



The Most Fascinating People: Samson

TEXT
Judges 16:4–22

July 5, 2015 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Samson is the biblical hero celebrated for his physical strength, but he shows that he also has his share of weakness. For one thing, he is obviously the sleepest person in the history of ancient Israel. He is no doubt the dumbest person as well. There is a lot in the story of Samson that I find more than a little troublesome. He is promiscuous, one woman after another, all from among the Philistines.

Not only that, he is violent. He kills a lion — with his bare hands.¹ Then he kills a thousand Philistines, armed with no more than the jawbone of an ass.² And in the end, motivated solely by a desire for revenge, he pushes apart columns supporting what must have been a tremendous house, bringing the entire house down and killing “more in his death than in his life.”³ It kills Samson as well.

Samson is touted as a biblical hero, but this is a violent story about a violent man. Why did people of faith keep telling this story?

Sometimes the importance of a story results from how you read it.

Parson Weems wrote a biography of George Washington in 1800.⁴ He told the story of

George Washington and the cherry tree. It was repeated in the old McGuffey Readers. Did any of you read those?

The story goes that young George chopped down his father’s cherry tree. When confronted about it, George’s response was, “I cannot tell a lie; I chopped down the cherry tree.” It’s a wonderful story. But later historians have questioned the veracity of the story and believe it is apocryphal. In other words, most now believe the story about telling the truth may not be true.

For those captured by a literal mind, this might be a problem; but it seems to me it’s a story that’s still worth telling. It still declares a truth that we need to know. The importance of some stories is connected to how we read them.

There are some parallels with the Samson story. This is not a story about physical strength. It is not a story about crushing your enemies. But it tells a truth about strength that we need to remember.

If we take this story literally, it creates all kinds of problems. For starters, why would God take Samson’s strength away from him because he got a haircut? And why would God restore Samson’s strength to him so that

he could enact revenge on the Philistines who had blinded him?

This is what I think this story is about. Samson had a calling. His was a God-given calling that was set before he was born. But Samson is casual about his calling. I think this story points out how easy it is to be casual about our calling.

Later, the Philistines would boast of Goliath. If Israel ever had her own Goliath, it would have been Samson. He was gifted with strength. He was called to use his strength to help Israel push back the Philistines. This is a military reality; but it is even more so a spiritual reality. For as Israel began to mingle with other nations, the question arose: What sets us apart from others?

Samson says over and over again, *If you do this to me, I will be just like anyone else. If you do that to me, I will be just like anyone else.*

It’s more than conversation; it’s the reminder that as people of faith, we are not always to be just like everyone else. Sometimes, because of our faith in God, we live in a way that is different from those around us. That is our calling.

Samson was casual about his calling. Why do I say he was casual? Samson was a Nazirite.

Nazirites were those who, for a season — or in Samson’s case, for a lifetime — were set apart.

Nazirites embraced particular practices which set them apart.⁵ They were to refrain from drinking wine — or even eating grapes. They didn’t touch anything dead. It was a practice to emphasize the focus on life. And they didn’t cut their hair. I know it sounds odd, but Nazirites didn’t cut their hair.

Soon, they became noticeable, as they stood out. As these long-haired, corpse-avoiding teetotalers walked around, they were visual reminders to those around them that Israel was not called to be just like other people, but to be set apart.

It’s a bit like wearing a clerical collar today. Sometimes I think I should wear a clerical collar, not just a tie like everyone else. The collar doesn’t make one more holy, but it does remind the one who wears it and those around that we are called to live in a certain way, the way of Christ.

These long-haired Nazirites were ancient clerical collars.

But Samson was casual about this calling. He ate honey from a hive that formed in the carcass of a dead lion.⁶ It doesn’t say he touched the dead lion. Maybe he just dipped his hand in and retrieved the honey without touching the carcass. But it sure shows he was casual about his calling.

He also had a wedding celebration, and the text simply said they had a feast, “as the young men were accustomed to do.”⁷ Now maybe it’s just me.

It doesn’t specify that there was wine at this feast, but “as the young men were accustomed to do” makes you wonder. Samson seems casual.

But the unambiguous straw that broke Samson’s bicep was the haircut.

Haircuts can be complicated. I remember as a child my mother insisting that I had to cut my hair. I don’t know why; it was only down to my shoulders. My sister’s hair was much longer. But Mom insisted, so I sat on a stool in our kitchen. She was armed with clippers and a bowl. My hair was falling around me, and tears were crawling down my cheeks. Oh, the trauma. It hurts me now to think about it.

