

JUNE 2, 2024

Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

May 26 sermon— ‘Heroes and Villains’: Samson’ Judges 14:18-20, Judges 16:28-31

This week in our series we’re looking at Samson. The question is whether he is hero or villain? Maybe neither? We’ll get there. A point that has to be made just in the interest of honesty is that the label hero or villain depends greatly on which side you happen to find yourself on. For example in the story of David and Goliath to us David is the hero and Goliath the villain. If you were a Philistine though, those labels would reverse. Something useful in studying stories of scripture honestly is to not only look at an even through the eyes of the Israelites but also the eyes of whomever they might be in conflict with at a given moment.

We are going to find that while Samson is often painted as a hero, he is more an example of things to NOT do, a cautionary tale, and also a story of just how incredible and big God is in using circumstances and people to accomplish a purpose.

Samson’s parents show us that parenting is important. How we form our own selves before having children is important and how we bring them up in the faith is as well. Samson’s mother was given instructions not only about her son to be born, but also how she needed to adjust her behavior while pregnant, before he was even born. In order for Samson to be a Nazirite she couldn’t drink while he was in the womb. Who she was and what she did would effect who her child would ultimately become. Who we are and the example we set and instill affects who our kids turn out to be.

How they raised him we don’t know. What we do know is that ultimately Samson was not a role model in anger management or following some basic Israelite rules.

Samson broke multiple times one of the cardinal rules God had for the Israelites, don’t mingle with women of other nations. This was because the women would lead them into idolatry. It was such a significant rule that it is the source of a rather gruesome story when they were wandering in the wilderness. The men were cavorting with women of other nations to the point that God struck Israel with a curse. The only thing that stopped it was when a man named Phineas saw an Israelite man parading a woman to his tent, followed him, and speared them both.

All three women mentioned in Samson’s story, the woman from Timnah, the prostitute, and Delilah are understood to have not been Israelite women. The Timnite and Delilah both were brought into cahoots with the Philistines whom God was using Samson to punish. It’s important to remember that at this time the Philistines had the Israelites under their thumb. Israel had fallen away from God and one might be correct in assuming that is why they were having so many issues with the Philistines.

Throughout the story of Samson we see several things. He didn’t restore Israel to faith. He wasn’t a leader of men. He didn’t rally troops or soldiers. Nothing he did was for the glory of God, it was all bent on personal revenge. The Timnite woman situation scripture tells us that the LORD was in that matter to set Samson up for a reason to go after the Philistines. Understand that God instructing and God allowing are two different things. My suggestion is that this falls into God allowing, particularly because God would have known the kind of man Samson was. Vengeful, self-centered, and hot-headed.

When he sets out to marry the Timnite woman he plots a way to get a bunch of garments from some men gathered for the feast. He tells them an unknowable riddle because only Samson had the necessary knowledge. He’d killed a lion some time before and passing the carcass some bees had nested there and he scooped out honey to eat. “Out of the eater something to eat, out of the strong something sweet.” They couldn’t guess it and asked the new bride to ferret the answer out of him. She asks and when he refuses to share it she nags him saying he didn’t love her. Ultimately Samson caves and she tells the men the answer. Samson has been outfoxed. His reaction? He storms off to Ashkelon, kills 30 men and takes their garments to turn over to the men who answered the riddle, and then storms off to his father’s house. He leaves his wife for a season.

The father in law gives her to his best man as a bride because he feels Samson has rejected her. Who

can blame him? The guys is so angry at his daughter he kills 30 men and runs away for an entire season. I don't know I'd want him to be my son in law either after that mess! When Samson goes to visit his wife and gets the news he now takes this as an excuse to do whatever violence and damage he wants to the Philistines. His first act is to tie a ton of foxes together by the tail, tie fired torches to the tails and send the foxes into the fields and groves of the Philistines destroying them. The result? The Philistines want Samson and they go and burn Samson's ex father in law and wife to death.

Even the Israelites don't really seem to care for Samson. He's ticking off their rulers who it seems they fear can squash them. So they bind Samson and hand him over to the Philistines. He breaks loose and then comes the famous story of him killing a thousand men with the jawbone of a donkey.

Then he goes to a prostitute and they are figuring to ambush him in the morning. He gets up at midnight and steals the entire town gate on his shoulders and deposits it on a hill for everyone to see.

Let's keep this straight though. Everything he's done to this point is because he feels he has been personally affronted. Meanwhile, his over the top responses EARN him the anger of the Philistines and even the fear of his own people. Everything he does he does alone and in reaction to feeling disrespected. So when we get to the place where they eventually do capture him and gouge out his eyes he's brought it on himself in every regard. We're not told why they took his eyes but I'd imagine on some level it's fear that he might get strong again and it's a lot harder to hurt what you can't see.

This happens with Delilah. Once again he ignores the rule regarding which women they are aloud to be with. And he hasn't learned anything from the Timnite. In exactly the same fashion she asks him about a question. Where do you get your strength? He won't tell her and she employs the same tactic of nagging him and crying about how he doesn't love her. To test his answer she wakes him in the night saying the Philistines are coming for him. Time after time he breaks loose from whatever he's told her to do to him. When he gives in he is captured because his strength is gone.

There is a great party thrown to celebrate this great enemy finally being caught and laid low. All the important Philistines are there along with thousands of others. As they are mocking him Samson asks God for one more burst of strength. The reason? To get revenge on them for taking his eyes. Not for Israel. Not for God. For himself. God grants the request and all that were present are killed as Samson pushes apart the supports and along with himself no one escapes.

The cautionary tale here I hope is evident. Actions have consequences. Samson has a bad temper, he's not a team player, cares seemingly for no one but himself, and is bent on vengeance. This is no way to live a life. It creates havoc and ill will from all corners, even our own people. Eventually consequences are bound to happen. Even in death Samson can't look at himself with any insight to realize what he himself had done to bring about his circumstance. Angry and vengeful to the end. This is not a man at peace with himself and I would argue at peace with God either. Samson is not a Biblical character we should try to imitate.

On the other hand there is an amazing comfort that comes from this story. Despite himself, God was able to work protection for Israel through Samson. We see it time and again through scripture that God truly can "use all things for the good of those who believe and are called according to His purposes". It doesn't mean that every person or situation is exactly as God desires it to be. Far from it. Yet somehow even through the bad God can bring about some form of good. When free will is in the recipe, God is rarely working with the perfect, ideal ingredients. God works with what we have and make, loves us in it, and tries to walk us through it to a better place.

It is also affirming for us as individuals. If God can use someone of Samson's character, surely God can use you and me. In all our imperfections and flaws, God still has purpose for us. God is still growing us. God still uses us for good works and intentions. Whomever you see in the mirror every day never forget that God sees potential, possibility purpose in you. And what a wonderful way to frame up each day. With that simple question. What potential do I have? What possibility does this day hold? What is my purpose when I walk out my door? This can be the difference of a day being a drudgery or an adventure. Amen.