

O.T. Tales – 6

“The Problem With Long Hair and Wild Women”

Judges 13:1-5, 24-25

Sermon Preached by Pastor Rob Fulton

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Well, in case you didn't know it already, there is a real argument to be made for being careful about long hair and wild women. They can both get you into a world of trouble. And if you COMBINE the two...well, you'd better WATCH OUT! You might just find your world tumbling down around you.

The last time we were together, of course, of you will remember that the Hebrews were about to begin their conquest of the Promised Land...that goodly land flowing with milk and honey which God had promised would be theirs from that time forth and forever more. Well, under the leadership of Joshua, and with the help of Rahab, that saint in the house with red lights that we talked about a couple of weeks ago, the Israelites conquered the city of Jericho, and then went on to subdue the rest of the land of Canaan, all except for the coastal plain along the Mediterranean Sea where a race of people known as the Philistines lived. And that's where they ran smack dab into a brick wall, so to speak.

For years, the Israelites and the Philistines fought back and forth. First one would get the upper hand and then the other. But neither could win a decisive victory over the other. So the fighting went on.

At the same time, however, the Israelites were facing ANOTHER problem...namely, learning how to live as a people who were no longer strangers in a strange land, but as people with a home...with land...in a society. Not having experienced that sort of thing before, they began to copy many of the ways of the peoples they had conquered and whose land they had come to occupy. And that meant problems for these people who were supposed to be a people set apart...God's people...God's CHOSEN people...a people who were supposed to live ONLY according to the laws and teachings of Yahweh God...the God who had called them into being and watched over them and protected them and blessed them each and every step of their way.

Adopting the customs and adapting to the ways of the surrounding Canaanite culture, the people of Israel began to intermarry with foreigners...sacrifice to idols and worship the false god Ba-al...all in direct disobedience to the commandments to the one God of Israel.

Well, it was within that setting that the next period of Israel's history came into being...the period of the Judges. The Judges, you see, were strong men (and women) from the various tribes of Israel who rose up to lead the people during the time between the conquering of the Promised Land and before Israel began to have kings. They had enough charisma and power to raise an army, provide some leadership, and do well in fighting for both their nation and their religion. And most of them remained faithful to the God of Israel...and called on the people to do the same...MOST of them, I said.

Now, though there were some 14 judges mentioned in the biblical book by the same name, we hear most often only about three them: Deborah, whose cunning ways managed to defeat the enemy general Sisera by driving a tent peg through his head...Gideon, who conquered the Medianites and their army of thousands with only 300 of Israel's best men...and perhaps the most famous of all, Samson – an overgrown, muscle-bound hunk of a man with long hair and a taste for wild women – who led Israel for some 20 years. It is HIS story that we want to consider today. And here's how his story begins:

Judges 13:1-5, 24-25

Leader: Friends, rejoice and give thanks, for this is the Word of the Lord!

People: **Thanks be to God!**

“Spirit of the Living God”

So from the very beginning of his life, Samson had been “set apart” to be a Nazarite – a group of specially dedicated men who would drink no wine, never cut their hair and not shave their faces. In other words, he was one who would maintain, at all costs, the purity of the Hebrew people as a people dedicated ONLY to God rather than the heathen ways of the foreign people within whose land the Israelites had found themselves.

Yet, despite his auspicious beginnings, there is little about Samson’s life that we could call redeeming. From the time he was a young man, though he had been dedicated to the Lord and given special strength by God, he consciously and consistently broke every single one of the vows his parents had made for him...even going so far as to marry not just one Philistine woman, but two. It’s a fascinating story, well told with all the drama that a good storyteller can put into it.

Now, the Philistines, you will remember, were a nation of fierce warriors who inhabited the coastal area from Gaza in the south to Mt. Carmel in the north. And they were Israel’s greatest enemy. But since there were no sharp boundary lines drawn between nations and tribes at that time...and no passports or visas required to go from one country’s territory to another, Samson found himself one day in a Philistine town where he became enamored with a beautifully tempting, but tempestuous young woman whom he immediately decided he had to have as his wife. So he hurried home and like the over-grown, spoiled child that he was, he demanded that his parents get her for him. This was, of course, back in the day when all marriages and relationships had to be “arranged for” by parents paying handsome dowry to secure a spouse for their son.

