

“EYELESS IN GAZA”
Sermon for January 4, 2009
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The scripture for this morning is the beginning of the story of Samson. You’ve seen the movie. Victor Mature and Hedy Lamarr. It starts with one of those dramatic birth predictions like the story of the birth of Isaac to barren Sarah, and the birth of Samuel to barren Hannah. New Testament writers used similar elements to describe foretelling the births of John the Baptist and, of course, Jesus.

Most everyone knows the basics of the story of Samson and Delilah; but there are a couple of other stories about Samson that describe an ancient enmity between the people of Israel and the people of Gaza.

Just to summarize the Biblical history briefly—Joshua led the Hebrews on a conquest of the land of Canaan. According to the book of Joshua, the twelve tribes of Israel had no problem destroying all their enemies who just happened to be living in the Promised Land before the Israelites arrived. Sort of like the way the Europeans dealt with the Native Americans. Same with the Canaanites. Then along came the Hebrews. And if that wasn’t enough, along came the Philistines, too.

The Book of Judges tells how the Hebrews developed and established the nation of Israel in the land of Canaan. And when you get down into the details of what happened, it wasn’t as simple as an inexorable march of conquest from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean like it’s described in the Book of Joshua. It was more like the long and complex expansion of the Euro-Americans from Massachusetts to California with all the skirmishes and interactions along the way.

Apparently the Philistines showed up in that strip of land between Israel and Egypt shortly after the Hebrews arrived—roughly 3500 years ago. They established a city at Gaza and conflict developed with Israel. Sometimes the Philistines prevailed, sometimes the Israelites. The tribe of Dan had been assigned territory in the southern most part of Israel, the

friction point between Israel and the Philistines. As we read today's newspaper, can we just substitute the word "Palestinian" for Philistine or Canaanite here? No it isn't quite that simple—but the conflicts and mutual resentments persist.

Samson's father, Manoah, was a devout and humble member of the tribe of Dan. His wife was visited by an angel who brought "Good news of great joy," as it was put by another angel on another occasion. The prophecy was a little vague, but it included the promise that Samson "shall begin to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines." It sounds like a messianic prophecy. The name "Samson" has the same root as "sunshine" and conveys the idea of his importance. (He was the original "Light of the World"!)

Along with the prophecy came an obligation. Samson would be set aside as a "Nazirite" from birth. You can read the details of what it means to be a Nazirite in the Book of Numbers, but here is a simplified description. A person could decide to undertake a spiritual discipline for a certain period of time (usually a month or a few months) and follow the three Nazirite regulations: that is—no alcohol, no association with unclean things (especially dead bodies), and no haircuts. Sounds simple enough, just three little rules to follow for a short time and it makes one feel closer to God. But Samson was to follow the Nazirite rules for his entire life, and in return he was given tremendous physical strength.

Delilah was not the first Philistine woman that Samson was involved with. The first Philistine woman he fell for is not named, but imagine the despair that Manoah and his wife felt when Samson told them he wanted to marry a Philistine woman. According to the Book of Judges they said to him, quote, "Is there not a woman among your kin or among our people, that you must go to take a wife from the Philistines? But Samson said to his father, 'Get her for me, because she pleases me.' His father and mother did not know that this was from the Lord; for he was seeking a pretext to act against the Philistines." End quote.

What? Wait a minute! God is behind this whole thing? God is setting them up for conflict? God was seeking a pretext to act against the Philistines?

Remember in the movie when Samson kills the lion with his bare hands? That sets up a riddle that Samson puts before his bride's family. He bets them 30 fancy tuxedos (well the book says "festal garments" but who knows what a festal garment is anymore?) so he bets them 30 tuxedos that they can't explain the riddle. The prospective in-laws prevail upon Samson's fiancée to find out the answer. She nags him and nags him, eventually he caves in and tells her the secret. So they win the bet. Samson is incensed. He goes to a nearby town, kills 30 guys and takes their tuxedos to pay off the bet and storms back to Manoah's house to move back with his parents. Naturally, the bride marries the best man and they go off to start a family.

