

*Then the woman went to her husband and told him, "A man of God came to me. He looked like an angel of God, very awesome. I didn't ask him where he came from, and he didn't tell me his name." <sup>7</sup> But he said to me, 'You will conceive and give birth to a son. Now then, drink no wine or other fermented drink and do not eat anything unclean, because the boy will be a Nazirite of God from birth until the day of his death.' "*

<sup>8</sup> *Then Manoah prayed to the LORD: "O Lord, I beg you, let the man of God you sent to us come again to teach us how to bring up the boy who is to be born."*

<sup>9</sup> *God heard Manoah, and the angel of God came again to the woman while she was out in the field; but her husband Manoah was not with her. <sup>10</sup> The woman hurried to tell her husband, "He's here! The man who appeared to me the other day!"*

<sup>11</sup> *Manoah got up and followed his wife. When he came to the man, he said, "Are you the one who talked to my wife?"*

*"I am," he said.*

<sup>12</sup> *So Manoah asked him, "When your words are fulfilled, what is to be the rule for the boy's life and work?"*

<sup>13</sup> *The angel of the LORD answered, "Your wife must do all that I have told her. <sup>14</sup> She must not eat anything that comes from the grapevine, nor drink any wine or other fermented drink nor eat anything unclean. She must do everything I have commanded her."*

<sup>15</sup> *Manoah said to the angel of the LORD, "We would like you to stay until we prepare a young goat for you."*

<sup>16</sup> *The angel of the LORD replied, "Even though you detain me, I will not eat any of your food. But if you prepare a burnt offering, offer it to the LORD." (Manoah did not realize that it was the angel of the LORD.)*

<sup>17</sup> *Then Manoah inquired of the angel of the LORD, "What is your name, so that we may honor you when your word comes true?"*

<sup>18</sup> *He replied, "Why do you ask my name? It is beyond understanding." <sup>a</sup> <sup>19</sup> Then Manoah took a young goat, together with the grain offering, and sacrificed it on a rock to the LORD. And the LORD did an amazing thing while Manoah and his wife watched: <sup>20</sup> As the flame blazed up from the altar toward heaven, the angel of the LORD ascended in the flame. Seeing this, Manoah and his wife fell with their faces to the ground. <sup>21</sup> When the angel of the LORD did not show himself again to Manoah and his wife, Manoah realized that it was the angel of the LORD.*

<sup>22</sup> *"We are doomed to die!" he said to his wife. "We have seen God!"*

<sup>23</sup> *But his wife answered, "If the LORD had meant to kill us, he would not have accepted a burnt offering and grain offering from our hands, nor shown us all these things or now told us this."*

<sup>24</sup> *The woman gave birth to a boy and named him Samson. He grew and the LORD blessed him. (Judges 13:6-24)*

### **In a Time of Confusion and Defeat**

Have you ever noticed how defeat and confusion go together? Think back to how we felt the day after 9/11. Alongside the profound sense of sadness and loss, we also felt enormous confusion. How could this have happened? I think that most defeats are like that. When people have suffered tremendous personal losses – deaths, divorces, bankruptcies and the like – I often find that they feel confused and lost. They can't help but ask unanswerable questions. Confusion and defeat go hand in hand.

That's true in the church, too. Wouldn't we love to see our church attendance go up every week until we had to figure out where we're going to put everyone? Wouldn't we love to see the number of Christians in the world growing and growing until everyone on earth believes? Sure we would. We'd like to see the gospel triumph in this world. But what do we really see? Today, we see a country that no longer even pretends to be Christian. We see the membership in the church in America dropping as a percentage of the total U.S. population. We see division and arguing. We see church leaders throughout the world dismissing what the Bible says. At times, we feel defeated and confused. The Word of God that we have before us this morning points us back to another time of defeat and confusion. What God did then teaches us about what God does today.

