

Eyes Wide Open

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Judges 16:4-31

I was young when my fascination for Samson and Delilah started. Children's bible—thinking Delilah was pretty—I think that I wanted to be like her
My affection for this story has changed over the years, but I have always had a particular interest in it.

As I have studied this text I keep asking myself why I like it so much...why am I almost obsessed with it?

On the surface level, I think people like this story because it resembles a lot of the popular movies right now. It is the classic "good guys" against the "bad guys"---hero/villain drama, filled with action and revenge.

The stereotype that goes along this storyline is that Samson is the ridiculously strong hero that saved the Israelites from the oppressive Philistines.
He was naïve, dumb, or driven by lust to let himself be deceived by Delilah, a temptress who was in it for the money.

When you read the whole Samson story found in Judges 13-16 you realize that this is not a nice story.

There is a ridiculous amount of cruelty and violence in it...violence towards the Philistines, towards animals, toward women...

I have a list of eleven atrocities that happened in three short chapters. I won't drown you in the gory details,

To give you an example of the kind of violence that is part of Samson's story, know that before Samson met Delilah he wanted to marry a Philistine woman—but because of a series of events involving a lion, a riddle, a bet and a threat—this woman was married off to Samson's best man.

As a response to this, Samson tied torches to the tails of foxes and sent them into Philistine land so they would burn the crops and village. In response to that, the Philistines burned his "wife" and her father. There is a lot of back-and-forth violence...fighting fire with fire.

So again, why do I stick with this text? Why did I choose a text that doesn't align with Jesus' gospel message about loving your enemy? Why do I like a text that depicts women in a pretty awful light?

To find the gospel, the light in a morbid tragedy, we need to go back and look at it with fresh eyes.

I want to start changing the stereotype of Samson and the Israelites being the hero's and Delilah and the Philistines being the villains.

Here is the thing, when we really immerse myself in this story we encounter really lost people.

We meet complicated people.

We find ourselves bound up in an intricately spun web of emotions, mistakes, relationships, grief, and chances for redemption.

Ultimately, when we view this drama with new eyes, we can uncover that Samson and Delilah are not one thing. Samson is not just strong; Delilah is not just a temptress.

In fact I believe that Samson and Delilah are liminal characters.

Liminal space is the in-between spaces of our lives...the now-but-not-yet-space, the grey area, the place where two boundaries meet. **The uncomfortable space.**

So Samson and Delilah—just like us, are made up of many different qualities and experiences.

They make us uncomfortable—just like their ambiguity made those around them uncomfortable.

This is, in my opinion, why Samson and Delilah make up such a compelling story. They are liminal characters.

To really dig into this story I want to break down what makes Samson and Delilah more complicated than how they are depicted in Children's storybooks.

Lets start with Samson.

I think that Samson was a really confused man who lived his life one bloody identity crisis after another.

He didn't fit neatly into the identity categories that existed at the time—and still exist. He was not "normal".

Before he was born, an angel visited his mother and told her that she would miraculously conceive a baby, who was to be a Nazirite.

This means that he was "set aside, consecrated" so that God could work through him to bring Israel out of the bondage of the Philistines.

His role as Nazirite had constrictions. He was not allowed to drink alcohol, touch dead bodies—and in this case, most importantly, he wasn't supposed to cut his hair.

So he always stood out, he had long hair braided into seven locks—or dread locks, seven the number of completion or perfection—basically he had really great hair.

Throughout his life he did everything he possibly could to defy this calling, this identity.

He is kind of like the rebellious pastor's kid.

I am a PK, and basically the logic goes, if you are a pastor's kid you either become a pastor yourself or you rebel like none other. So here I am...becoming a pastor...and I know nothing about rebellion of course.

Samson is uncomfortable in his own skin, and he does everything he can to shed that identity.

He rebelled, sought a foreign wife, slept with a prostitute, he was certainly close to dead bodies with all his killing and he indulged in wine at a party. The only thread left to his Nazirite covenant with God was the fact that he hadn't cut his hair.

Enter Delilah. Samson met Delilah right after he had slept with a prostitute—and he fell in love. Delilah is typically considered a villainous, scandalous, seductive, deceitful, overall terrible person.

In fact, the book entitled, *The Top 100 Women of the Bible* describes Delilah as such:

"Look at Delilah, and you get a clear picture of how *not* to live. Need an example of what loose living will get you? She's the poster child for it. The pain she caused someone who loved her ran so deep that Samson didn't mind sacrificing his life. Samson had been used by an immoral woman who evidently felt no guilt at betraying him."

Harsh huh

Delilah has a reputation for a reason, I will give you that.
But we have to remember her circumstances.

She lived in a society where basically women depended on men for survival—this might be putting it a bit strongly, but women certainly didn't hold the power. Especially economic power. Through the bribe to betray Samson, Delilah was offered freedom.

