

Growing in Gratitude
Saint Mark PC
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This passage from Judges is one of those unexpected treasures in the Old Testament.

Did you hear the riddle?

"Out of the eater came something to eat.
Out of the strong came something sweet."

Can you explain the riddle? People have always loved riddles. They are not only fun brain teasers, but sometimes they contain insights to some of life's mysteries.

Many centuries ago, a man named Samson constructed a riddle for his own enjoyment, but it also contained some surprising encouragement in difficult times.

If you are at all familiar with the figure of Samson in the Bible, you have a mental image of a man with legendary strength, and as it happened, great weakness as well. But this is a little-known story for the most part in his life.

Judges 14 tells of the day Samson set out to visit a young woman in a distant country. Along the way, through the roads of the open country, he encountered a lion. As a testament to his legendary prowess, he killed the lion barehanded.

Later when he traveled the same road, he came upon the same lion's carcass. But now, he found a swarm of bees had taken residence there. In relatively barren land where there are few trees, it was not unusual for bees to find a home in the hide of an animal such as happened here.

So this carcass is now rich with honey from those bees. Samson, not apparently afraid of bees either, scooped out some honey and went on his way. He made sure to bring some extra for his parents, though he did not tell them where it was from or how he got it.

Soon it came time for Samson to marry the young woman he had visited. In those days, weddings were quite a bit different than in our culture - we talked a lot about that in our Bible study last week from a different passage.

An example is here too. For amusement, a groom could sometimes test his friends with a riddle. And, we also read that a wager was involved in the outcome of that riddle - 30 linen garments, 30 festal garments. Who knew gambling was in the Bible?

So here was the riddle to test them:
Out of the eater came something to eat.
Out of the strong came something sweet"

Now you and I know the answer to this riddle - A Lion - but the men at the party were stumped for three days. They were so angry that they threatened his bride for the answer and things went badly afterwards.

But what is our interest in this riddle? It is in the surprising truth that it contains. Samson found nourishment - something life giving - out of that which threatened to take life from him. The Lion was by nature, the eater, but out of his carcass came something sweet. He found sweetness out of a potential disaster. He found honey in the lion.

A way to look at that is, no doubt along life's journey we will encounter threats, challenges, things which threaten to undo us. Hopefully not an actual lion, but nonetheless fierce. It is a surprising blessing when we discover honey in the lion.

Here in 2020, no one has to look very far to see those lions. Some of us are challenged individually by whatever threatens us, and in truth some lions threaten entire populations, such as we see with the COVID pandemic. Others deal with the harsh reality of lion of poverty, drug abuse, violence.

Some are subtle, like peer pressure, job pressure, anxiety, tension, stress. Every human being will experience some of that no matter what road you are on.

These Biblical stories always ask how are we to respond to the se things?

Some respond in different ways. Some encounter the lion and simply give up "Why Me?" ,they say, or "Life isn't fair". Others become bitter and lash out. They take the persona of the lion. "Life is tough" they say "and only the tough survive. Get the other guy before he gets you." We are aware of one well known person who likes to say "If you hit me, I will hit you back 10 times"

So how can we learn from Samsons' riddle? In the threatening and strong to find something sweet?

This is one of the hard to understand paradoxes of life: That we can harvest good out of the difficulty - even the brutality of our circumstances or experiences. Sometimes that is the very sweetest kind of honey.

History is full of these kind of stories - a fellow named John Bunyan wrote one of the best selling Christian books of all time not in his comfortable chair, but in prison - Pilgrims Progress.

Beethoven wrote the 9th symphony when he was completely deaf.

If you like to read stories about well known hymns, you would find so many of these kinds of stories. George

Bennard is said to have written "The Old Rugged Cross" during a time of great stress and trial in his life, He appeared to be suffering greatly, he thought his career and maybe his life were at an end.

Instead he found in that experience, and shared with the world something sweet.

Maybe you have experienced this phenomena in your own life.

Some of us had the experience of a stunning defeat that looked like the end of our dreams, but proved instead to be the beginning of a whole new and wonderful chapter in our lives. Some of us have had experience with a devastating illness, that when it was past we had found God in a measure we never had before.

We have to remember, turning something positive or life giving out of a potential tragedy is not just about our own strength or gritting our teeth and trying harder. Of course, Samson was strong enough to defeat the Lion, but he had nothing to do with the honey. That was pure grace, it was freely given to him.

Our faith tells us that God is the one who helps us to find the good in a difficult or challenging situation. Even more, the Bible tells us that our strength can get in the way at times. When the apostle Paul begs God to rid him of some Thorn in the flesh, he gets the answer that "my grace is sufficient for you, my power is made perfect in weakness"

For Paul it is through that weakness that Christ is revealed in his life.

So 2020...In less than a couple of weeks, we have one of our most cherished holidays, Thanksgiving. Ideally, we express gratitude for all the blessings of this past year. How will you do that?

It is always there, if you look for it hard enough you can find something redemptive out of chaos or disaster. When we seek that, when we try to find that, we are on the side of life, faith is on our side, God is on our side. That is ultimately how we grow in gratitude in all circumstances.

How can we find something redemptive, or even be thankful in these times?

Diana Butler Bass wrote a book just recently called "Grateful" that goes deeply into this idea. In the face of daily bad news, she began to resist with gratitude, by giving thanks for small things, you know, just seeing the morning sun, eating a meal, being with family. She even started using a prayer of the Buddha:

"Let us rise up and be thankful
For if we didn't learn a lot today
at least we learned a little.
And at least we didn't get sick
And if we got sick
at least we didn't die
So let us all be thankful."

Let me share how she views gratitude in a year like 2020: She writes this:

"Gratitude is defiance of sorts - the defiance of kindness in the face of anger, of connection in the face of division, and hope in the face of fear, Gratefulness does not acquiesce to evil - it resists evil." (Butler Bass, Grateful, pp 185)

And as far as finding honey in the lion, Butler writes:

"Pain suffering and injustice - these things are all real, they do not go away. Gratitude however invalidates the false narrative that these things are the sum total of human existence that despair is the

last word. Gratitude gives us a new story." (Butler Bass, Grateful p.186)

We never mean to make light of difficulty, or to downplay it - far from it.

Can you find something life giving? Can you find a new story?

For the person who can say "I believe that in all things God works together for good, therefore I will face my disappointments, my present difficulty with faith. Because there is honey in this lion and someday, if not today, I will see it."

This may seem foolishly optimistic to some, but you and I can't help being optimistic because we believe in God through Jesus Christ.

For sure none of us can avoid life's issues. None of us can erase 2020.

But what Samson's riddle teaches us is that these things don't need to destroy us.

No one wants bad times, and we never go seeking out trouble, but when it comes your way, grasp your lion firmly, and calling on God's spirit, as Samson did, give that thing a good struggle.

Then say to yourself, "In hope and thanksgiving to God, someday I will pass by this place and I will look again upon this disaster I wish had never come into my life. And though it seems improbable now, I know that I will find in the frame of this a store of honey."

Because

Our of the eater came something to eat.

Out of the strong came somethings sweet.

It is a riddle isn't it?

But thankfully it is also the word of God. May it be so. Amen.