

“The Surprising Ways of God”  
Judges 14/1 John 2:29-3:3

One February day thirty-five years ago, Lori and I left Princeton for the airport. I was in my final months of seminary and we were on our way to meet a Pastor Nominating Committee, the group in a Presbyterian church tasked with seeking a new pastor. We were both nervous and excited about the weekend, eager to learn where God was leading us, yet our flight was delayed out of Newark, meaning that by the time we landed, our welcoming party had gone home. I had reserved a car just in case that happened--a modest sedan--but walking up to the rental counter, we learned they had no more in that category. They offered a free upgrade and we soon found it in the lot—a red sports car. I wondered what the PNC would think, but was too tired to object.

The next day, we went to the hotel lobby to meet representatives from the committee. Since they had never seen us or we them, I peered around for a group of three people of varying ages who didn't appear to be related to each other and seemed to be waiting for someone. Soon, we spotted a likely party and walked over. “Are you from the church?” I asked. “Yes!” they replied. We introduced ourselves and began a nice conversation. After a few minutes, I wondered why we weren't heading out for our tour when one of them asked “So, where are you folks from?” I thought that was odd. “Aren't you from the Presbyterian church?” “Oh, no, we're from the such-and-such church that meets here.” Minutes later, members of the PNC arrived.

We had a nice morning as they showed us around the community and church, but every time I asked a question about the congregation, one of them would say “Let's save that for tonight.” We were to have dinner with the whole committee and they wanted everyone present for such conversations, so I waited. When we gathered that evening, I was ready to start getting answers, but it soon became clear the committee had decided not to have any in-depth talk until after dinner. They didn't articulate that plan, but acted on it even so as they mostly ignored me. They chatted with Lori and had a good time with each other, but the only one who consistently talked with me before and during the meal was the 10-year-old son of the committee moderator.

The next day, I was preaching at a nearby church that was also without a pastor. I led the whole service and felt things were going well until the sermon and had been positive about it, too, until I saw a man in a pew to my left who had fallen asleep. That wouldn't have been so bad except he began to snore so loudly that every time I paused, the sound reverberated around the sanctuary. After a couple of those interruptions, I finished the rest of my message in double time and at the front door afterwards, that same man told me how much he had enjoyed my sermon!

Lori and I had set out for that weekend with clear hopes for how it would go, but never imagined all of the trouble we found. While waiting for our return flight, we joked that it would be fitting if we experienced engine problems, but all went smoothly and soon we were laughing about the many missteps of the previous 48 hours. It was a time we had sought God's clear involvement, but not in the ways it all unfolded. I suspect that many of you had the same reaction to hearing of the events recalled by our Old Testament reading, too.

Over the course of the summer, we are reflecting on individuals from Israel's past known as judges; persons who not only settled disputes, but led military efforts. Last Sunday, Pauline set the stage for the judge who will be our subject the rest of the way, Samson, who will help the Israelites stand up to the Philistines. Her message grew out the moment an angel appeared to the wife of Manoah and told her that she would finally become pregnant. In addition to the normal physical demands of such a journey, her part of the bargain from God's end was to refrain from consuming unclean food and alcohol. It was implied that such restrictions would apply to the son

throughout his life too, along with the rule that he never cut his hair. She accepted the conditions and months later, he was born. Our passage comes immediately after that account in the book of Judges, but picks-up the storyline years later when Samson is a teenager or young adult.

It tells of a day he journeys to the Philistine town of Timnah and sees a young woman. It is love at first sight. He returns home and demands that his parents get her for him as a wife. They resist because she is not an Israelite, but soon accompany him to the village. At some point on their way, Samson is alone when a lion attacks. He kills it with his bare hands and goes on where he finally meets the young woman and confirms that he wants to marry her. Weeks later, he walks back home and passes the lion's carcass and sees it contains a swarm of bees. Samson reaches in and eats some of the honey, which is against Jewish law since a dead body and the animal itself makes the honey unclean. Even so, he takes some to his parents and they eat it, too.

