

**Where Is Your Power?**  
**September 21<sup>st</sup>, 2014**

**Judges 16:22-31**  
**Pentecost 15 A**

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The time of the Judges is an interesting period in the history of God's plan of salvation. It's not one we talk about a lot and it's just very unique in the overall landscape of history. If you wanted to sum up in a few words what that time was like, you'd use a phrase repeated several times in the book of Judges, "and everyone did as he saw fit."

We talk a lot about Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and how they held to God's promise of how the land of Canaan would be theirs one day. We talk about how Moses led that nation out of Egypt and through the desert to finally reach the promised land. We even sometimes talk about Joshua and how he led the people into Canaan and started taking it over. But then what? Well, Joshua presented the people of Israel with the Law of God. The law told them how to live and how to worship and everything they needed to know for carrying on their daily lives. The priest at the tabernacle was their contact to God should they need to inquire of him or make a sacrifice, but each was expected to follow the law and that was that. And they all agreed.

Except then each went their own way and most of them forgot about God and his law. And everyone did as he saw fit. God, in order to wake them up, would send an enemy in to attack them or to occupy the land until they finally returned to him and cried out for help. At that point God would send a leader, a champion to deal with the opposition. Historically these leaders were called "Judges" though their roles had very little to do with what we think of when we hear of a judge. But then, invariably, the leader would die or retire and everyone would again do as he saw fit...and the cycle would repeat.

It is near the last repetition of this waltz that we come to our account today. The Philistines had invaded and occupied the land. They ruled over God's people. They cried out for help and he sent a miracle baby. Samson, born to a barren mother and devoted to be a Nazarite, a special class of God's people who vowed never to drink alcohol or touch the dead or shave their heads. And God would use this man to deliver his people.

Except, Samson was not a role model. Not in the slightest. From the moment he became a young adult he was arrogant, rude, insolent and lecherous. The very first thing we read about him after the Bible mentions his birth is how he saw a pagan woman who was pretty and he demands his parents get her as his wife. On his way to the eventual wedding he has no trouble touching a dead lion and at the wedding itself it seems beer is not an issue for him. The wedding itself, however starts a feud with the Canaanites that ends with Samson standing and several thousand of them dead. Samson was not a role model. He was barely faithful. Only once during his life do we have it recorded that he credits God for his victory and asks for help when it is over. But nevertheless through Samson, God managed to work relief for the nation of Israel from the Philistine oppression, as he promised.

Samson, however, God was not done with. As much as God was concerned with the nation, he was also concerned with the individual. Samson had gone undefeated his whole life. He had never been backed into a corner that God did not give him the power to fight his way out of. And despite some setbacks, he'd always been pretty much allowed to do as he pleased and take what he wanted. God, through a woman named Delilah, changed that.

Most of us know the story, Samson had a mistress named Delilah. His enemies among the Philistines promised her a sum of money totaling something like 15 years' wages to find the secret to his strength and rob him of it. Three times she pleaded him and each time he gave her an answer that sounded like it might work, but it didn't. But the fourth time, whether it was her incessant nagging or her sob story of "if you really loved me you'd tell me" or whether it was just ridiculous arrogance that nothing could stop him, he finally told her the truth. Maybe he figured it wouldn't make a difference if his hair was shaved. After all, he'd broken the other parts of being a Nazarite and nothing happened to him. But whether it was the loss of the hair or the final nail of arrogance or just God being ready to humble Samson to save him, this time it had an effect. Samson's strength was taken from him by the Lord and he was set upon by the Philistines. They took him prisoner and gouged out his eyes. He was left in their captivity to spend his days blindly turning a millstone like a common beast of burden.

It would seem like a fitting punishment for someone who had been so full of himself, so contemptuous of everyone else and with such a weakness for women. But the imprisonment and the pain were not the end. They were not the point God was trying to make or accomplish here. God took Samson's strength and humiliated him in order to save him.

