

18 October 2020

Things Fall Apart: The End of Judges
Judges 10-21; Ecclesiastes 1:1-9

The words of scripture are not always encouraging. There is darkness in the world and emptiness in life, and the Bible does not pretend otherwise. We read from Ecclesiastes chapter 1, verses 1-9:

1 The words of the Teacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.

*2 Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher,
vanity of vanities! All is vanity.*

*3 What do people gain from all the toil
at which they toil under the sun?*

*4 A generation goes, and a generation comes,
but the earth remains forever.*

*5 The sun rises and the sun goes down,
and hurries to the place where it rises.*

*6 The wind blows to the south,
and goes round to the north;
round and round goes the wind,
and on its circuits the wind returns.*

*7 All streams run to the sea,
but the sea is not full;
to the place where the streams flow,
there they continue to flow.*

*8 All things are wearisome;
more than one can express;
the eye is not satisfied with seeing,
or the ear filled with hearing.*

*9 What has been is what will be,
and what has been done is what will be done;
there is nothing new under the sun.*

We ended our story last week with a great victory. Gideon had trusted God, who had rewarded that trust with a miraculous rout of the Midianite armies against impossible odds. Israel had gathered to Gideon, wanting to crown him the king of Israel, but Gideon had declined, reminding them that God was their king, and so long as that was true, they needed no other. It's one of the high points of the Bible story. Certainly the high point of the Book of Judges. But high points don't last, do they? In his most famous poem, "The Second Coming," the poet W. B. Yeats says,

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

After Gideon, things did, in fact, fall apart, and it started in his own family. When Gideon died, he left many wives and even more sons behind. One of those sons, named Abimelech, decided after the fact to take up the Israelites' offer of kingship. Gathering some followers from his mother's family, Abimelech declared himself the King of Israel, and his first action as king was to round up and execute all his brothers, because they might have been rivals to his power. Abimelech reigned as king over Israel for three years, until one day, while trying to put down a rebellion in a city, he got too close to the city wall and a certain woman from the city dropped a millstone on his head. That was the end of Abimelech, but the decline had begun.

Next we move across the Jordan River. Most of the Israelite tribes had lands west of the Jordan, but some – Reuben, Gad, and part of the tribe of Manasseh – had settled on the eastern side, in lands taken from the Ammonites. Today, that's the nation of Jordan, but at that time it was often called Gilead. The Israelites had conquered Ammon, but the Ammonites were still around, holding a serious grudge, and so it came about in time that the Ammonites grew powerful enough to rise up and try to take the land back. Under attack, the Israelites remembered the Lord, put away their Canaanite idols, and cried out to God for help. As you'll remember, this has been the pattern all through Judges. The people forget God and start worshiping idols, get in trouble, remember God and call out for help, and God raises up a deliverer. And that's sort of what happened this time, except that for the first time the book does *not* say that God chose a deliverer. Instead, the people picked their own, a man named Jephthah.

Jephthah was a Gileadite, sort of. His father was, anyway, and had conceived him with a prostitute. Because he was illegitimate, though, Jephthah had been left out of the will and driven out of town by his brothers. So he'd become an outlaw, gathering around him a band of other dispossessed and disgruntled people. Sort of like Robin Hood, stealing from the rich. That's all. Just stealing from the rich, or really anyone. Anyway, oppressed by Ammon, the Gileadites sent word to Jephthah that they'd like to let bygones be bygones and welcome him back, along with his band of fighters, and would he like to fight the Ammonites for them? Jephthah replied that he'd be happy to, if they promised to make him ruler over Gilead afterwards. You're probably noticing a few points of difference between Jephthah and Gideon.

Jephthah did defeat the Ammonites and deliver Gilead, but that's not what he's remembered for. He's remembered for a tragic vow he took before going to battle. Calling on God, or the gods, for help – hard to tell with Jephthah – he made a solemn vow that if he should be victorious he would sacrifice to God (or the gods) the first thing he saw upon coming home. It's like a Greek tragedy: you *know* this isn't going to end well. Sure enough, the first thing he saw upon returning victorious was his young daughter. Yes, he kept his vow.

