

I got in trouble in high school for wearing a Christian t-shirt. I was raised in Church, and I took a peculiar kind of pride in my Christian status. I had a whole collection of t-shirts that loudly proclaimed to everyone that I was a Christian. My favorite was one that said in big, bold letters on the front "DON'T FIGHT NAKED". Then on the back, it had a cartoon of a person in full Roman armor and said, "Put on the full armor of God".

I went to high school in the late 90s, at the height of the Co-Ed Naked trend. If you're old enough, you no doubt remember those shirts. They featured all kinds of sports - Co-Ed Naked football, soccer, pool, etc. And they all featured a tagline that was heavy in sexual innuendo. Of course those shirts were not allowed at our high school.

But one day, when I was wearing my "Don't Fight Naked" shirt, one of my teachers caught me in the hall and made me turn my sweet Christian shirt inside out (the punishment for wearing an inappropriate shirt). She said, "This isn't because it's a Christian shirt. The other teachers and I talked it over and we agreed if you can't have co-ed naked, you can't have naked God."

At the time, I was sure I was enduring religious persecution. But looking back, I realized she was right: the way I was being a Christian didn't make me particularly different from the rest of my school. I was treating my faith essentially as one more branding option. Other kids wore the swoosh or Mossimo or Starter jackets (late 90s, remember!) or Co-Ed Naked. And I wore Jesus.

This branded Christianity didn't transform me. I didn't have a fundamentally different character because of those T-shirts. I certainly wasn't winning friends to the faith. I was just another brand.

I want to talk today about what it means to be holy - to be the people of God in the world. Too often, we treat Christianity as just another brand. Another political view. One more good option in a sea of possible ways to be human.

Too often we have a faith that is *superficially* different from the rest of the world, but at its core is just another brand. Just another version of what everyone else is selling.

But the faith God calls us to is something essentially different from the world - that's what the word 'holy' really means. And when we allow God to make us holy, we're not a source of judgment and condemnation for the rest of the world (which is how we usually think of it - no one wants to be a holy roller, I think). Rather, when God transforms us, we become an invitation to life for the whole world. We offer something fundamentally different - and better - than the world's brands.

## **Welcome**

We're in a series called *Empathy for the Devil*. We're meeting six of the worst villains in the Bible and asking, "Why did they do what they did?" We're not looking to apologize or make excuses for them. We simply want to practice some empathy - put ourselves in their shoes. Because ultimately, we'll discover

we're more like them than we thought, and reflecting on their sin will illuminate the seeds of those same sins in our own lives.

[Scripture Slide 1] Today, we're going to meet the first femme fatale, the ultimate Black Widow. Her name is Delilah. Turn with me to Judges 16.

As you're turning there: the book of Judges is a strange, sad part of Israel's history. God has freed them from slavery in Egypt and led them through the wilderness. They've conquered the Promised Land, and now they're living as a loose confederation of 12 tribes (sort of like the USA was originally set up under the articles of confederation).

The book of Judges has a consistent cycle throughout the book: the people will quit following God (the way Judges says it is, "Everyone did what was right in his own eyes."). Then a neighboring tribe conquers them and oppresses them. So they repent and cry out to God. Then God raises up a deliverer, who is called a Judge, and this person rescues Israel from oppression. They're faithful... for a time. And then the cycle starts all over again.

We meet Delilah in the story of Samson, who is the last Judge in the book. Israel is being oppressed by the Philistines, and God raises up Samson as the rescuing Judge. Samson is essentially an ancient superhero - he has supernatural strength and a secret weakness: his strength comes from a sacred vow his parents took to make him a Nazirite. He's never allowed to cut his hair, and if he ever does, he'll lose his impossible strength.

Again and again, the Philistines try to kill Samson, and again and again, Samson defeats them. No matter how many times they face him on the battlefield, he utterly destroys them. So they turn to a woman named Delilah. Let's read together, beginning in verse 4:

Some time later Samson fell in love with a woman named Delilah, who lived in the valley of Sorek. The rulers of the Philistines went to her and said, "Entice Samson to tell you what makes him so strong and how he can be overpowered and tied up securely. Then each of us will give you 1,100 pieces of silver..."

