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the SAVIOUR

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“Marvel: Samson”

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Judges 15:14-17 (CEB)

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Samson is one of those figures that transcends religious tradition. Whether or not you grew up attending Sunday School or even reading the Bible, there’s a good chance you know Samson’s name and a few things about him. What woman was Samson involved with? (Delilah) What was his superpower? (strength) What physical attribute led to his downfall? (hair) Samson is familiar to us. Much of Samson’s story reads like folklore, fantastic accounts of superhuman strength and wily cleverness, like those of Paul Bunyan or John Henry.

And yet, there are parts of Samson’s story that are less frequently read or told. While the parts of his story we *do* know make for a cautionary tale, we can learn a great deal more by exploring the rest of the story. Whether it happened this way or not, there is truth in it.

We find Samson in the Book of Judges, the same book from which we read last week when Rev. Moseng taught about Deborah. This story comes later in the book. Samson would turn out to be the last of the leaders in the judges’ tradition of Israel’s story. The drama begins even before Samson appears. The Israelites were unfaithful to God and grew weak, allowing the Philistines to rule over them for 40 years. Like other heroic figures in the Bible, Samson was born miraculously to childless parents. He was a nazirite, one who is “set apart” for a special purpose by God. As such, he was to avoid alcohol, or anything produced from the vineyard and he must never cut his hair. He would be the one to begin Israel’s rescue from the Philistines.

But Samson’s tale gets off to a rough start. The first thing we learn about his adult life is that he traveled to the Canaanite city of Timnah and found a Philistine woman he wanted to marry. The Israelites had been forbidden to marry anyone who was not an Israelite, and intermarriage was one of the reasons cited for the weakening of their nation. If Samson was the one who was to begin Israel’s deliverance from the Philistines, marrying a Philistine woman was not a good way to begin. His parents pointed this out. But Samson was insistent...and rather petulant, too. “Get her for me!” he demanded. So they all traveled to Timnah to meet her.

On the way, they passed through a vineyard. Another bad sign, since Samson was to avoid anything that came from a vineyard. They became separated as they walked along. Suddenly, out of nowhere a lion charged at Samson. In his first show of exceptional strength, Samson killed the lion with his bare hands, literally tearing it apart. Apparently, he didn’t think this was worth mentioning to his parents because he never said a word about it. They arrived in Timnah, met the girl and her family, negotiated the marriage contract, then returned home.

When it was time for the wedding, Samson returned to Timnah. On the way, he passed through the same vineyard and saw the dead lion still lying where he had left it. A swarm of bees had taken up residence in the carcass and were making honey. Samson scooped some of the honey from the lion and ate it, and collected some for his parents, too. If being in the vineyard was a borderline infraction, this was *way* over the line. Coming into contact a dead animal made one ritually unclean in the Hebrew tradition, and nazirites were expressly forbidden to touch anything dead, much less eat from it. Samson’s actions defiled both himself and his parents, who were unaware of the honey’s origin.

The time came for the wedding. Samson threw a feast for his guests, “as was the custom for young men,” the scripture tells us. The Hebrew word used for feast is not the word typically used to depict a banquet. This connotes something more like a drinking party. *Strike two, Samson. No drinking allowed.* But Samson was feeling pretty good about himself. He was stronger than anyone else he knew, he had handpicked a beautiful woman to be his wife, and his growing popularity went to his head. He devised a clever riddle and wagered with 30 guests that they couldn’t solve it. If they couldn’t, each of them would have to give him a set of clothes for his wardrobe. But if they did, Samson would have to give each of *them* a new set of clothes.

Out of the eater there came something to eat.

Out of the strong there came something sweet.

For three days, they tried to solve the riddle but couldn't. Finally, they approached Samson's bride, threatening to kill her and her family if she didn't reveal the answer. She didn't tell Samson of the threat but asked him to tell her the secret. For days, she cried every time she was with him, begging him over and over to give her the answer. Finally, he relented, telling her the answer and the story behind it. She immediately went to her people and told them.

When the Philistines gave the correct answer, Samson knew he'd been betrayed. His rage was uncontrollable. He went to the nearby Philistine city of Ashkelon and murdered 30 men, taking their clothes, and delivering them as payment for his wager. His ego was bruised, his triumph turned to defeat, and his celebration spoiled. He stormed off, heading for home, leaving his wife behind.

But Samson still pined for her, and at harvest time, he went back to Timnah to see her. When he arrived at the house, her father wouldn't let him in. After Samson had left, her father married her to another man, one of the guests from their own wedding. Samson was beside himself with anger. He vowed revenge, not just against her or her family, but the whole village. He trapped 300 foxes, tied their tails together in pairs with a lit torch between them, and set them loose in the fields surrounding the town. Chaos ensued, and the entire harvest was burned to the ground. The neighbors learned who was behind the mayhem and why, and in retaliation killed Samson's wife and her father. The violence only escalated from there. Samson attacked those who had killed his wife and slaughtered them all. Then he went into hiding.

The surrounding Philistine communities launched a manhunt and attacked a Judean city. Some of the people of Judah went to where Samson was hiding. "What have you done? Don't you know that the Philistines rule over us? Now you've provoked them to even more violence."

Samson's reply revealed his character. "I only did to them what they did to me."