Have you ever had to learn that lesson? Or do you, perhaps, have this lesson coming to you? Look at your life and ask yourself: where is your strength? Where is your power? Perhaps sitting here in this spiritual setting and after the story we just read you readily give the good, Christian answer; my power comes from God. He is my strength in everything. But has your life shown that? Does your heart live that truth? When you go about your daily life do you trust God to do the things he's promised for you, to care and provide for you through the things and skills he's given

you...or do you trust instead your strength, your smarts, your stuff instead? To put it straight; are you trusting the power of the gift or the giver?

Perhaps you can't lift the doors of the town gate off their hinges like Samson once did. But that doesn't stop us from relying on earthly strength and power while forgetting how fragile and temporary it is. God gave these things to us each to use, but not to rely on. We rely on him and him alone. If today he chooses to feed you through your job or retirement account then so be it. If today he chooses to take that away and feed you another way, then nothing has changed. The source remains the same. At least, that's how it should be. But because we build up our trust in the wrong places, we depend on the wrong powers to help and protect us in troubles, and like Samson they could be all taken away from us in an instant. They all came from God and they all exist only at his discretion.

Perhaps the easiest test is to ask yourself about the things you rely on in your life. Your house, your car, job, family, health, toys, cabin, whatever. If any of those were gone tomorrow, would you be okay with that, or would you be in a panic? Would you be devastated? Would you recognize that you didn't need whatever it was or would you be unable to figure out how you're going to keep on living? If God is the source of your strength and trust then nothing we lose here can affect us. And if we are putting too much trust in the stuff here and not enough in God, then he may take it away from us like he did to Samson to remind us where real power is found.

None of the power we think we have is ours. Nothing that you can do can be done because of you. You can only do anything so long as God decides you should. We are, in ourselves, powerless. And nowhere is that more obvious than in the face of God's eternal law. You want to talk about fulfilling and meeting needs, this is the one. Eternity is the end game and the only way to a good end is to keep God's law. It won't matter the slightest if you have food to eat tomorrow if you can't keep God's law because it will still end the same; you will be condemned for failure. But it's already too late. The law commands that we fear and love and trust in God above all things but clearly the trust hasn't been there. Like Samson we've put our trust in the wrong places and we've failed. Sometimes God needs to let us get hurt temporarily like Samson in order to get us to realize that we've failed him. In order to make us understand just how deeply we NEED him.

God wants to help. God planned to help. He died to help you. He even wants to help you to trust him. By God-given trust in his death and resurrection for us we are saved from our actions against his law. We are released from our servitude to sin and set free to serve our God and free to trust our God completely.

Samson understood at the end. His final prayer to God is not one of demands and arrogance but one of a humble plea. A humble plea to the only source of help he had left. He asked that he be able to give his life to have vengeance on God's enemies, on those who thought they had triumphed because of the power of their false god. Their trust was misplaced, too. Their power over Samson had only come because Samson's God had allowed it. And God had allowed it to teach Samson humility that would save him and give him an opportunity to cripple the Philistines to help his chosen nation.

God is our strength. God wants to help you. He wants to take care of you now and he wants to carry you from this world into the eternal life to come. But he can't force you. He offers faith, trust in him and him alone for this life and the life to come. He gives that trust to us freely by the power of the Holy Spirit through his Word. But we can choose to deny that trust. We can choose arrogantly to think we are strong enough to take care of ourselves here and even worse to save ourselves for eternity. We pray that if this should happen that God would humble us again and bring us back to him.

All the power you think you have, it's all from God. And it is only yours in God. What earthly power you have from him is there in whatever way serves the eternal purpose, the saving of your soul and others. And the eternal promise from him cannot be taken away from you, it can only be willfully discarded. Every day, in humility, recognize where all your strength comes from. Give thanks for what you have, and trust that God will always provide where you lack. God's power is something we can always have a sure confidence in. It will not fail us, it will carry us home at the end. Trust it completely, but remember where it comes from. It's not from you, it's all from God. Amen.