For Samson, this was his first haircut in his whole life. When his hair fell into Delilah’s hands, Samson’s gift of strength was gone.

Why would this be such an offense? Nazirites weren’t supposed to cut their hair, but when they did, they were supposed to offer their hair to God. Their hair was made as an offering to God.⁸

A rabbi friend of mine told me once that because hair never stopped growing, it was assumed that the hair was the part of the body that was most alive. It’s always growing.

So for a Nazirite to offer hair to God was symbolic of offering his life to God. Samson is called to give his life to God. We are all called to do the same. Is this story making sense now?

Samson takes what belongs to God and gives it to Delilah.

If I understand the text, the point is this: To be truly faithful

to and not casual about the call of God requires strength.

Some of you have reached out to me in recent weeks regarding the Supreme Court decision that same-sex couples had the right to marry. I am surprised at how quickly the nation has changed her mind on this matter. When I joined you 11 years ago, I didn’t think that in my lifetime it would be possible for same-gender couples to be married in the Presbyterian Church.

But now, not only has the court declared it the law of the land, the Presbyterian Church has declared it a faithful practice. For most among us, this only makes sense. For others, you used to think this was wrong; but like me, you have changed your mind and now you celebrate this news. And for others, the court’s decision was confusing and difficult. I understand.

And while this is the law of the land now, there is still conversation that needs to be had. This week, both the governor and leaders in the state house said that same-sex couples will not be treated the same as heterosexual couples. There will be two separate categories for marriages in Kansas. The governor wants to prohibit homosexual couples from changing their names on driver’s licenses.

They haven’t decided if homosexual couples can file joint tax returns, and the state has not extended health insurance coverage to government workers who are in same-gender marriages.⁹ So in Kansas, you can get married, but yours will be a second-class marriage. Topeka

has some history with making separate categories for citizens. We need to remember our history. A marriage is a marriage, and they should not be treated separately — but they should be treated equally.

With all this in the air, the local NBC station reached out to us this week. Some of you may have seen the report on TV. Ms. Hawley seemed a little disappointed when I told her that this would not split us wide open. We don't have second-class members in this church family.

She said, "But this will be a big change for your congregation, right?"

I thought: "I'm 55 years old; I'm not as worried about change as I used to be. It's about time that people loving each other is no longer seen as a threat or an abomination. If we have learned anything about ourselves in recent months, it is that we could benefit from a few changes in our nation."

What I wish I had told her is that you at Village are not casual about your faith.

We know that following the calling of Jesus is not just something we think; it shows up in how we treat each other. I wish I had told her that we have people who don't vote the same way, but they still fill grocery bags together every Tuesday at the pantry. We have people who don't fall in love the same way, but they pray together in this room every week.

We have people who don't think alike about certain Bible passages, but they sing their

faith together every Sunday in worship.

That kind of unity takes strength — even courage. But it shows up when we are not casual about our calling.

I didn't preach last Sunday, so I attended the early service to hear Jenny's wonderful sermon about James. After worshipping here, I joined a handful of Village members at the Metropolitan Missionary Baptist Church in Ivanhoe. There was a moment that will stick with me. I rounded a hallway corner and came face to face with a woman about my age. We shook hands, but in her eyes, I think I saw fear. I think she was afraid of me. I understand that. It was ten days after Charleston. Churches are being burned across the country. What I saw in her eyes was fear. But what she *said* to me was, "Welcome to Metropolitan; you are welcome here."

She was afraid, but she was not casual about her calling. It takes strength. And she showed me what that kind of fidelity to our calling looks like. You might say she was a Nazirite.

If I understand this story, it's not a story about physical strength. And it's not really a story about fighting one's enemies. It is a story about who we are called to be.

She said, "Samson, how can I cause you to take what belongs to God and to casually throw it away?" He said, "Shave my head, and I will be like anyone else."

There will be moments when living as a Christian is hard. And sometimes you may feel that you

do not have the strength. But remember, the strength is not a possession; it is a gift. So when you choose to be faithful, trust that God will give the strength. Of that I am confident — in part, because I have seen it.

¹Judges 14:6

²Judges 15:15

³Judges 16:30

⁴*The Life of Washington* (1800), written by Mason Locke Weems, known as Parson Weems.

⁵The observances of the Nazirites is found in Numbers 6.

⁶Judges 14:8–9

⁷Judges 14:10

⁸Numbers 6:18f

⁹*The Kansas City Star*, "Kansas Mulls Law on Faith," John Hanna, July 3, 2015

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's Web site: www.villagepres.org/sermons.