

“The Source of Our Strength”
Judges 16:13-22/Romans 8:31-39

Miss Christine East lived alone after her sister died. She wasn't in the greatest of health herself, yet remained fiercely independent. She had trouble moving quickly and thus began to leave the front door unlocked so friends could let themselves in. It was a risky step, living as she did in the heart of a big city, but she wasn't going to change, even after the intruder.

As one day, she was in her kitchen when a young man burst into the room looking for money. “Where is it?” he shouted. “Where is what?” “You know what!” and began rummaging around. Soon he found three envelopes in which she had placed small amounts of cash to pay persons who helped with the upkeep of her home. As he ripped them open and stuffed the money into his pocket, she reached for the phone. “You dial that,” he said “and I'll hurt you!”

It was a situation that would terrify most people, but she remained calm. “Let me ask you something, young man,” she said. “The money you have just taken goes to people who have worked awfully hard to earn it and you're not doing anything but taking it. Do you think that's right?” He didn't answer. She pushed further. “Do you go to school?” “Yes.” “Where?” “That's not important.” “Do you go to church?” “Yes.” “What are they teaching you over at your church? What has your family been telling you? How could you come into my home, a helpless old woman like me and take this money? How can you do that if you go to church?” Caught off guard, the young man threw the money on the floor and fled from her home.

The account of Christine East, a true story told by her pastor years ago, has always impressed me. I have this image of a 95-pound elderly woman who, in many ways, was frail standing up to a young man who could have easily harmed her. Yet despite her physical limitations, she displayed a strength that overpowered one who tried to take advantage of her. An outcome made all the more impressive when contrasted to events in our Old Testament account.

Those verses tell of Samson, that judge from Israel's past who was known for his physical strength. In the past two weeks, we have heard of how he killed an attacking lion with his bare hands and broke free of ropes when handed over to his adversaries, yet by the end of the today's account he is completely helpless and has been taken captive.

The lords of the Philistines had approached his latest love interest, a local girl named Delilah, and offered her 1100 pieces of silver each if she would help them capture Samson. She agreed, and three different times, in events just prior to our account, asked him to tell her the source of his strength and never suspecting a trap, he told her that fresh bowstrings or new ropes or weaving his hair into a loom would do it. After each of those times, she passed on word to the enemy, awoke him with a shout saying “The Philistines are upon you, Samson” and he easily broke free. Why he didn't catch on that something was amiss in their relationship is a great mystery. Perhaps, he was the source of the expression that “love is blind.”

At any rate, in our text we hear Delilah cry out “How can you say, ‘I love you,’ when your heart is not with me? You have mocked me three times and have not told me what makes your strength so great.” Worn down by her constant pressure, he tells her the truth, that cutting his hair would take away his strength. Delilah passes on the message and when Samson falls asleep has someone shave his head. When he awakes, Samson is unable to break free and as the scene draws to a close his eyes have been gouged out, he is in chains, and laboring in a prison.

The accounts of Samson and Christine East could not be any more different yet when heard together, they raise the same question posed repeatedly to a naïve man of long ago. For what is the source of our strength? What gives us the courage to face the hard moments of life as

they unfold? What did that woman of the 20th century know that a man from millennia before did not? Most importantly, how might we find the kind of strength she modeled?

I believe the answer emerges when we look closely at the source of Samson's strength. When exhausted by Delilah's pleas, he says to her "A razor has never come upon my head," he said, "for I have been a nazirite to God from my mother's womb. If my head were shaved, then my strength would leave me; I would become weak, and be like anyone else."

Delilah heard that answer in the same way most persons who have read that account over the years, namely that Samson's strength lay in the hair itself. That somehow the follicles on his head had a kind of effect on his physical prowess. Certainly, that interpretation can be drawn from the flow of Biblical events for when his hair is cut, his strength does vanish. Yet the narrator never claims Samson's power was due to the hair itself. Instead, I would suggest that the source of his strength was not so magical or contingent upon one's last visit to the barber.