A few months later Samson cools off and goes back to claim his bride. She's long gone, but her father has a younger daughter so he offers her to Samson. Samson takes offense, so he catches 300 foxes and turns them tail to tail, puts a torch between

each pair of tails, lights the torches and sets the foxes running through the Philistine's farm land. Now it gets a little confusing. The Philistines go after the bride's father—who is himself a Philistine, Samson goes after the people who attacked the bride's father, so those Philistines go up to the tribe of Judah—cousins of the tribe of Dan that Samson belongs to. So then the Judeans go to get Samson to turn him over to the Philistines to get them off their backs. (Have you got all that? Moderate Palestinians attack Hamas to try to keep Israel from continuing air strikes in Gaza. Hezbollah and the Lebanese try to take back land they lost in the Golan Heights while Israel is distracted in the south. Meanwhile the Egyptians and the Jordanians are trying to figure out if the Iranians will intervene triggering a response from the Americans who have condemned Hamas as a terrorist organization that hides missile launch sites in mosques.)

3500 years of confusion, resentment, revenge—at best, constant bickering, finding enemies of my enemies who might be my friends.

The end of the story of Samson is the familiar story of Samson and Delilah. The Book of Judges says he fell in love with her. He's had trouble with Philistine women before, but Samson seems to be a slow learner. He looked like Arnold Schwarzenegger, but at this stage of his life he seems kind of slow on the uptake if you know what I mean. Three times he tells her a fib about the source of his strength, three times she follows the fib and tries to take his strength and every time she fails, she blames him for not telling her the truth about his vulnerability. She nags him and nags him, eventually he caves in and tells her the secret. So while he sleeps, she calls in a barber—remember the Nazirite vow? He loses his God-given strength, his enemies capture him and take him to Gaza. They gouge out his eyes and make him a slave to grind at the mill. But, the Book of Judges says, “the hair of his head begins to grow again after it had been shaved.”

“Eyeless in Gaza”—what a fate. Surrounded by enemies he can't even see. He broke his vow, and God in his Divine Righteousness has abandoned him and withdrawn the superhuman strength that He had given as a blessing to the one He had chosen before birth to begin to save Israel. Samson has squandered the potential and calling that God had proclaimed through the angel to his mother.

The blind poet John Milton expressed Samson's despair this way in Samson Agonistes:

***“Promise was that I
Should Israel from Philistian yoke deliver;
Ask for this great Deliverer now, and find him
Eyeless in Gaza at the mill with slaves,
Himself in bonds under Philistian yoke.”***

He gains some measure of revenge. They call to have him shown off in front of a banquet celebrating how their god, Dagon, had prevailed over the Israelite hero. It is brilliant how the Book of Judges focuses the story on fine detail. “Samson said to the

attendant who held him by the hand, 'Let me feel the pillars on which the house rests, so that I may lean against them.' ...Then Samson called to the Lord and said, 'Lord God, remember me and strengthen me only this once, O God, so that with this one act of revenge I may pay back the Philistines for my two eyes.' And Samson grasped the two middle pillars on which the house rested and he leaned his weight against them, his right hand on the one and his left hand on the other. ...He strained with all his might; and the house fell on the lords and all the people who were in it. So those he killed at his death were more than those he had killed during his life." Remember the scene in the movie—those great columns beginning to fall and pull the house down, banquet turns to panic.

3500 years. My God is greater than your God.

We celebrate reconciliation. We gather at a communion banquet to celebrate forgiveness and hope. How can we be instruments of our ideals when ancient enemies yearn for mutual slaughter? Again from Samson Agonistes John Milton gives Samson words of insight:

*...What if all foretold
Had been fulfill'd but through mine own default,
Whom have I to complain of but my self?...
O impotence of mind, in body strong!
But what is strength without a double share
Of wisdom, vast, unwieldy, burdensome,
Proudly secure, yet liable to fall...*

We have none to blame but ourselves, and what is strength without a double share of wisdom? The strength is vast, unwieldy, burdensome; and we are proudly secure, yet liable to fall.

As we and the leaders of our Nation and the World look again to Gaza; we pray for wisdom that we may be instruments of our own ideals.

Will you pray with me?