

**August 27, 2017**

**TEXT: Judges 13**

**TITLE: Judges' Wisdom: What Makes Us Strong**

*By the Rev. Heather Schoenewolf*

When I opened my laptop to begin writing for today, a Word document popped up on my screen—one from June 9. That day I started writing a journal for my son. I wanted to capture the details of his birth and early weeks so that he would know about his first days, and, frankly, so that David and I would remember some of the precious details of what has been the most sacred time of our life. I started writing on a Friday afternoon. My mom and sister had stopped by in the morning to help me get some housework done, and now the house was quiet and Noble was asleep. I got a page written that afternoon before Noble woke up and a friend stopped by to meet him, and I haven't had the chance to return to the journal yet—even though the narrative hasn't even gotten us to the hospital yet! Such is life with a newborn, and the learning curve of a first-time mom.

There is something important in knowing the story of our origins. Hearing these words tells us something about who we are and whose we are. These stories shape our identities—whether they take us back to who we are, or whether they remind us of how far we have come. Our origin narrative creates a lens through which we understand the whole rest of our story.

Sampson is the last to judge Israel. Our text for today tells us that he is the one whom God has sent to begin to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines. His deliverance, we realize up front, is partial—Sampson's role, while critical, is not fully salvific. One commentator suggests that the "judge paradigm is increasingly losing effectiveness."<sup>1</sup> But God is still at work, even when the ones through whom God chooses to work aren't up to snuff.

Sampson is a name we've all heard. But most of us who know his story only think about its final chapter. That's the one that gets all the press. In it, Sampson meets Delilah and falls in love. The Philistines knew that Sampson was a man of super-human strength who could not be defeated, so they implored Delilah to find the source of Sampson's great strength. Now Sampson, in spite of recognizing three times earlier that Delilah was trying to trick him into spilling his secret so that harm would befall him, eventually does tell her that his strength comes from his hair that hadn't been shaved since birth, the mark of a Nazarite. Knowing his vulnerability, she shaves his head and calls on the Philistines who torture, mock and enslave Sampson. But when his hair grows back, he tricks his captors, toppling the house in which all of the Philistine lords were celebrating—killing them, and himself.

But Sampson's beginnings show us that God has taken hold of his life. In our text for today we hear that an angel has appeared to Sampson's mother, telling her—an

---

<sup>1</sup> NIB Commentary Vol 2, p 845.

unnamed woman who has been barren—that she will conceive and bear a son. It is a story we have heard all throughout scripture—even up to the birth of John the Baptist. Over and over again, God does amazing things through these children born to women who couldn't conceive—from Isaac to Jacob to Joseph to Samuel to John. So our story gives us a clue that the child to be born to the wife of Manoah is no ordinary child.

This child—this son—is to be set apart from the beginning. His mother is to drink no wine nor eat any unclean food. He is to be a Nazirite—a person consecrated to God's service. Nazirites are to live in a manner set apart from others, and have “three obligations: no wine, no cutting of hair, and no touching of a corpse.”<sup>2</sup>

And God blessed him. God was faithful to him. God's plan of deliverance would continue with him.

Although we don't yet meet Samson in this text, we see through his parents, models of hope and faith. His mother accepts the news delivered to her, as shocking as it is, as soon as she recognizes that the messenger is from God. But Samson's father is more skeptical. He doesn't ignore the stranger's words to his wife, however, but investigates them through prayer. He asks that God will send the messenger again, and God does. He then offers a burnt offering, which God accepts. Faith and obedience guide their decision-making, and set the stage for them to welcome an unexpected son into their family.

Samson's origins are clear. He is a child of God whose birth is the next installment in God's plan to deliver God's people Israel from captivity, from threat, and from oppression. He is a child of parents of faith, who know how to discern God's will and who trust in God. They stop and pay attention. They turn to each other for discernment. They turn to God. Samson is to be consecrated to God's service—from the time of conception set apart. He is to be God's instrument of liberation for God's people. At his core, that is who he is.

