Hey There Delilah

Hespeler, 2 October 2022 © Scott McAndless – Baptism, Communion Judges 16:4-22, Psalm 37:1-9, 2 Timothy 1:1-14, Luke 17:5-10

atthew and Venessa, you have shared a lovely gift with us today. You have invited us, as a church, into this very important and significant celebration of your family. Most of all, you have shared your beautiful daughter with us and introduced her into the life of this church. She is a beautiful girl, and she has a beautiful name.

I was a little bit curious about her name, Delilah, and just how popular the name has become over the last decade or so. Did you know, for example, that back in the 1980s and '90s the name Delilah was very rarely chosen for girls and that remained true right up until about 2007. Then it suddenly boomed in 2008. I'll get to why that happened in a bit, first I want to acknowledge why it didn't take off any sooner.

Delilah is a biblical name. It is also a very beautiful name that means delicate and so seems rather fitting for a little girl. But it was unpopular for a long time. And I'll tell you why; it suffered from the bad girls of the Bible syndrome. Like a few other women in the Bible – women like Jezebel or Salome – she may have had a beautiful name, but it was overtaken by some of the disturbing events of her life.

Delilah's Bad Rap

Delilah is credited, in the Book of Judges, with getting the Israelite hero, Samson, captured by his enemies, the Philistines. But it is not just the capture that made her infamous, it was the way that she pulled it off. The traditional understanding was that she used her feminine wiles on him which made her almost the perfect example of the extremely sexist (and I would say offensive) trope of the beautiful woman who tempts good men down evil paths.

So, I guess, parents hesitated to name their daughters Delilah because they didn't want them to turn out to be *that* kind of woman which is pretty silly. First of all, the name you give your child does not predetermine what kind of person they will turn out to be. But, even more importantly, it was based on a sexist stereotype of a woman rather than the actual woman who appears in the Bible.

Samson and Delilah

So, let me tell you a few things about the biblical Delilah. We are told, first of all, that Samson "fell in love" with her. And, sure, that sounds very nice and romantic, doesn't it? Sounds like the beginning of a love story. That is until you take a quick look at Samson's story up until this point. He has already been married once. It was to a woman who he saw one day and said to his father, and I quote, "Get her for



me, because she pleases me." (Judges 14:3) And then he threw a tantrum until he got what he wanted.

So, this tells me that Samson is not really a man who has a mature attitude towards women. He apparently thinks of them as pretty playthings that he wants to possess. And we certainly see that play out in his first marriage when he loses interest in his wife and abandons her, at least until it is convenient for him to go and look for her again.

So that is Samson's history with women. You will perhaps forgive me if I am a little doubtful about his deep and abiding feelings towards Delilah when he "falls in love with her." But worse, that is all that we are told about Samson and Delilah's relationship. That *he* fell in love with *her*. Whether she felt the same or whether she just felt as if she had no choice but to give in to this big strong guy who had a tendency to throw tantrums, we are not told.

But my impression is that there was not really a mature, mutually loving and affirming relationship between these two people. Delilah appears, above all, to have been pushed into what is not a particularly healthy relationship.

Delilah and the Philistines

And then, of course, Delilah gets manipulated by the Philistines to discover the secret of Samson's incredible strength so that they can capture him. Again, there is no indication that this is something that Delilah wants to do. At one point, they do offer her money to betray Samson, but it mostly seems to me that they are putting her in a position where she just can't say no to them. They are threatening her, or maybe threatening those who are dear to her.

So really, the impression I get of Delilah in the Bible is of a woman who is deprived of choice and agency in her own life. She has Samson take possession of her without consulting her desires. She has the Philistines using her whether she wants to be used or not. And I can't help but wonder how differently her story might have turned out if she had been allowed to be in touch with what she wanted and needed as an individual. I certainly don't believe that she was fated to go down a bad path just because of her name.

