***I LOVE TO TELL THE STORY: SAMSON AND DELILAH***

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Texts: Judges 13:1-5, 24-25; 16:4-22 and Matthew 12:15-21

One of the challenges in this pandemic for some of us who are accustomed to a certain daily routine is the loss of early morning workouts at the gym. I have always contended that working out at the gym and playing basketball are for me a lot cheaper than therapy – and more fun. When gyms closed, exercise equipment suddenly was harder to find than N-95 masks and oregano! While some gyms have now reopened, there is still some hesitancy to race back to those sweaty environments to breathe hard and share equipment with gasping neighbors in the midst of a pandemic of airborne particles. As a result, some folks have cobbled together in-home gyms while others have found creative alternatives to strengthen muscles, get the heart pumping, and ease anxious minds!

A few years ago, a friend gave me a t-shirt; on the front was a caricature of a brawny male figure with bulging muscles and flowing black hair pushing apart two crumbling temple columns; beneath the picture in bold print was the inscription: *God’s Gym*. On the back of the t-shirt was a verse of scripture: “*Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord.*” The quote is from Zechariah 4:6, but the figure on the front is not Zechariah; it is Samson – the biblical Hulk and paragon of strength for roughly the last 3,000 years! His name conjures up images of great strength, a fact not lost on a multitude of modern manufacturers who have appropriated his name to make things like *Samson Airline Microphones* which claim to be “fitness-rated to withstand the demands by fitness pros in rugged group exercise classes”, *Samson rope* for use by fishermen to deliver strength in “grueling environments”, the *Samson workout* that supposedly pushes muscles to their max, and of course the supposedly indestructible *Samsonite luggage*. Given the images of strength and power associated with Samson, why pair that verse from Zechariah with that musclebound picture on the t-shirt? Why declare God’s spirit to be greater than might or power, and then picture the consummate heroic hulk in Samson? Those who know Samson’s story know this is no paradox, for Samson’s story is the living illustration of Zechariah’s words: “*Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord*.”

Though Samson’s story is told in the Book of Judges, Samson was less a judge than a one-man wrecking crew. He had the strength of an ox, the finesse of a charging bull elephant, and the gentle disposition of an angry pit bull. He demonstrated no great wisdom or discernment, just a wry wit and an explosive temper. He led no army; he was his own army in a one-man crusade against the Philistines who had oppressed Israel for forty years with high tech weapons and a nasty attitude. The Israelites perceived it as their punishment for doing “what was evil in the sight of the Lord.” Among a people beaten and battered by Philistine hands, Samson stood as a beacon of hope that Israel might one day be freed.

His deeds are legendary and Scripture recounts them – killing a thousand Philistines with just the jawbone of a donkey, ripping apart a ferocious lion with his bare hands, burning Philistine crops by tying torches to fox tails, toppling the pillars of the Philistine temple with a mighty stretch as depicted on that t-shirt. These random acts of violence brought Israel no decisive victory or freedom, but did offer defiant hope to a defeated nation. Samson stands in contrast to the wise and faithful judge Deborah and the chronic skeptic Gideon whose stories are also told in the Book of Judges. What then do Samson and his tales of terror offer to the roots of our faith? Is he just an action hero or might he be an inspiration?

Samson’s birth was clearly an inspiration. An angel of the Lord came to a barren woman whose hopes for children were as forlorn as her hopes for the freedom of her oppressed people. An angel came to her, as to Sarah, as to Elizabeth, as to Mary, with the good news that she would be an agent of God’s salvation; she would bear a child who would be the instrument for the beginning of God’s deliverance. The child was to be a nazirite – a child set apart – who was to refuse all alcohol, unclean food, and haircuts. He was to be set apart for a purpose: to begin to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines. In this promise of a child was the hope-filled promise that God would redeem Israel from her oppression. This nameless woman, the wife of Manoah the Danite, believed that good news, and in time the promise was fulfilled in the birth of a son.

God chose an ordinary person, a woman of humble roots and hollow hopes, to fulfill God’s gracious purpose for God’s people. From Noah to Mary and the disciples, we see God’s hand at work in the lives of unexceptional people who sought no glory or mantles of leadership. Samson’s mother was such a woman. We err if we believe that God no longer chooses such ordinary people for extraordinary tasks. The hand of God which chose Samson’s mother continues to choose ordinary people to do the work of the Lord. It may not be as miraculous as bearing a son for salvation from a barren womb; it may be no more miraculous than giving a cup of cold water to the least of those among us; it may be no more amazing than offering comfort to someone who grieves or a visit to someone who is lonely or a meal to someone who is hungry or a helping hand to those cleaning up from a flood. God touches human lives with human hands; God speaks to human hearts with human tongues. You and I, as ordinary as we are, may be chosen to put those hands or tongues to work for God’s good purposes with the assurance that God is with us. It is not by might, nor by power, but by God’s spirit that we can accomplish anything for God.