I'll be honest. Like most of us, Samson's story gets messier the older he gets. We never know if his parents tell him in a journal what the angel said to him. We know that they try their best to steer him in a good direction, and upon a path of obedience. But we see that Samson is impulsive, and is a man of his appetites. He drinks wine. He eats honey from the carcass of a lion. He tells Delilah the source of his physical strength, full well knowing that she will undermine him with this knowledge. He runs a bit free and loose, rather than following his parent's cautious obedience. And he pays for it. He loses loved ones. He loses his freedom. He loses his sight.

But the story of God's claim on his life and the hoped for deliverance marked by his birth narrative never wavers, even as a grown up Samson wavers in his faith and his actions. When he falters, God does not let go. God keeps on keeping on, continually working on and working through Samson so that even a fraction of God's plans might come to

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid 845.

fruition. God is the source of deliverance, not one person nor one governmental structure. God alone is God.

We have a lot to learn from this messy story with a beautiful beginning. For many of us, our stories are messy with beautiful beginnings. We bear the gifts of God's people, formed in hope and created to be instruments of peacemaking, justice and love. Yet we falter—as individuals and as members of fractured generations who prioritize profit over peacemaking, fame over friendship, status over sanctification. We fix our hearts and our hope on a vision for this world in which love rules and justice reigns—a justice that prioritizes the needs of the vulnerable and shows mercy to the marginalized. We work and pray and strive that we might not only witness this vision enacted, but that we might be a part of this dream coming true.

But we see brokenness all around. We see brokenness in our own lives—in the sharp tone we take with our spouse; in the way in which we hoard our “stuff”, in the fear that holds us back from taking a stand when we witness injustice. And boy oh boy do we see brokenness in our country and in our world.

We live in a nation where bandages we thought had been healing divides are being peeled off only to find that wounds are still gaping. The events in Charlottesville from a few weeks ago have brought into the light a centuries' old reality that we prefer to ignore—that racism is alive and well in many hateful forms. Story after story is being brought into the light and exposed for what it is: hate, denigration, evil.

We see that promises made in our government's documents of origin mean different things to different people. For example, the rules are apparently different if you are, say, a white sheriff in Arizona or a migrant worker in Arizona. Or your willingness to put your life on the line for our country means something different if you are, say, a cis-gender man or a transgender man—even if you have served our country in the armed services for more than a decade. And who are we kidding? When we look back to the origin story of our country we know that the Declaration of Independence meant something quite different to Christian men of European descent than it did to Natives of this country—or to enslaved Africans or to women.

But hope comes to us in the text for today. For we see a story in which human sinfulness does not have the final say, for God is faithful still. God delivers in spite of Samson's arrogance and disobedience. God restores in spite of Philistine deception and Samson's sense of impenetrability. God doesn't give up on us—even when we give up on one another, or even ourselves.

This is what gives me hope, as I write a journal for my son and as I raise him up in this broken world. As I listen for his soft breath in the bassinet beside our bed, I do my best to shield him from all that could cause harm. I do my best, knowing all the while that if I can't even shield him from the stuffy nose he has I won't be able to shield him from the fact that not everyone really thinks that all people should be treated equally. But that's not cause to give up or hide—that's reason to make change. And as I do my best to

stand against all that can hurt him, and look frantically for more that I can do, it is God's faithfulness that gives me hope. It even gives me some courage. The story of our faith replays this truth, over and over again. It is a story that points to God's justice in the face of injustice, of God's mercy in the face of sin, of God's love in the face of hate, of God's redemption in the face of despair.

And God raises up people in each generation to give voice to these truths and to bear witness to God's plan for humanity: people like those who drafted and adopted the Theological Declaration at Barman against Hitler's claim that he was the head of the church, articulating their claim that Christ alone is the head of the church; people like those who marched on Washington with arms locked together singing of freedom; people like the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who proclaimed boldly a kingdom vision of equality and unity 54 years ago tomorrow.

May we see that our origin story is grounded in God. Our roots go back to the one who made us, redeemed us and sustains us in love. As rhetoric flies trying to compel us to be something else, may we stand firm in our awareness of who we are and whose we are. For God has not let go of us yet.

Thanks be to God.