She was offered 5,500 Shekels— to put that in perspective a Levite priest would make 10 shekels a year.

Who knows if she had family members she was needed to take care of? Other mouths to feed? She was given a chance to take hold of her life, and not depend on men for once.

I want to discourage us from creating an "other" out of Delilah by distancing ourselves from her reality and saying "I would never do that".

I am going to go out on a limb and guess that a lot of us would have made the same choices she did, given her context.

We also can't know how she felt about the events that transpired. We get a surprising amount of words from Delilah—which is amazing—like it is amazing that we know her name!!—We hear her talk, but never about how she *feels*.

This confusion about Delilah, her true motives and emotional state, also make her a liminal character

She is ambiguous in many ways, including her race and ethnicity.

Delilah lived in the valley of Sorek, which is in between the Philistine and Israelite land—literally a liminal space, where two boundaries meet (she really could have been either, most assume she was Philistine) but, again, we don't know for sure.

To complicate Delilah further, and show the true extent of her liminal status. I want to offer three tidbits about Delilah that usually go unnoticed—which might offer a window into how she felt about what happened between her and Samson.

First of all, it was not Delilah who cut Samson's hair.

Now some Hebrew linguists argue over this, but I am making an interpretive decision and offering up that I don't think it was Delilah who cut Samson's hair.

The NRSV and several other translations read that Delilah let Samson fall asleep in her lap and then she summoned a man and had him shave the seven locks off Samson's head. If this is what happened, why didn't she shave Samson's head?

She had this beast of a man literally in her lap and had the opportunity to single handedly render him useless, weak, emasculated.

She could have personally taken her revenge on patriarchy with a single slice.

She was the acting agent the first three times she tried to trick Samson into telling her his secret,

She bound him with seven fresh bowstrings.

She bound him with new ropes.

She wove his locks into her loom

So why not be the one to shave his head?

Two, Delilah never actually did the job she was asked to do. She was paid to reveal the secret to Samson's strength.

The story says that Samson was "in love" with Delilah.

The word “love” is surprisingly uncommon in the Hebrew Bible, this fact was supposed to stand out, especially knowing Samson’s seemingly unfeeling and lustful past relationship with women.

Because Samson was in love with Delilah, he revealed his whole heart to her, meaning his whole identity—his mind, will, and spirit.

When he told her the secret of his strength, that it lie in the locks of his hair, he uncovered who he was to his core as a man set apart by God. A covenant weaved into his very being.

Delilah was now armed with the ability to sap his strength, and she did have his hair shaved and he did turn him over to the guards, but she didn’t divulge his true identity.

If she had given up his true secret and identity as a Nazirite, then they would never have let Samson’s hair grow out.

I wonder if she gave Samson a way out...he chose what to do with his second chance, but maybe Delilah was the one who created the loophole.

Three, Delilah helped Samson realize who he really was.

Delilah was the one that he was in love with, he completely trusted her, so much so that he willingly stripped off his brutish exterior and let Delilah see the true Samson, his whole heart, the good, bad, ugly, and beautiful.

When Samson tells Delilah the secret of his strength, this is the first indication that Samson actually owns up to the fact that he is different.

It is the first time we hear him speak of the covenant with God that gives him strength.

This is the ultimate form of vulnerability, when we reveal to those we love the parts of ourselves that we don’t want to admit actually exist. Our weak parts, our soft spots.

Will they still love us when they know us, when they look at us and truly see all of us? Our whole heart? The good, bad, ugly, and beautiful?

Samson fell in love, and at the same time he fell face-first into the reality of what his calling meant.

Unfortunately Samson understood this identity as a warrior’s identity. From the beginning Samson assumed his calling involved violence.

The angel told his mother that he would begin to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines.

He, and seemingly everyone else, assumed that this meant war.

All of the times in Judges where it says, “the spirit of the Lord rushed upon him” Samson acted violently.

What if the spirit of the Lord was trying to move Samson to a different kind of action...creative rather than destructive.

When Samson laid eyes on the Philistine woman that would be his wife, for a very short time, the text says that this (relationship) was “from the Lord”.

This could have been Samson’s way of manipulating his parents, which could very well be the case...
but it also could have been God trying to mend the broken and bloody relationship between the Israelites and Philistines through a different kind of relationship.

Yet Samson couldn’t see an alternative to what was easy, or resist acting out and compensating to make himself feel better about the fact that he wasn’t like everyone else.

His strength, fiery temper, and thirst for women provided the perfect blockade for any underlying insecurities or “weak” emotions.

He was blinded by the kind of toxic masculinity that tells men and boys that they need to be physically capable and strong, dominant, possessive, and imperious to emotion.

This toxic masculinity still exists today and I mourn the pressure it puts on boys and men to perform instead of simply “be”.

To act with bravado rather than to feel. To dominate rather than relate.