Soon, Samson and his father return to Timnah where the groom hosts a seven-day feast after the wedding. Thirty local men are presented as companions to Samson and he poses a riddle to them: "Out of the eater came something to eat. Out of the strong came something sweet." Samson tells the men that if they can explain the meaning of that puzzle by the end of the week he will give them linen and festal garments. If unsuccessful, though, they must give him sixty articles of fine clothing. After three days, they still have not solved the riddle and the men threaten violence against the bride and her family unless she gets them the answer. The text then offers an unflattering portrait of a nagging wife and a mean-spirited husband who finally relents and tells her the solution. She passes on word to the men who triumphantly meet the deadline. The groom is furious, accuses them of having slept with his wife and then kills thirty other men in a nearby town and takes their clothing to pay off his wager. If all of that isn't bad enough, the story ends with Samson abandoning his wife who is then given in marriage to the best man.

It's a plot more appropriate for an HBO mini-series than Holy Scripture, but since it is part of the Bible there is something to be learned even so about the ways of God. The narrator brackets the whole sequence of events with divine activity for when Samson tells his parents to secure a bride, the writer adds, "His father and mother did not know that [the plan] was from the LORD; for [God] was seeking an occasion against the Philistines." When Samson kills the lion, we read the "spirit of the LORD rushed upon him" giving him the strength needed to survive which later provided the occasion to break the vow made to God against eating unclean food. Finally, when that young man explodes after the riddle is solved, we are told "the Spirit of the LORD came mightily upon him" after which Samson kills the men and steals their garments, breaking two of the 10 Commandments. Thus, the picture we have is of God creating a pretext for trouble and Samson happily breaking rule-after-rule followings the whim of the moment.

Now it's certainly possible—maybe even likely--that such editorial framing was an addition by that ancient narrator to soften some of the dismay over that judge's behavior. The unnamed author clearly knew that his Jewish audience would wonder how Samson's behavior possibly fit with their understanding of God as good and just and loving. Maybe, the final editor of that narrative added divine fingerprints to make the account more palatable for people of faith. We don't know, but even if he did that doesn't lessen the responsibility Samson bears for his own deeds which reflect a spoiled, selfish young man with anger issues. Yet when we take the narrative as written, it offers us a glimpse into the surprising and complicated ways of God.

One scholar put it this way: "God is free to contravene the very laws God has given to Israel for the sake of God's mercy and love for the people and for the sake of the punishment of the oppressive Philistines. Although laws and ordered structures are important and helpful, the priority remains on God's will and God's compassion." (Olson, Dennis T. *The New*

*Interpreter's Bible: Volume II*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998, p. 851) In other words, that God's sovereignty always remains as God continually uses imperfect human agents.

Our New Testament passage builds upon that idea. Prior to our verses, John has spoken of the need for human holiness and how Jesus is our advocate when we fall short. He wrote of how we are to embody love in all of our actions and to overcome evil in the world. John then says: "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are." Such a familial identity does not mean we have perfected God's love for he goes on to add "we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is."

John is saying that even though you and I have this unique identity as created in God's image our best efforts provide only a glimpse into the nature and character of the Creator. Yes, we are called to work diligently to change our behavior and the world around us so that it ever more closely reflects the love of God as seen in Jesus Christ. Yes, when we fall short of that goal we can seek and receive the grace of God as offered to us through Jesus. God does not wait for perfect human deeds to further the divine agenda. Instead, our Maker has always worked with what he had at his disposal; people like Samson and people like us.

Do you remember the trip I mentioned earlier about our visit with a Pastor Nominating Committee years ago? I didn't finish that story, as a few days after we returned to Princeton, I received a phone call from the committee moderator saying they had met and wanted me to become their next pastor. That might seem a strange result given all the weekend's mishaps, but what could seem even more odd is that Lori and I knew it was the right thing to do and so I accepted that call and enjoyed five and half years as their pastor in Mount Sterling, Kentucky.

How can I explain a sense of it being right when so much had gone wrong? How could I accept that invitation when so much about that weekend would suggest I needed to keep looking? The only way I can make sense of it even thirty-five years later is to see it as God's activity and leading even though it came about in spite of one human misstep after another.

As the good news is that God has never insisted only human beings who have their act together can be utilized as agents of his purpose. God has never drawn only from human responses that were completely selfless or carried out with precision. Rather God has always relied upon imperfect and on occasion, even questionable human deeds to further his larger will.

Which is why even that troubling glimpse of a judge named Samson permits us to turn to God on this day with grateful hearts. As it offers the hope that if the divine purpose could be achieved through such unsettling events of long ago, that surely God can further the expansion of his realm on earth with people like us, too, and do so amidst events we would never expect.