Then Delilah pouted, "How can you tell me, 'I love you,' when you don't share your secrets with me? You've made fun of me three times now, and you still haven't told me what makes you so strong!" She tormented him with her nagging day after day until he was sick to death of it.

Finally, Samson shared his secret with her. "My hair has never been cut," he confessed, "for I was dedicated to God as a Nazirite from birth. If my head were shaved, my strength would leave me, and I would become as weak as anyone else."

Delilah realized he had finally told her the truth, so she sent for the Philistine rulers. "Come back one more time," she said, "for he has finally told me his secret." So the Philistine rulers returned with the money in their hands. Delilah lulled Samson to sleep with his head in her lap, and then she called in a

man to shave off the seven locks of his hair. In this way she began to bring him down, and his strength left him.

Then she cried out, "Samson! The Philistines have come to capture you!"

When he woke up, he thought, "I will do as before and shake myself free." But he didn't realize the LORD had left him.

So the Philistines captured him and gouged out his eyes. They took him to Gaza, where he was bound with bronze chains and forced to grind grain in the prison. -- Judges 16:4-5, 15-21

Delilah is the ultimate femme fatale. She entices Israel's invincible champion, tricks him into exposing his hidden weakness, and immediately betrays him into the hands of his enemies. She's a manipulative woman who uses sex as a weapon against God's chosen hero.

Except... Judges isn't actually all that concerned with Delilah. In fact, the book intentionally parallels Delilah with another woman named Jael we meet clear back in chapter 4. Jael comes into Israel's story during the time of the judge Deborah. When Deborah and her armies set their enemies on the run, the enemy king stumbles upon Jael's tent. Like Delilah, Jael is not an Israelite. Like Delilah, Jael entices him into her tent with promises of sex. And like Delilah, she puts him to sleep, treating him more like a baby than a lover. And finally, like Delilah, Jael does something to this man's head (instead of just a haircut, she drives a tentpeg into his skull and kills him!).

The author of Judges intends for us to notice these parallels. Because it raises a hard question: Why do we praise Jael as a hero and curse Delilah as a villain? They essentially did the exact same thing.

The answer is that we villainize Delilah not because of what she did, but who she did it *to*. Jael helped Israel's champion, so she's a hero. Delilah worked against Israel's champion, so she's a villain.

But if we press on that even further, we see that the book of Judges doesn't blame Delilah even for working against Israel, at least not directly. In fact, for the book of Judges, the real villain of the story is Samson.

What makes him the villain is that he refuses to be who God created and called him to be.

If you're familiar with the story of Samson and Delilah, that might come as a bit of a shock. I grew up in Sunday School always hearing the stories as though Samson was the hero.

And there's a lot to indicate that he *is* a hero. An angel announced his birth to his parents. And his name means "Sun" - he was to be a light in Israel's dark days. Then of course there's his impossible strength.

But if you read Judges 13-15, you see that Samson is actually a pretty rotten guy. He never once uses his strength to defend Yahweh or Israel. He only fights Philistines when he's angry. Worse, he doesn't keep

Israel's Torah, the way God gave them to follow. Instead, again and again, Samson takes whatever he wants. Judges uses a number of phrases that have to do with what Samson sees - he takes a wife because she looks good to him. He eats honey out of the corpse of a lion (which is a big no-no for Israelites because corpses are unclean) because it catches his eye.

That's all very intentional. Because the book of Judges isn't just a cycle. It's also a downward spiral. The judges at the beginning of the book are faithful. They're people you can really look up to. But as you work through the book, they get worse and worse. Samson, as the last, is the bottom of the barrel. He has the most potential, and is the least faithful.