But the story doesn't end there, either. The tribe of Ephraim, from the west side of the Jordan, took offense that they hadn't been invited to fight the Ammonites, and so they started attacking Gilead, and suddenly we have a full-blown Israelite civil war going on. Jephthah defeated the Ephraimites, too, and we end the edifying story of Jephthah with him and the men of Gilead standing at the ford of the Jordan River, stopping everyone who tried to cross, and slaughtering everyone who spoke with an Ephraimite accent. Things fall apart.

And then there's Samson, a "judge" from the tribe of Dan. Now back when Joshua had divided up the supposedly conquered land of Canaan between the twelve tribes, Dan had kind of drawn the short straw. Dan had been allotted the land along the southern Mediterranean coast, including prosperous cities like Gaza, Ekron, and Ashkelon. That sounds pretty good, except that

those were the lands that had recently been conquered by the Sea Peoples – the Philistines – and it seems that Joshua’s conquest never did make a dent into Philistine power. Dan was allotted territory that was already securely held by someone else. Into that context, Samson was born.

His story starts out promising enough. Samson’s parents were elderly and childless, but one day a mysterious messenger came to them, telling them that they would have a child, and that their child would deliver his people from the Philistines. Like Abraham and Sarah, Samson’s parents didn’t believe it at first, but the angel assured them it would happen, and then made them promise that their son would be dedicated to God as a Nazirite. This was an ancient vow by which some were set apart for God. Nazirites were to drink no alcohol and maintain their ritual purity by never touching a dead body, and the mark of a Nazirite was that they never cut their hair. Sure enough, the couple had a son. They named him Samson and they dedicated him to God.

For all the good it did. Here’s how that turned out. Samson grew up to be unnaturally strong and shaggy and narcissistic, and it came about one day that Samson visited the Philistine city of Timnah, where he saw a hot young Philistine woman. “That woman!” he said to his parents. “Get her for me.”

“Son, son, she’s a Philistine. Don’t you want to marry a nice Jewish girl? You know, my friend Rachel has a granddaughter . . .”

“Get her for me now. I want her.”

His parents gave in – which helps to explain a lot – and they went down to arrange a marriage to the Philistine woman. A wedding date was set. Samson set off alone for the wedding feast, which was to be a seven-day bash. I’m not sure what happened to the no alcohol part of the Nazirite vow; it’s not mentioned once Samson gets older. Anyway, at the feast, Samson makes a bet that no one can guess a riddle that he tells. The stakes are thirty changes of clothes. You can read the riddle itself in Judges 14, with all its disgusting detail, but the upshot of the story is that none of the Philistine wedding guests can figure out his riddle, so they get Samson’s new bride to ask him.

“Why won’t you tell me? I thought you loved me! Oh, Samsie-poo,” Samson was stronger of arm than of brain. He revealed the riddle to his bride, and she told the wedding guests, and Samson lost the bet. In a fit of surly rage, he went to the neighboring town of Ashkelon, killed thirty Philistine men, and took their clothes to pay off his bet. Then he went home to Mom and Dad. Eventually his Philistine wife was given in marriage to someone else.

A few months later, though, Samson remembered her and thought he’d go spend a night with his wife. He went to Timnah, where her father said, “But . . . I thought you had rejected her. She’s married to someone else now.”

“But I want her!” Angry at not getting his way, Samson set fire to the Philistine wheatfields outside of town. The Philistines of Timnah, seeing their food for the next year destroyed, found out why Samson had done it, and they executed Samson’s wife and father-in-law then came after Samson. They found him in the desert, but Samson picked up a bleached donkey’s jawbone and using that as a weapon killed hundreds of them and got away.