Well, when Samson’s mother heard his demand, being the good Jewish mother that she was, she wailed (in her most nasal whine) “*A Philistine! Why must you break your poor old mother’s heart? Is there no woman within the entire nation of Israel for you to find as a wife except for a PHILISTINE?!? Why can’t you find a nice JEWISH girl to marry?*”

Though his parents didn’t realize it however, the scripture tells us that it was actually the Lord who was leading Samson to want to marry the Philistine woman, for the Lord was looking for a way to fight the Philistines because the Philistines, at that time, were ruling Israel.

Well, to make a long story short, let’s just say that the marriage didn’t work out very well, because, before the week of wedding celebrations were even over, Samson deserted his crying, wailing wife on their wedding night...his bride immediately took up with the best man whom SHE had wanted to marry all along...and Samson, muscle-bound brute that he was, killed a thousand Philistines with the jawbone of an ass in a fit of rage and revenge!

Now, you would have thought that after a fiasco like that, Samson would have been done with foreign women. But such was NOT the case! The second wild woman to get Samson into trouble was a harlot from Giza, the southernmost of the Philistine cities. When the Philistines heard that Samson was there and that he was enjoying the woman’s company in the privacy of her home, they laid a trap for him. They figured he would surely be staying the night so they planned to capture him first thing in the morning. Besides, they thought, the massive, heavy city gates would be closed all night preventing his escape. But Samson only stayed with the harlot until midnight, and then, taking hold of the city gate, he simply pulled it up – doors, posts and all. Putting them on his shoulders, he carried them to the top of the hill overlooking the city of Hebron, some thirty-eight miles away...again using his brute strength to get himself out of trouble.

Finally, Samson became interested in a woman a little closer to home...MUCH to his parent’s delight. But had they known what Delilah was REALLY like, they might have been happy with another Philistine woman!

Of all the wild and wicked women who had attracted Samson’s attention over the years, the beautiful and enchanting Delilah was, no doubt, the wildest and most wicked of all...just the sort of woman who was attracted to Samson’s muscle-bound body and long flowing hair.

Well, no sooner had Delilah wooed and won Samson with all her feminine charms than did the five Philistine kings come to her with a proposal. They would pay her the enormous sum of five thousand, five hundred silver coins if she could discover the source of Samson’s strength. That way, they thought, they could defeat this muscle-bound Israelite once and for all! And if there was anything Delilah loved more than muscle-bound men, it was money!

“Oh, Sammy dear,” she subtly began one day when they were relaxing together after a particularly torrid round of fun and games, *“what makes you so big and strong? How DID you get such wonderful muscles?”*

Now, Samson may have been a pushover for a pretty face, but he was no muscle-bound dummy. He wasn't ABOUT to tell Delilah the secret of his strength...at least not right away. So he decided to have a little fun with her and suggested that if he was bound with seven fresh bow strings, she could control him.

Well, Samson must have liked the idea of playing another little game with Delilah because he allowed Delilah to tie him up with those seven new bow strings just as he had suggested. And then she cried, *“Help! Help! The Philistines are here!”* But Samson just laughed and snapped the bow strings without even flexing the muscles in his little finger. And the Philistines, who really had gathered at Delilah's direction to capture Samson, quickly fled.

Delilah, of course, wasn't at all happy with Samson. *“You made a FOOL of me and used me as the brunt of your little joke,”* she cried. *“If you don't tell me what makes you so strong, I'll never SPEAK to you again,”* she pouted.

So Samson told her it was new ROPES that would sap his strength. And the whole little scene was repeated all over again.

Samson, of course, knew that his strength lay in his long hair. But he enjoyed toying and teasing the beautiful little Delilah. And he especially liked the way her bottom lip quivered when she was angry. So he told her that if his hair was woven into seven strands and tied up tightly with a pin, he would be as helpless as a baby. Which is precisely what Delilah did, only to discover that once again, Samson had played her for the fool such that the Philistines STILL couldn't get their man...and SHE couldn't get her money!

“How can you say that you love me?” she wailed. *“Three times you've made a fool of me and STILL haven't told me what makes you so strong. Please, oh PLEASE Samson – you big, strong, beautiful hunk you...TELL me what your secret is.”* And day after day she badgered him, until finally, growing sick and tired of hearing her whine...which Samson couldn't stand in a woman, he told her his secret. *“My strength is in my hair,”* he finally confessed. *“If you cut my hair, I'll change from Hulk Hogan into PeeWee Herman.”*

Well, when Delilah realized Samson had finally told her the TRUTH, she sent a message to the Philistines: Tonight would be the night they would get their man...and SHE would get her money. Maybe she got him drunk...or drugged his food...or wore him out playing “games”...we really don't know. But somehow she got Samson to sleep and then called in a barber who shaved Samson's head a bald as a baby's bottom.

