto the two pillars to rest. Then he asks God to give him strength one last time and to let him die with the Philistines. Samson is not the only person in the Old Testament to ask God to take his life. Moses, Elijah, Jeremiah, and Jonah all made that request of God, but Samson is the only one who God grants his request. And unlike the people of Israel in this story, Samson for a second time cried out to God as he pulled the columns down causing the temple to collapse killing more people than he had killed in his entire life. And while this was the beginning of the rescue of Israel, peace was a long way off and the final chapters of Judges show a descent into even more vengeance, violence, and covenant breaking.

What can we learn from Samson?

It’s very easy to either minimize the story of Samson to a cautionary tale about the dangers of women or to question why the story is in the Bible in the first place. Other than his miraculous feats of strength, Samson appears to be self-absorbed, vengeful, lustful, and just plain foolish. Yet, Samson was chosen by God prior to his birth to begin to rescue Israel. So what can we learn from this story?

God chooses to work through fallible humans. The story of Samson reminds us that God uses unlikely people to accomplish God’s goals. In the absence of truly righteous people, God will use whatever “raw materials” available. In Numbers, God speaks through a donkey. In Isaiah, God works through the Emperor of Persia. The story also reminds us that God works cooperatively with humans and our faithfulness, or lack thereof, impacts the results. Through their faithfulness, God rescued Israel and granted them periods of peace, while Samson was unable to accomplish much on behalf of his people. God could choose to change the world from afar and yet God chooses time and time again to work through broken human beings. The

good news is that while we can help or thwart God's work in the world, ultimately God's work will be done!

We can harden our own hearts. Samson took God's blessing and presence for granted. He blithely broke his covenant with God and still assumed that God would grant him strength. He focused on his own needs and desires and ignored those of the people he was called to serve. By the time Delilah cuts his hair, Samson is so disconnected from his Lord that he doesn't even notice God's absence. However, the good news is that while God withdrew Samson's strength, God never abandoned him. When Samson turned and cried to God, God heard and responded.

The Reckless Love of God. Samson was the culmination of all the worst traits of the Judges and of the nation of Israel, yet there was one way in which he mirrored the nature of God and that was his extravagant and foolish love of someone who was unfaithful. Again and again, Delilah betrayed him. Again and again, he returned. Samson continually chooses to love even when his love is not returned. So, too, the people of Israel, the church of Jesus Christ, and individual followers of God and Christ have continually broken our covenant only to find that God comes back to us again and again despite our unworthiness. In the words of Biblical scholar, David Tolson, "Ironically, the most disobedient and ineffective of all Israel's judges becomes the best window into the heart and character of Israel's God."

Questions (Please pick and choose which questions your group would like to cover)

1. In the Old Testament, when you meet a barren woman you can be assured that God is going to do something amazing. What are some other stories found in scripture where a barren woman gives birth to a miraculous child?
2. Throughout his life, Samson broke his Nazarite vows. Why do you believe Samson had such little regard for his vows and the way his parents were trying to raise him?
3. How do you think Samson's parents felt about their son's actions as an adult?
4. If you had to describe Samson with three adjectives, what would they be?
5. Read Judges 14:4. Even though Samson was making poor decisions, God was still using him. How has God used some of your mistakes and bad choices for his greater purpose?
6. If you could rewrite Samson's story, what would his life look like if he truly lived to honor God? What greater impact could he have had?
7. Some scholars believe Samson's reckless love for Delilah parallels God's reckless love for us? How have you experienced the reckless love of God?