And remember that phrase Judges uses? "Everyone did what was right in their own eyes." Samson embodies that - he does whatever he wants. He gives no thought to God, to his own people, to the Philistines. He doesn't care about anyone but himself. He's basically the Tasmanian Devil, swooping into town, taking and destroying whatever he wants, and leaving.

So Samson embodies Israel's unfaithfulness. He represents everything that's wrong.

To be an Israelite was to believe that God created the world and put humanity in the world as God's images. From the beginning, we were to reflect God's light into the world (sort of like the moon reflects the Sun's light). We don't do that - we miss the mark, failing to be God's faithful images. So Israel was God's rescue plan. When God freed them from Egypt, God made a covenant with them - "if you will be my people, I will be your God. And I will make you a kingdom of priests."

Priests represent God to the people. And Israel was to be a whole nation of priests. God called them to represent God to the rest of the world - to all those neighboring tribes that kept oppressing them. Israel was meant to be the means by which the rest of the world knew about God. They were to be God's images in the world - a direct callback to the creation story.

Another way to say it: God gave Israel the secret to a fully human life. That's what the Torah was - it charted out the path we need to walk to live the way we were created to live. And when Israel followed God's way (rather than doing what was right in their own eyes), they became a light for the rest of the world, showing them the way to God.

That's what happened early in Judges, when a non-Israelite woman saw in Deborah the Judge and her people the righteous way of God. Because God's light reflected off Deborah onto Jael, she embraced God's way.

But by the time we get to Samson, the light of Israel has gone dark. The Sun of Israel isn't shining God's light. He's doing whatever he feels like. So none of the Philistines who encounter him see anything essentially different from the rest of the world. For all his great power, Samson is essentially just a different brand of warrior.

Samson is meant to be the Sun, the light of Israel, shining light on the path of God's way. He's meant to embody Israel's holy vocation, to show Israel and the Philistines the way to be fully human.

But the light is dark. And in the end, the man who took whatever he saw was blinded, never to see anything again.

Friends, the Church is too often more like Samson than we care to admit. Rather than remain faithful to the way of God, rather than offer something truly different, we become just another optional way for people to invest their time.

Does the way we engage in politics actually look different here among us? Or are we just as divided and divisive as everyone else?

Does how we think and talk about race look different here among us? Or do we perpetuate injustice and polarization like those outside the Church?

Are we creating spaces for everyone to find God among us, or are we one more place people have to be fake, lest they are judged and condemned?

Do we trust the Spirit to change us? Or are we just another self-help group?

Do we take seriously God's command to rest, or are we just one more thing to fill up schedules, next to soccer practices and dance recitals?

Friends, what I love about Catalyst is our commitment not to be just another option in the world. We don't want to be the Christian T-shirt option for our community. What makes us different is not that we do our own Christian versions of everything, but that we are transformed by God's Spirit.

Imagine if Samson had been faithful to God's way. Imagine if he had been the sun of Israel, shining the light of God's way into the world.

How might Delilah's story have been different? Might she be remembered as a hero, like Deborah and Jael? Might she, if she had seen God's way, chosen God's way?

Friends, you and I are Samsons. God has called us to be God's images in the world around us. And God has gifted us to shine the light of God's life into the world.

What's at stake is not just you and me. We are surrounded by people who don't know God, who don't know the life God offers them. And they can be either Jaels or Delilahs. Of course, we can't make the decision for them, but we can show them the way. We can live lives that shine like the sun, bathing their world in the light of God such that they can see clearly the difference between the ways that lead to death and the way that leads to life.

This is our calling: to be priests to the world. To be God's images, reflecting God's light.

### **Communion + Examen**

[Communion Slide] Jesus succeeds where Samson fails, lights the way for us to find God, invites us to follow him.

1. When in the last week did I reflect God's light into the world?
2. When did I look more like the world than God?
3. When in this next week will I be tempted to look like the world instead of God?
4. How can I choose to reflect God's light into the world this week?

### **Assignment + Blessing**

Fruit of the Spirit Examen