When Samson awoke to the sound of Delilah's all too familiar cry, *“The Philistines are here,”* he didn't know that his strength had left him and he jumped up to defend himself as usual. But this time, he had no strength...for his hair was gone...and, as the scriptures tell us, *“the Lord had left him as well.”* The Philistines quickly captured him, put him in chains, poked his eyes out so that he could no longer see, and dragged him back to Giza where he had pulled up the city gates.

Well, the Philistines were finally happy. Delilah was finally happy. But Samson was definitely NOT happy. Chained to a grinding mill like a mule, Samson became the laughing stock of the entire city. The people came and jeered at him...and threw rotten eggs at him...and smashed tomatoes in his face...and generally made his life a miserable as he had once made theirs. And then, during a religious festival, Samson was taken to the Temple of Dagon, where he was chained between the temple's massive pillars while a drunken orgy was celebrated to honor their Philistine god. All kinds of Philistines were there...hundreds and thousands of men and women...along with the five Philistine kings who had so long sought Samson's downfall...all of them laughing and jeering and making fun of their now helpless nemesis.

Ah! But what no one seemed to notice in all the revelry, however, was that during his imprisonment, Samson's hair had begun to grow back! Standing there between the temple pillars, Samson turned his blinded eyes toward heaven, and in the only prayer the book of Judges ever records Samson uttering to the Lord...the only time Samson ever acknowledges something other than his long hair and mighty muscles being the source of his strength...Samson pleads with the Lord for power just one more time.

Summoning all his might and crying out to the Lord: *“May I die with these heathen Philistines,”* Samson gave a powerful shove against the massive pillars and the temple caved in upon both Samson and the Philistines, killing every last one of them, including the five kings and all their court...and Samson as well. And then, the book of Judges concludes his story by saying, *“And those Samson killed in his death outnumbered all of those he had killed during his lifetime.”* Mmmm!

Now, I suppose I could just sit down and leave this story of a Jewish hero right there. But for some reason, we Presbyterian preachers just can't do that. We've got to find SOME kind of meaning in what seems to be an otherwise UNMEANINGFUL chapter of Israel's history. So let me, if you will, draw several conclusions which occur to me from this unredeemed story of Samson's life. Maybe there are lessons and conclusions you might draw yourself...and I would encourage you to do so. But if I've got to find some kind of meaning in this story of Samson's life, then here's what I think it might be.

First of all, the story of Samson reminds me, once again, as I am OFTEN reminded when reading about some of the unlikely heroes in scripture, that God can and DOES use all KINDS of persons to do his work and work his will – even spoiled, conceited, impetuous, hot-headed, overgrown, muscle-bound bullies like Samson. In my way of thinking, there is little or nothing redeeming about Samson's life. There is nothing he did...nothing he said...nothing about his moral character that I would encourage us to emulate. And yet, fortunately, I am not Samson's judge. GOD is. And God called him and used him at a time when Israel needed someone like Samson. Which tells me that our God is a God of grace and mercy and oftentimes unsuffering patience. And that gives me great hope. For if God can use the like of someone like Samson, then surely...SURELY God can use the likes of people like you and me as well.

Secondly, I'm convinced that the story of Samson gives us all, individually and collectively, a warning about the use of power...whether it be the personal power of our words...or our strength...or our personalities...or our good looks...or our persuasive abilities...or our intelligence – or whether it be the collective power of our society -militarily...morally...socially...governmentally. If our power and strength are not used in the right ways...if they are used for purely personal gain...or in arbitrary ways...or in ways that are hurtful rather than helpful - that power may well bring about the destruction of not only other people, but ourselves as well...which is precisely what happened to Samson. Power and strength can be a good thing when used in the right way...God's way. But power and strength can bring about destruction with untold consequences when it is not channeled in the directions God would have us use it.

And finally, I think this Samson story tells us to be exceedingly careful about relying on any form or means of earthly, transitory power. Wit...intelligence...good looks...charm...beauty...persuasiveness...great strength...influential position – they are ALL fleeting. They will ALL pass away. When push comes to shove, the only REAL strength in life comes from the Lord...which, unfortunately, Samson realized all too late.

So let us pray to the Lord, our God that WE may not make the kinds of mistakes Samson made of trusting in something...ANYTHING...OTHER than the Lord in our lives. For, when push comes to shove, God...and God alone...as the Psalmist says...is our strength and our refuge...both now and forever more.

Amen...and AMEN!

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