

December 12, 2018 (Advent Midweek) – Judges 13:2-7 & Luke 1:26-38

It was a situation that would become all-too-familiar for the Israelites. They were at war with the Philistines, their longtime enemy. Again. And this time, as punishment for Israel's idolatry, God had allowed the Philistines to win.

For forty years, the Israelites suffered under a Philistine occupation, their cities looted, their countryside ravaged. Severely oppressed and enslaved, Israel was in a dark and hopeless time. An impossible situation.

Yet, as so often happens to God's people, dark and hopeless times gave birth to a renewed faith in God. God heard the Israelites' repentant pleas and did for them what was humanly impossible: He rescued them from the Philistines.

But God's rescue plan didn't involve raising an army or gathering weapons. No, his plan centered on one man. One man who would rescue Israel by himself without touching a single conventional weapon of war.

What's more, God's rescue plan also commenced with circumstances no one was expecting: an angel speaking to a childless woman, the wife of Manoah. "*Behold, you shall conceive and bear a son,*" the angel proclaimed.

The Lord had done great things through the infertile wombs of Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel, and He would yet again do great things through the wombs of Hannah and Elizabeth. The wife of Manoah would join their ranks by bearing an important son. His name was Samson.

God gave Samson incredible strength and his feats became legendary. Once, while in a vineyard, he was attacked by a vicious lion. Samson tore the lion to pieces with his bare hands, as though the creature were a stuffed animal. Another time, Samson killed a thousand Philistines with the jawbone of a donkey. And later, when the Philistines thought they had trapped Samson in Gaza, he went out at midnight, tore the city gates from the walls, and carried the gates on his back to the top of a hill, just to show them how powerless the Philistines were to stop him.

But his final act was his greatest. Blinded, weakened, and mocked by his enemies, Samson was placed between two pillars in a large building where thousands of Philistines were worshipping their god Dagon. Even though he knew it would result in his own death, Samson prayed that God would let him have strength once more to be able to pull the building down on their heads. And three thousand of Israel's enemies died. God's Spirit did great things through Samson.

However, Samson's life was supposed to be distinguished not only by his single-handed feats of strength, but also by his single-minded devotion to the Lord. We read in our Old Testament lesson how, even before he was conceived, he was set apart to live as a Nazirite, forbidden from eating anything unclean, drinking wine or any strong drink, and cutting his hair.

He was to be different. To be holy. Set apart for God's purposes. He was to live a life dedicated to the Lord. But while Samson may have wowed everyone with his strength, he didn't wow anyone with his devotion. Again and again, he failed to live up to his Nazirite calling.

And in this, we share something in common with Samson. In Baptism, we, too, have been called to be holy. Called to think and live differently than the world around us that opposes God. God's Word says to us, "*You shall be holy, for I am holy.*" We are a people dedicated to the Lord and his purposes.

But, honestly, when was the last time you wowed anyone with your holiness? More often than not, we are undisciplined and self-indulgent. We compromise and we blend in with the world.

We're more devoted to our sports teams and TV shows than to the Lord. More dedicated to our impulses and desires than to the Lord. More committed to our own way than to the Lord's. Our dedication to living a holy life has not impressed anyone, least of all God himself. And we stand guilty before Him.

We are a conquered people. Conquered by an all-too-familiar enemy. And I'm more likely to defeat a thousand Philistines with the jawbone of a donkey than I am to defeat my own sinful heart and mind. We are in a situation that is humanly impossible.

But thankfully the Lord is far more dedicated to you and me than we are to Him. He has done for you what you could never do for yourself. In the fullness of time, at a time of great oppression, in our deepest, darkest defeat, the same God who acted for Israel through Samson acted for all mankind. He acted for you.

With single-minded devotion, He rescued you from your sins and from the false gods you chose to obey. And he didn't use an army or any traditional weapon of war. No, he sent just one man to do what is humanly impossible. *"For nothing will be impossible with God."*

Six times in Scripture God did wondrous things through unlikely women who bore extraordinary children from unlikely wombs. But in our Gospel today, He does an even more wonderful thing through the womb of a most unlikely seventh woman. He speaks His word through the angel Gabriel, and a faithful virgin named Mary conceives a Deliverer greater than any other.

And God outdoes Himself. His plan of salvation begins not through a barren womb, but through a new one. *"Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son,"* the angel said. Mary would bear not a sinful, imperfect child like Samson, but rather a sinless, perfect child: Jesus.

No wonder Gabriel said, *"He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High... Of His kingdom there will be no end... The child to be born will be called holy."* What Child Is This? This Child is God in the flesh, Jesus Christ.

The child conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary was much like Samson, yet so much greater. His life was also set apart, but He didn't waver for one moment from His calling and purpose. He was also called great, but Jesus' greatness wasn't found in His feats of strength. Instead, His greatness was in setting aside His divine strength to do everything necessary for our salvation.

Jesus had the strength to easily rip apart the lion that prowls around us, seeking to devour us: Satan himself. Yet for your sake, He placed Himself inside Satan's jaws. Suffered God's righteous judgment in your place. He could have used the jawbone of a donkey to wipe out a world of people who have sinned against Him. But instead, He willingly went to the Place of a Skull to suffer death in your place.

He could have destroyed all those who have rebelled against Him. But instead, He lifted our rebellion onto His back and took it up a hill to atone for it. He could have stretched out His arms and crushed those who crucified him at any time. But instead, for our sake, He let Himself be blindfolded, beaten, and mocked so that He might stretch out His dying arms on a cross and defeat a much greater enemy than any who nailed him to the cross that day.

Like Samson, Jesus died to save God's people. But unlike Samson, Jesus did not stay buried under the rubble of sin and idolatry that came down on top of him. No, he was greater than Samson. And rose from the grave to win you the victory.

From a new womb to a new tomb, Jesus' whole life was dedicated to making you new. A new creation, reborn by water and the Word. And filled with the same Holy Spirit that empowered Samson. The same Holy Spirit that overshadowed Mary.

So that now we say with Mary, *"Let it be to me, Lord, according to Your word."* In any circumstance. In pain and sickness. In poverty and despair. In fear and grief. In the midst of death itself. *"Let it be to me, Lord, according to Your word."* For our Lord is great. His mercy is great. And His victory is great. Amen.