Sunday April 25, 1982

"SAMSON: MISPLACED TRUST" Judges 16:4-22

We human beings seem to have a desire in times of uncertainty and change to hand over our freedom to one person or one group of individuals. We say: "here, you solve our problems." When nations are having problems, they often look for a savior. Adolph Hitler came to power in German in the 1930's because the German people saw in him someone who could solve their problems.

The ancient nation of Israel in the Old Testament was no exception to this tendency. The Hebrew people had entered the promised land under the leadership of Joshua. Before him, Moses had led them out of Egypt and out of slavery. Moses and Joshua were not dictators, but ruled with the help of an elected council from the twelve tribes of Israel.

Once in the promised land and after Joshua died, the Hebrews had trouble working together as one people. Each of the twelve tribes went its own way. Worse than that, the people began to worship false gods. As the book of Judges in the Old Testament puts it--"And they forsook the Lord, the God of their fathers and mothers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt; they went after other gods, from among the gods of the peoples who were around them."

Into this vacuum of leadership, a succession of individual leaders took over. They were known as "judges." One of the first of these judges was a man named Ehud. He became famous because he personally and secretly killed the King of Moab, Israel's enemy. After Ehud died, a judge named Shamgar took over, and following him a woman named Deborah. Gideon succeeded Deborah and his military victories were so overwhelming that the people of Israel begged him to become their king and supreme dictator. They said, "Rule over us, you and your son and your grandson also, for you have delivered us out of the hand of Midian." But Gideon refused, he knew the danger of being a dictator. He replied, "I will not rule over you; and my son will not rule over you; the Lord will rule over you."

After Gideon, there were other judges, but none with the leadership abilities of Gideon. The nation began to

drift again in their promised land. It was into this leadership vacuum that Samson came.

According to the Old Testament stories, Samson had all the gifts that any human being could have possessed--enormous physical strength, gigantic size, daring flash, likeableness. He was a fighter and a lover. But he never lived up to his potential and at the same time the people expected too much of him.

Because of his immense physical strength and size, the Hebrews thought he was the solution to all of their problems. They made the mistake that many nations make. No one leader can ever be the solution of all the problems no matter how strong or powerful he is.

Furthermore, Samson had some fatal flaws caused partly by his immense strength and size. His background was good however. He was born into a religious home. His parents had been childless for years and desperately wanted a child. Once Samson was born, they agreed from the beginning that they would do their best to raise this child in the best possible way. In fact, one of the most beautiful prayers in the Bible is offered by Samson's father, Manoah, when he learned he was to be a father. He prayed, "O God, teach us what we are to do with the child who is to be born to us."

Like most of us when we discover we are going to be parents, Samson's father and mother had good intentions. However they didn't follow through on their good intentions.

As Samson grew up, his parents continued to make his decisions for him. When children are young, we have to make many decisions on their behalf, but gradually they need to be helped to make decisions on their own. That's part of the process of growing up. It's what maturity is all about.

But Samson never learned to think things through on his own. He never learned to use his mind along with his physical strength. He came more and more to trust in his size and power. Any problem could be solved through the use of force, raw power, he believed. Added to this, he lacked spiritual strength and direction. Even though his parents had a strong and almost fanatical religious

faith, he never made that faith his own, and his parents on their part did little to nurture his religious faith. They gave him a religion of rules and regulations. And there were more don'ts than do's. They were committed devout people, but lived a very narrow, rigid life.

Samson's parents had not learned that our minds are as much a gift from God as our emotions. They had not learned that the ability to think is just as valid in one's religious life as the ability to feel and to follow rules. It is not enough to be zealous and passionately committed. The need for intelligence is just as great as the need for emotional intensity.

Samson felt God's Spirit in his life, but didn't know how to interpret or respond that Spirit. He knew there was more to religion than just following rules, but he didn't know what that "more" was.

Thus Samson came to trust more and more in his own power and not much else. The people of Israel, came more and more to trust in Samson's power. He would save them. Who could possibly defeat them when they had a leader so strong?

But defeat can come to those who trust only in physical strength and military power. Defeat comes in other ways. Samson had won many battles for his people. He had become something of a legend in his own time because of his size and strength and destructive behavior. Up to a certain point in his life he had gotten pretty much what he wanted. If he saw a woman he wanted as his wife, he took her. If he saw a prostitute he wanted to be with, he took her.

