

Mrs. Manoah
September 1, 2013
Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost
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Texts: Judges 13, Hebrews 13:1-8, Luke 14:1, 7-14

Before Scripture reading: This story follows the story of Jephthah and his daughter which we read two weeks ago. This one is a refreshing change from the violence and horror of that story. It caught me by surprise when I read it, because I did not know this story at all. Listen for the word of God.

Two weeks ago we read a list of faithful people in the book of Hebrew. It included Jephthah, a successful but flawed man who sacrificed his daughter in order to keep a promise that he made. That list also included the name Samson. We just heard about his parents and his birth. You may remember a bit about Samson from Sunday School classes. He was a big guy, with lots of muscles. He killed a lion with his bare hands. He killed a thousand Philistines with the jawbone of a donkey.

He reminds me a bit of Gaston in the movie Beauty and the Beast. Lots of brawn. Not much brain. Big biceps. Big ego. Not too bright, but very sure of himself.

The secret of Samson's strength was his uncut hair. But Samson kept falling for problematic women, who were not Israelites. The most famous is Delilah, who did not trick him but repeatedly asked him for the source of his strength and then tried to trap him when he told her. When his hair got cut off, he lost his strength, and he was captured, blinded and imprisoned by the Philistines. But in one final display of strength, after his hair grew back, he prayed that God would give him revenge on his enemies.

Then stood in a temple with thousands of the enemy Philistines and pulled down the support pillars. He died along with them, but his action made an impression on the author of Hebrews, who included Samson as a man of faith.

Samson had a vocation or a calling to be a judge and deliver the Israelites from their enemies, the Philistines. Unfortunately, he did not take calling very seriously. Mostly he acted out of revenge. There was always a lot of drama around Samson.

Samson represents a flashy and showy type of faith. He prayed to God when he was in trouble. He asked for God's help on a big project. He ended his life and the lives of a lot of Philistines with a lot of drama. He lived his life without much visible spirituality or piety, but finally he asked God's help to carry out his vocation, which was to begin to destroy the Philistines. Many of the heroes of faith in Hebrew 11 had stories like this. They did something big and dramatic. It is hard to see ourselves in their stories.

When I think of big and dramatic faith, I think of someone like Charles Colson. He was one of Nixon's henchmen who went to prison after Watergate and became a Christian there. He had a very public faith and did a lot of good work in prison ministry.

The second character in the story is Samson's father Manoah. It's no surprise the man had a few questions! Manoah's wife came to him one day and said that a "man of God" had just told her that she would become pregnant. That is kind of strange news, and Manoah wanted more information! He needed to *see* the man of God. He needed his

name. Manoah's questions were perfectly understandable given the circumstances.

Having faith does not mean that we can't ask questions. But with Manoah you get the sense that there was something more going on. He wanted to have a little more control over the situation! It wasn't enough that the angel came to his wife. Manoah wanted to see the angel himself. So he prayed that the angel would come to him, but instead the angel came to his wife when she was alone! His wife came to get him and brought him to meet the angel. Manoah asked what they should do with the child. And the angel refused to give him a direct answer! The woman should do what I told her! That's enough of an answer for you.

But Manoah kept pressing. He asked the angel to stay for dinner, but the angel refused and suggested a burnt offering instead. Then Manoah asked for the angel's name, and the angel refused to give it. The name was too wonderful, he said. Finally Manoah offered the sacrifice, and as the smoke rose in the air, the angel did too, and finally Manoah understood who had been talking to! And then Manoah had a bit of a spiritual meltdown. We just saw God! We are going to die!

Manoah demonstrates a faith that is highly engaged and interactive and questioning. He wants to know what is going on. He wants to be prepared and know what to expect. He'd like answers and clarity and clear directions for the future. But maybe he is just a tiny bit too controlling? I identify a lot with Manoah!

Manoah's wife has a very different style of faith. You noticed she has no name, which is why I call her Mrs. Manoah or Samson's mother

Mrs. Manoah is what I would call calm, cool and collected. She takes this visit from the angel in stride. She has a remarkable lack of curiosity! She did not ask where the angel came from, or ask for his name. The text doesn't record that she was terrified, though she may have been. She simply passes on the news of the encounter to her husband in a matter of fact way (she leaves out the part about the hair and the Philistines though).

When the angel appears to her again after Manoah prayed, she went to get him so that he could participate in the conversation. But the angel clearly didn't need to speak to the "man of the house." What he told Mrs. Manoah was enough.

My favorite part of this story comes at the end, where Manoah finally realizes this is an angel and has his meltdown. "We shall surely die, for we have seen God." But Mrs. Manoah calmly responds that if God had meant to kill them, God would not have accepted the burnt offering, or told them all these things about their son. Or" in teenager speak, "Chill out, Manoah!" She is thoughtful and rational. She has spiritual insight. She can take a step back in a tense situation. She doesn't have to solve everything right away.

And later the woman bore a son and named him Samson. The story says nothing about what it was like to raise this boy. As parents, they would be very disappointed in

Samson. Usually in Scripture, when a woman had difficulty conceiving and then had a miraculous pregnancy, it's a sign that the baby will be something special. Sarah had Isaac, Rebekah had Jacob, Rachel had Joseph, Hannah had Samuel. Samson was destined to help deliver Israel but he did not turn out the way they had hoped.

Mrs. Manoah represents a type of faith that is steady and calm and confident. But you notice that SHE is not in the list of the faithful in the book of Hebrews! The author of that book had a flair for the dramatic, and he listed faithful people who had done big things. Her faith does not get so much publicity and acclaim, which is unfortunate. Because she is a solid rock of calm and most of us could use some more of her type of faith.

Most of us don't have the dramatic vocation of Samson. We're not called to kill the Philistines with our super human strength. Most of us are called to quieter, less dramatic vocations. We teach students, care for people, make things, tend our children, make decisions. We may think something is lacking in us because we don't have the big dramatic faith and the big dramatic calling. We're not pulling down any pillars. But a quiet, solid faith is a gift. It is nothing to be ashamed of.

And that is exactly what the author of Hebrews is calling us to do in chapter 13. He has been writing to a group of people who were having a rough time with their faith. Some may have experienced persecution. And he encourages them to be faithful.

But here at the end of the book, he gives advice for regular Christians like us.

“Demonstrate mutual love. Show hospitality to strangers. Remember those who are in prison. Honor marriage. Don’t love money too much. Be content.” It’s not flashy or dramatic. It’s not Samson bringing down the pillars. It’s not Manoah offering a sacrifice with an angel flying up in the smoke. But this is the kind of calm, steady advice that makes a community thrive. These are instructions for all of us in our regular lives.

And it ends with confidence. God will not leave us. God is our helper. We do not need to be afraid. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever. Amen.