Name Popularized

So, I hope you understand a little better why Delilah was not a popular name up until 2007, even if I think the reasons for that were a little bit silly. So, if people stayed away from the name up until that year because of scripture, what changed at that time? We know exactly what happened. In 2007, a song by the American rock band Plain White T's hit the top of the pop charts. A certain number of months later, thousands of girls were given the name Delilah. The song was called "Hey There Delilah."

So is that it? It just took a really popular song to turn the fortunes of a name around? Well, I think there was a little more to it than that. I know that I usually interpret scriptures in these sermons that I do, not the text of popular songs. But I'm inclined to make an exception today. In many ways, I feel as if that song did not just popularize the name Delilah. There's a sense in which it redeemed it.

Another Silly Love Song

You might make the mistake of thinking that the song is what Paul McCartney would call just another silly love song, but I say there is more to it than that. It is a song that a boyfriend sings to his girlfriend, Delilah, when the two of them are separated because she is pursuing her studies on the other side of the country. It is sweet and sentimental, but it is also more than that.

In many ways, the fictional relationship in this song is the antithesis of the relationship between Samson and Delilah. The young man singing the song obviously misses his girlfriend and would like to be with her. He says so several times. But he also shows a deep understanding that both of them are in the midst of pursuing their own goals and becoming the people they are meant to be. In other words, Delilah is not there merely to please him or to be the object of his love.

There is a real sense in which they are both there to bring the best out of each other. As the singer puts it at one point, "We'll have it good. We'll have the life we knew we would. My word is good."

Empowering Delilah

So, I see the Delilah of the song as having something that the Delilah of the Bible never really had. She got the opportunity to define her own life and she had at least one person in her life who was supporting her in that even at great emotional cost. And I cannot help but wonder how the biblical Delilah's story might have been so differently if she had just been given that kind of support rather than having a bunch of people around her telling her exactly what she was supposed to do and who she was supposed to be.

And that is why it is so good to be here today and to celebrate what we are celebrating. I do not know what the future course of Delilah's life is going to be. Nobody does. She has many choices ahead of her that will define who she is and what she accomplishes. That is exciting. And we are here today as the people who love her, her family and her church, because we want to do our very best to make sure that she sets a good course in her life. We want her to be the kind of strong person who can stand against those who would use her like the Philistines and Samson used Delilah. But how can we do that?

A Prayer for Delilah

I would say that my prayer for you, Delilah, would be that you would have the spirit that is spoken of in our reading this morning from Second Timothy: "For God did not give us a spirit of cowardice but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline." That is what you need, what we all need, in order for you to become the best person you are meant to be and not simply the person that everybody else thinks you are supposed to be.

But the question remains, how can we make sure that somebody has that kind of spirit? How can we make sure they don't fall into the trap of just conforming to everyone else's expectations of them? Well, the exemplar of that in our reading from the letter this morning is Timothy, the one to whom the letter is addressed. This is what the writer says about Timothy: "I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy. I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you."

And that makes it pretty clear, doesn't it? One of the things that helped Timothy to avoid a spirit of cowardice and develop instead a spirit of love, power and self-discipline was the incredible support and love and acceptance he received from extraordinary people in his life like Lois and Eunice.

Extraordinary Support

Now, Delilah, I do not know all of the members of your extended family. But I do know your mother and your father, and I know some of your grandparents. I know that these are people who love you with a fierce love and are absolutely devoted to accepting you for who you are and giving you the space and the power to become the person that God made you to be. I know that, while you will face your own unique challenges and you will have your own unique capacities, that they will be there to love you and support you in who you are and who you become. That is exciting. I am also excited that they have invited this church to be a part of all of that and that we will do all we can to support you in similar ways.

Delilah, the best and most exciting part of this celebration today is that we get to watch you become the incredible person God has created you to be. You are not merely someone to be possessed by somebody else, even somebody who falls in love with you. You are not somebody to be manipulated by others for their own ends. You are going to build your own personhood and accomplishments with the help of these incredibly supportive people, your church and your God. That is what we get to celebrate today. And if I'm going to end with a promise, it's going to have to be this one:

Delilah I can promise you That by the time we get through The world will never ever be the same And you're to blame.