After an affair with a prostitute, Samson met a woman named Delilah. She was a Philistine and the Philistines were the life-long enemies of the Hebrews. But that didn't bother Samson. He was sure that in the end his strength and power would save him from anything.

But even the strongest person or the strongest nation has its weaknesses. And the stronger one is, the more one tends to be blind to any weaknesses. One cannot admit any weakness and thus is doubly vulnerable.

When the Philistines found out that Samson was infatuated with one of their women, they saw a chance to get at Samson. They offered Delilah a large bribe to uncover the secret of his strength so they could capture him.

When Delilah began to beg Samson for the secret of his strength, he didn't take her seriously. Rather he thought it was a game. He was so unaccustomed to serious self-reflection that he did not even realize what she was doing or what her intentions were. He lived the unexamined life.

So after playfully giving Delilah several answers about his strength which were false, she finally got him to tell her the secret. With that she promptly lulled him to sleep, cut off his hair and took away his power. The Philistines came and easily captured him. They gouged out his eyes and reduced him to the role of a slave and a spectacle for years to come.

As time passed, his hair grew back and with it, his strength. One day the Philistines had him appear at one of their huge cultic celebrations. After he had been paraded around in ridicule, Samson asked to be taken to the place where he pillars of the large arena were located. There he prayed one last prayer--a prayer of anger, hostility and revenge. "Please God, restore my strength one more time so I can give these people a taste of their own medicine."

Then Samson grabbed the two middle pillars of the arena and leaned his weight against them and pulled the pillars away from their footings and the entire building fell upon him and all the people in it. He killed all the spectators as well as himself. There were no winners--all were losers.

"To dust his glory they would tread, and number him amongst the dead."

The story of Samson speaks to our day and to us as Christians in several ways.

1. First, as Christians and as a nation, beware of trusting too much in one individual to solve all our problems. The Hebrews mistakenly placed too much trust in Samson and his personal strength as a way of solving their problems. It was a case of misplaced trust. Even a nation

like ours can make that mistake. We sometimes want to believe that if we have the right person as President, all our problems will end. Leadership is important and some individuals are better leaders than others. But it takes more than one person. Most dictators are in power because enough people believe that a strong and all-powerful leader will be their salvation.

"The salvation of the state is the watchfulness of its citizens." That's the quotation on the front of our State Capitol Building.

Especially in times of uncertainty and instability, we citizens are often too willing to give over our freedom to one person or one leader. It's almost as if we are at times afraid of freedom.

The Hebrews after being freed from slavery in Egypt, time and time again longed for the security of slavery rather than the uncertainty of the future. We are forever in danger of handing over our freedom to the power of the state in our anxious desire for security.

2/ Secondly, the story of Samson warns us of the danger of undisciplined power. Samson's immense power was at the disposal of his emotions and not his reason, and that is always a dangerous combination. He simply reacted. He tore down more than he put up. Sometimes we want to use power too quickly. In a day of nuclear weapons, it's even more important that the use of our power be extremely disciplined

Like Samson, giants always face special temptations. The more power we have the more disciplined it has to be. Undisciplined power will destroy the user as well as those it is being used against. In the end, Samson destroyed himself as well as many of his enemies. There were no winners, only losers. In a nuclear conflict, those using nuclear weapons will be destroyed as well as those the weapons are used against.

3. Thirdly the story of Samson and his power is a warning against the worship and trust we tend to place in power. Samson and his nation's biggest problem was in believing that pure power could solve any problem. And we too at

times want to believe that. Samson trusted so much in his own size and strength that he was vulnerable to Delilah. "What could she do? How could a weakling like her bring any harm to him?"

Samson forgot that there are many ways to handle an adversary. There are other ways to win than just using brute force. Ghandi led the nation of India to freedom from Britain without any guns or army, or bombs. There are many ways to deal with an enemy. Military power is only one of them. The true strength of our nation is not to be found in our bombs and weapons. It is to be found in our free and open society.

Our Christian faith reminds us that God is the ultimate power and God works through what we consider as weakness and foolishness. God saves the world through Jesus Christ on the cross. There is in suffering love a power that cannot be defeated by any other kind of power in the world. Amen.