The key comes from learning more about that group known as the Nazirites. They were a sect of Jewish women and men, mostly from the Old Testament era, who promised to live visibly different lives as an act of faith. It could be a lifetime vow or one for a particular period of time. As part of that commitment, they promised not to eat unclean food or drink alcohol or cut their hair. Samson's mother had made that vow on his behalf before he was born, yet for him to refer to himself as a Nazirite says that Samson had assumed those promises for himself though as we have seen did not seem to take the vows seriously. That being said, there's never any intimation in the Biblical accounts that such steps would have magical results. If so, we would have heard of others from that period with amazing strength. What is clear, though, is if a Nazirite cut his or her hair the individual was breaking their commitment to God. That's what Samson did.

For when he ended Delilah's pestering by telling her that cutting his hair would take away his strength, he proved yet again that he did not worry about honoring his vows to God. He seems to have thought his long hair had magical powers, too, instead of reminding him of his promise to God. So, when he awoke after that trim and could not break free, we read that it was because he "did not know that the Lord had left him." I reject that statement from our narrator as God never leaves us, but Samson in his own way had turned his back on God. All those years and success in protecting Israel from the Philistines had failed to teach him that the importance of being a Nazirite was not that hair made him strong, but that God did. The true source of his strength was before him all along, but he didn't see it, until it was almost too late.

In one his best-selling books, Robert Fulghum tells of a similar kind of discovery amidst vastly different circumstances. It came years ago when he saw a distressed young American woman in the Hong Kong airport, waiting for her plane. He wrote about the experience in his book and framed it as a letter to her.

She was crying and Fulghum asked what was wrong. "I imagined some lost love or the sorrow of giving up adventure for college classes, but when you began to sob, you drew me into your sadness. Guess you had been very alone and very brave for some time. A good cry was in order...Indeed, you were not quite ready to go home; you wanted to go further on. But you had run out of money and your friends had run out of money, and so here you were having spent two days waiting in the airport standby with little to eat and too much pride to beg. And your plane was about to go. And you had lost your ticket. You cried all over me again. You had been sitting in this one spot for three hours, sinking into the cold sea of despair.

"After we dried you off, I and a nice older couple from Chicago who were also swept away in the tide of your tears, offered to take you to lunch and to talk to the powers that be at the airlines about some remedy. You stood up to go with us, turned around to pick up your

belongings. And SCREAMED...it was your ticket. You found your ticket. You had been sitting on it. For three hours. Like a sinner saved from the very jaws of hell, you laughed and cried and hugged us all and were suddenly gone. Off to catch a plane for home and what came next. Leaving most of the passenger lounge deliriously limp from being part of your drama.

“I’ve told the story countless time,” Fulghum concludes. “‘She was sitting on her own ticket,’ I conclude, and the listeners always laugh in painful self-recognition. Often when I have been sitting on my own ticket in some way,” he continued “sitting on whatever it is I have that will get me up and on to what comes next—I think of you and grin at both of us and get moving. So thanks. You have become, in a special way, my travel agent. May you find all your tickets and arrive wherever it is you want to go, now and always.” (Fulgham, Robert. *It Was On Fire When I Laid Down On It*. New York: Random House, 1992, pp. 197-199)

All his life, Samson had thought that his power came from uncut hair, when in reality he was sitting on the truth. As it was not his hair and certainly not his bright mind that made him so strong. It was not his role as judge or family ties or military skill either. His strength came from God and it wasn’t until his hair was cut, a moment when he broke his vow to God, that he began to discover the true source of his strength. For in the closing verses of our passage, after he has been blinded and forced to work in a prison, the narrator says this: “But the hair of his head began to grow again after it had been shaved.” More than speaking of returning follicles, I hear that author to be asserting that Samson’s faith had finally begun to grow.

You and I don’t have to go through such trials to discover the same truth. We don’t have to wait for our youth or health or place in society to fade before we identify and act upon the true source of our strength. We don’t have to wait for hard economic times to realize that is isn’t our home or pension or investment portfolio that gives us the endurance we need either.

Rather, we need only to claim once more that our strength comes from God. That while other people and things may add to our well-being that everything and everyone else is second to God in the ability to provide us with the kind of strength we need for every moment of life. Or as another believer put it: “I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, no things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Thanks be to God that it is so, no matter the length of our hair.