Samson reluctantly agreed to be handed over to the Philistines. But as soon as the Philistines approached, Samson broke free of the ropes that bound him. He picked up the jawbone of a donkey lying nearby and used it as a weapon. He killed a thousand Philistines, then bragged about what he'd done. He was touted as a hero and led Israel for 20 years.

Samson's questionable decision making continued. He went to Gaza to visit a prostitute. The Philistines set a trap for him, planning to attack him at the gates in the morning when he left. But Samson caught wind of the plot and left in the middle of the night. As he left the city, he pulled up the city gates by their posts and carried them some 40 miles home to symbolize his power over the Philistines. Interesting story to record in the Bible, don't you think?

Sometime later, Samson fell in love with a woman named Delilah. The Philistine rulers saw in her an opportunity to rid themselves of Israel's strong man. They bribed Delilah to seduce Samson and find out the secret behind his strength. Three times she begged him to tell her the source of his power. Three times he made up a story. *Tie my hands with new bowstrings. Bind me with new ropes. Braid my hair into a web.* Each time, Delilah tried what Samson told her. Each time, Samson easily broke his bonds at the first suggestion of danger.

Delilah accused Samson of not loving her, of making a fool of her and a mockery of their relationship. Day after day, she begged him to tell her the truth, pestering him until he finally gave in. "If you shave my head, my strength will fade and I'll be like any other man."

Delilah sent word to the Philistine rulers, and that night she coaxed Samson to sleep with his head on her lap. While he slept, she summoned a man to cut off his hair. When the attackers approached, Samson leapt up to defend himself. But it was no use. He was easily overpowered. They tied him up, gouged out his eyes, and dragged him off into forced labor.

After that, Samson became something of a showpiece among the Philistines, a symbol of their dominance over their enemies. They would drag him chained from the mills and put on display; a former hero reduced to nothing more than a spectacle of failure. At the annual festival for the Philistine god Dagon, the rulers and leading citizens gathered in the temple to feast. They called for Samson to be brought out so they could mock him again. Staggering in his chains, Samson played up his weakness. He asked to be positioned near the central pillars so he could hold himself upright. Blind, humiliated, and humbled at last, Samson prayed that God would grant him one last moment of strength. He pushed against the pillars with all his might, and the temple collapsed, killing him and all the Philistines inside.

Samson was certainly a marvel. He had a miraculous birth, was chosen as God's instrument to usher in freedom from the Philistines and was given superhuman strength to fulfill his calling. But from the very beginning, Samson's perspective was fatally flawed. He thought his good looks, clever wit, and exceptional strength were his to exploit. He was a womanizer who manipulated his parents, stumped his friends, and outfoxed his enemies. He used violence not

only to defeat his adversaries, but to settle personal grudges and exact revenge. He was arrogant, hotheaded, a gambler and a murderer. He broke every vow – drinking and defiling himself until only one last vow remained. When he succumbed to Delilah’s questioning, there was nothing left to save him but a trail of broken promises.

It is important to note that while women are involved in Samson’s failures, none of them acted on their own or were free to choose another way. Each of them was used by the men around them to achieve their means. As Rev. Moseng pointed out last week, this is a thread that runs throughout the Book of Judges. As the role of women diminished, so too did the fate of the nation of Israel. History may portray Delilah as the villain, but the Biblical record tells a different story. She was just another pawn in the game of power and violence.

Samson’s story is often interpreted as a metaphor for Israel. Called and set apart for a special purpose, blessed with unique gifts and close relationship with God, Biblical Israel lost its way, failed to keep the covenant, forged unholy alliances, and placed its hope in its own strength. The people’s reckless self-reliance and stubbornness divided the nation, and both kingdoms would eventually fall violently to foreign powers. But just as the hair on Samson’s head began to regrow the moment it was cut, so a remnant of Israel would remain, a covenant promise God would keep even when the people did not.

But if we read this simply as an interesting story or as a symbol for an ancient people, we are as foolish and short-sighted as Samson. Samson’s story could easily be our story, too. What gifts have we been given? For what purpose does God intend them? Have we used those gifts to serve God, or have we treated our blessings as if they came from us? Is what we achieve for God’s glory or our own? When things go wrong, do we accept responsibility and refocus our priorities, or do we point fingers of blame and forge ahead with our own agendas?

Bishop John Hopkins once shared a story of his then toddler grandson. He was at that stage when he was able to pull himself up on things but not really walking yet. At that age, anything and everything is a crutch, from a chair to a curtain to the family dog. John and Elaine were visiting one day, marveling at their handsome, intelligent, exceptional grandchild. He was soaking in the attention. He pulled himself up by the coffee table and smiled for their approval, which they were happy to give. Then, just at his moment of triumph, he let go of the table, determined to show that he could do it on his own. And for a moment, he could. But then down he went, right on his diaper. For Bishop Hopkins, that story served as a powerful illustration. “That’s what sin looks like. When we forget what got us here and try to go it alone, we deceive ourselves. Pride takes over, and we set ourselves up for a fall.”

Even though Samson was blind to the collision course of his own arrogance, in his physical blindness he was at last able to see the error of his ways. God granted him one final moment of grace. For Samson, it was a small triumph at the end of a great tragedy. But for God’s people, it was a step on the path toward liberation. God will *always* make a way. But God invites us to be *part* of the story, not to get there in spite of us. Whatever you have, remember where it came from and use it for God. Let’s be part of God’s story, not just our own. Amen.