But Samson’s mother was not on the front of my t-shirt. Samson was. From his youth, says the text, “*the Lord blessed him, and the spirit of the Lord began to stir him…*” The spirit of the Lord was shaping him into the holy destructive force that he would prove to be. It was not his long hair or his tee-totaling ways or his diet or his workout schedule that gave him his legendary strength and courage. It was the spirit of the Lord that inspired him. The secret to Samson’s strength was the gift of the spirit with which he was blessed because he had been set apart for the Lord from his birth! His mother and father honored that calling in him; as an adult the responsibility lay with Samson.

For the most part, Samson honored that calling – he followed the rules set down by the angel, and as his hair grew, so did his strength. But it all came crashing down with the arrival of Delilah, a woman with her own agenda. It is not clear whether Delilah was a Philistine or an Israelite, but it is clear that her loyalty could be bought for a price, and the Philistines were willing to pay that price in order to learn the source of Samson’s strength. Samson’s passion or ego were too great to see past her seductive beauty to the treachery that lay behind her smile.

As you heard, Delilah nagged Samson to tell her the secret of his strength. Samson saw it as a game. He told her that if he were bound with fresh bowstrings his strength would leave him; he said that if he was bound with new ropes he would be helpless; he suggested that weaving his hair into a web would make him weak. Each time that Delilah put these confessions to the test, Samson broke free with undiminished strength and a smile on his face. The secret of his strength – the nazirite pledge to let his hair grow as a sign of faithfulness to God – remained unexposed, and Samson remained free. After each of these episodes Delilah pouted and suggested that Samson’s lies reflected his lack of love for her. She encouraged Samson to place his love for her above his pledge to God.

Eventually she succeeded. As you heard, the writer of Judges says, “*Finally, after Delilah had nagged him with her words day after day, and pestered him, Samson was tired to death. So he told her his whole secret.*” There is a biblical proverb that says, “*Like water dripping on a rainy day, so is a contentious woman.*” Delilah was that kind of contentious woman, nagging Samson until, in a moment of weakness, he gave in and revealed the secret of his strength. Shortly thereafter as Samson lay asleep in Delilah’s lap, the Philistines came, cut his hair, gouged out his eyes, and led him in shackles to prison. Samson was defenseless, for he had given up the spirit in giving up his secret. He had the blessings of God upon him, the spirit of God to inspire him, and he gave it all away. The temptation was too great, his patience wore thin, he was too weak of character. It is a very human thing to do what he did – give in to temptation.

What Delilahs tempt you? *Greed* offers the lure of money and status. If you will only give up your faithful spirit and concentrate on making all the money you can, then you will have real power and happiness. *Prejudice* tempts us to give up a loving spirit with the promise of dominant power, the weapon of arbitrary hate, and the satisfaction of self-righteous love. In these pandemic days *self-centered impatience* tempts us to set aside the precautions we take to keep ourselves and others safe in order to satisfy our hunger for contact with others or a return to “normal’ as we knew it. There are a host of Delilahs in our lives that try to draw us away from faithfulness to God and in so doing, sap our strength. What nags and pesters and tempts you to give up a faithful spirit with the promise of something better and so weakens your relationship with God?

The truth is that none of those temptations offer the power and promise of God’s spirit. Samson found that out the hard way. The spirit of the Lord was the source of his strength; without it, he was vulnerable and miserable. It was that same spirit that was at work in and through Jesus as we heard in Matthew’s Gospel, at work through him to heal, exorcise demons, and perform miracles. It is that same Spirit which inspires people today to do what they could not do alone.

When Samson realized what he had done that had resulted in the loss of God’s spirit, he repented of his mistake. He prayed to the Lord from his pain, prayed that the Lord might strengthen him one last time. He prayed from behind blind eyes with the curses of three thousand Philistines raining down on him and with his chained hands stretched out against the pillars of the temple of a Philistine god. He prayed as the Philistines celebrated the apparent triumph of their god over Samson and his god. He prayed for God’s spirit to return, and offered his life in God’ service. His prayer was heard; his request was granted. The spirit returned and with it his strength; with a mighty stretch, the pillars of the temple came crashing down on the Philistines and on Samson - *not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord*.

Three thousand years later, we remember his story. It is a cautionary tale about the perils of giving in to temptation. It is an inspiring story of what God can do by the power of God’s Spirit. It is a story that urges us to be faithful to God in the face of temptation. It is a story of redemption as God hears Samson’s prayer and grants his one last request. But at heart Samson’s story is God’s story, a story of the strength, power, and faithfulness of God through God’s spirit. And so the gist of Samson’s story is found not on the front of that t-shirt with his bulging biceps bringing down the pillars of the temple, but on the back in those words of Zechariah – *Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord!* Amen