Samson’s toxic masculinity melted when he lay in Delilah’s lap.
It was here that he sloughed off the toxicity and said, “this is who I am”.

He reveled the tender underbelly of the lion and, for a moment, relished in her sweet embrace.

But the waters of violence, manipulation, and deceit ran too deep. The deed was done with the Philistines,
whether Delilah regretted her decision or not—
whether she actually loved him or not—
whether she was forced into this or not—
and Samson’s new vision for who he is
was literally cut out of him.

There was a moment, right before his death, that he again gave in to his complicated identity and called out to God, his covenanted creator.

But the pain of betrayal and humiliation left him hungry for revenge and he prayed:

“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”

One last time he denied his creative, consecrated calling, his true identity. And acted to avenge his lost eyes and he pushed apart the columns, killing himself and everyone else.

Is this what victory for God’s people is supposed to look like?

Like I said, this is not a nice story and it doesn’t have a happy ending.

But because God shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot put it out...another man was set apart,
doubted his calling, yet in the end surrendered his life,
bringing down—not the demise of other people...but death itself.

The story didn’t end with Samson and Delilah. And by the grace of God our stories are still unfolding.

The story of Samson and Delilah is worth digging in to because it is not a simple, happy-go-lucky children’s story.

It is complicated, just like our lives today.
It evokes emotion, passion, and imagination.

It shows that vulnerability can be costly, sometimes deadly, but absolutely necessary if we are going to reveal our whole hearts,
to ourselves and others.

Even if the risk doesn’t pay off, there is always joy in the risk.

When we look at others we need to—and I mean literally—open our eyes and our hearts to the understanding that each person is trying to participate in the uncomfortable, task of figuring out who they are and who they are called to be.
We are all trying to figure out where we fit in this liminal space we call life.

Just like Samson and Delilah, we cannot—cannot, reduce people to one thing.
Truck example.

We need to break these untrue and unhelpful habits of trying to fit people neatly into spaces that they don’t fit into—because it makes us more comfortable.

To break this habit— we have to re-focus our thoughts. We must resist doing what is easy, or what makes us feel better about ourselves.

We must train our thoughts and actions to turn away from the concrete and into complicated.

This is a journey of re-wiring our system, so we don't see people as one dimensional...so we generate compassion...if we don't then we are blinded to the God-in-them.

This is a journey of re-wiring our system so we don't assume that what the Spirit of the Lord is calling us to do and giving us strength to do—is the easy way out.

This is acting creatively instead of destructively...this is relating to others rather than dominating others.

This is melting the voices around us telling us that we must be better than those we are sitting next to

—that life is a competition.

That we must deny our feelings, that we must twist people into simple categories—so it is easier to hate them, easier to resent them. Easier to scape-goat them.

If we are to enter into God's reconciling work in the world then we need to stop trying to be inhumanly strong like Samson, and dehumanizing those we think are like Delilah.

We need to stop pretending that we are the blessed Israelites that can do no wrong and see life through the eyes of the Philistines—who are God's people too.

Lets take off our blinders and see the world with our eyes wide open.

With our eyes and heart expanded we can embrace the complexity, the feelings of others, the fact that life is not easy—

that the easy way out—that taking short cuts—

can be a form of violence (or actually violence)

and that it will do nothing but tear us down and everyone else around us.

This is a journey of giving our whole hearts, everything we are, to ourselves, and others, so that we can accompany in God's work in the world.

This is bravery. This is strength.

There is a secular song by Regina Spector called "Samson". Like all of life—what I just preached about—this song is not what it seems at first glance.

And a disclaimer—this song and it's back story make me cry. I am comfortable with this so you all can relax. I have witnessed a beautiful example behind this very pulpit—of a woman that empowers me, and reminds me that its ok to cry—even if it is in front of everyone.

Anyway, the story behind this song is an example of what I am desperately asking all of you to live in to.

We will play it shortly, and when we do I want you to listen carefully and thoughtfully to the lyrics. This song is about one of Regina's past loves.

This man got sick with cancer...and so in the middle of the night Regina cut his hair—which was probably thinning because of chemotherapy.

But as the song says they couldn't bring the columns down—they couldn't fight the force of the disease and win the battle against cancer,
and he died.

And he did take Regina down with him...he was her sweetest downfall.

Yet here she is, bearing her whole heart, and turning tragedy and loss into heart wrenching art.

This is what happens when we give in to vulnerability, when we search for the light in the dark places, when we sit in the discomfort of not being "normal" because normal doesn't exist—

When we sink into this liminal space we call life, when we don't rest until we have found our call,

we realize that our true identity rests in our relationship with our Creator, where we get our strength!!!!

So be vulnerable, see God in the complexity of yourself and others, and choose to live with Eyes Wide Open.

I invite you open your hearts to this song and afterwards I am asking if we can sit in silence for a bit, let everything sink in?