So Samson became the Philistines' Public Enemy No. 1, but he never did anything with that. Never tried to raise an Israelite army, for instance. No, mostly he cruised for Philistine chicks. The Philistines almost caught him once, at the home of a Gaza prostitute, but once again Samson used his great strength to escape. He pulled the city gates out of their foundation and walked free. And then, last in a long string of Philistine beauties, there was Delilah. Samson fell for her, of course, and began spending nights at her home. Meanwhile, the leaders of the Philistines had figured out that Samson's strength was not natural. There was some secret. They bribed Delilah to find out what it was. Delilah played on Samson's weaknesses – his fascination with Philistine women, his lack of self-control, and his tiny brain. She wheedled and coaxed for weeks. Samson first tried putting her off with lies. He told her that if he was bound with wet rawhide, he'd be helpless, so she tied him up while he was asleep, then screamed, "The Philistines are coming!" He snapped the thongs and sat up. ("You don't trust me!") Next he told her that he'd lose his power if he was tied with new ropes that had never been used. Same thing. Third, he told her he'd be helpless if she braided his hair. She did, and he wasn't.

No, I don't know why Samson didn't get a clue. But Delilah kept at it, and the fourth time he told her that he'd be helpless if she shaved off his hair entirely. Now Samson appears to have thought this was lie, too, but even Delilah recognized that this was different. His hair was the outward sign of his being dedicated to God – frankly the only outward sign – and so this time she told the Philistines to get ready. While he slept, she had his hair shaved off, then cried out again, "The Philistines are coming!" In one of the saddest lines of scripture, we read that Samson said, "I will go out like all the other times," but he did not know that the Lord had left him."

Samson was captured, blinded, and set to work as a mule for the Philistines. Occasionally, though, they'd bring him out of prison for display purposes, and so it came about once that he was brought in chains to the temple of Dagon, the Philistine god, during a harvest festival. He was chained to a couple of central pillars so that people could mock him, and in what may be the only genuine prayer of Samson's life, he said, "God, give me strength, and let me die." Pushing the pillars apart with some of his former power, Samson brought the temple of Dagon down on the heads of his enemies. He and all the Philistines were killed.

So, a great victory over the Philistines, right? No. Samson's is a thoroughly depressing story of a little man abusing his great potential and dying a pathetic death. Trust in God, which was at the heart of the story of Gideon just last week, is pushed aside in the stories of Jephthah and Samson, and is glaringly absent in the stories that conclude the Book of Judges. We won't go into those stories today, but they revolve around theft and idolatry and a renegade Levite serving as a priest to other gods and betrayal and rape and murder and another civil war – this time nearly wiping out the tribe of Benjamin – and the whole discouraging parade of depravity is tied together with the repeated refrain, "In those days there was no king in Israel, and every man did what was right in his own eyes."

You could be pardoned for wondering, "Why is this even in the Bible?" Let me tell you why: because it's real. Depravity, idolatry, selfishness, brutality – they're real, and they are never far beneath the human skin. Yes, we were made in the image and likeness of God, granted the gift of being able to choose love and compassion and loyalty and faithfulness and mercy and honor and courage and hope. But we have all, to our own degree, betrayed these gifts and chosen badly – either refusing God's gifts entirely or abusing them for our own ends. Everything good we eventually corrupt. Things fall apart. Every empire collapses, every great nation declines,

every Utopia betrays its founding principles, every church falls short of its ideals. Things fall apart; the center cannot hold.

The Bible story is a story of redemption, but a part of every redemption story is the part that tells why redemption is necessary. That's why this is in the Bible. But there's good news, too. Even in the dark times, when everyone does whatever is right in their own eyes, God is not absent but is present and waiting. Our story with God will not end in darkness, and even while the darkness is present, that hope remains, and God is beside us. We'll see this in next week's story – a story of life and hope and renewal and love that takes place quietly during the dark time of the judges. In the meantime, do not despair. God is still here, present and waiting.

Let us pray:

God, we're so tired. We're tired of the pandemic, of isolation, of fear.

We're tired of masks and sanitizer and not hugging people we love.

And we're tired of the election – O God, how tired! –

We're tired of sound bites and misquotes and unanswered questions.

We're tired of lies.

We're tired of police violence and casual racism and frivolous police calls,

and we're tired of protests that turn into wanton vandalism and betray their own cause.

We're tired of people who think they know all the answers and don't need to listen to others.

God, we're tired of our own friends on Facebook.

But this is where and when and with whom we live,

So God, make us lights of peace and love in a world

That feels as if it's falling apart. Amen.