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<sup>a</sup> Or *is wonderful*

## I.

The time that we're studying this morning was one of the worst times in the history of Israel. It was before Israel had a king, so before the time of David and Solomon, but after the time when Moses brought them out of Egypt. Today we call this period the time of the judges. And it was a hard time. For four hundred years, a pattern kept repeating itself. The children of Israel would forget about God and begin to worship false gods. God would send an enemy to oppress them. The people would wake up and realize their sin and pray for God to rescue them. Then God would send a deliverer. Then, for a while, they would follow the Lord, until the pattern started again. The events we have before us occurred when the Israelites had hit rock bottom, spiritually and politically. They were getting more and more confused about what God had said to them. They were helpless before the Philistines. **But in a time of confusion and defeat, God prepared a deliverer for his people.**

That deliverer was Samson. But our text isn't really about any of the things Samson did. It's about the way God announced his birth. His mother couldn't have children. But God announced that he was sending a baby anyway. With this announcement God made it clear who was really going to provide the rescue. God underlined that by commanding that Samson would be a Nazirite. Nazirites were people who took a special vow to God. During the time of that vow, they had to avoid alcohol and indeed all grape products. They couldn't cut their hair. They were dedicating themselves to the Lord. Usually, if someone took a Nazirite vow, it was temporary. But God designated Samson to be a Nazirite for life. Even when he was in the womb, his mother was supposed to avoid alcohol and grape products. And God tied his great physical strength to keeping that vow by making his hair the source of his strength.

All of this was to show that Samson was God's chosen deliverer for Israel in this time of confusion and defeat. Sadly, Samson was a disappointment in many ways. He was far too worldly minded and his career was cut short. But God did send him and God used him to rescue his people. God accomplishes his purposes when his people are defeated by their enemies and when his church is on the defensive. God still cares about his people and he still rescues them, even when they are spiritually confused and their own sin brings trouble and difficulty on them.

God sent many different leaders to protect his people during the 1500 years that Israel existed in the Old Testament. All of them were flawed. There was only one perfect deliverer in all of history: Jesus. Jesus, too, came at a time of confusion and defeat. In Jesus' day, the Jews had given up idol worship. But even so, Jesus quoted Isaiah against them and pointed out that they were ever seeing but never perceiving, ever hearing, but never understanding. They had taken the revelation of God in the Old Testament, all of which pointed to the coming Savior, and they had reduced it to empty rule keeping. They really worshipped themselves. They were so confused spiritually that when the Savior they were waiting for arrived, they couldn't see that he was the one God had been talking about for 1500 years. They rejected him.

But Jesus was their deliverer. And he is also ours. He came at that time of spiritual confusion and oppression by unbelievers and he proclaimed the gospel. From the physical nation of Israel, the New Testament church was born. Through that church, God has continued to proclaim the gospel right down to today. Through that gospel, Jesus still comes to us in our times of confusion and defeat. No matter how difficult things get for the church in our country, no matter how many people turn against us and no matter how much persecution it leads to, our Deliverer still calls us his own. He promises us that he will be with us, even when all the world is against us. He promises that he will keep our faith strong when the devil rages against us and the unbelieving society we live in tries to stamp out our faith. He promises that he will bring us home and that we will rule with him forever.

And in those promises, we find clarity to heal our confusion. We don't have to know what's going on. We don't have to understand what God is doing right now or why. All we need is Jesus. In those promises, we find victory when we feel defeated. He died and he rose to give us life. And he promised to be with us forever. So even when the servants he sends to us today are disappointments like Samson was, God's promises are still real. His love never fails. He will deliver us from this life to eternal life.

## II.

This lesson shows us how real God's promises to us in Christ are because at the heart of this lesson is God's love for his people. In this lesson, God shows that love in a very special way. **In a time of confusion and defeat, God came to his people.**

Now this is not a well known Bible story. But it centers around a mysterious man of God who came to Samson's father Manoah and his wife. Manoah's wife said, **"He looked like an angel of God, very awesome."** Now, does that mean that she recognized he was more than a man? It seems that way. Yet, in the conversation between the angel and the couple later, it would also seem that he did look like a man and Manoah at least thought he was just a particularly impressive person. But he was not a human being. He was the angel of the LORD.

Sometimes, when the Bible speaks of an angel of the Lord, it means just what it sounds like. When an angel of the Lord spoke to the shepherds outside of Bethlehem and told them that Jesus had been born, that was a true angel. But sometimes, "the angel of the LORD" means something more. When Manoah offered a burnt offering to the LORD, the angel ascended back to heaven in the flames. That miracle caused Manoah to realize that it was the angel of the LORD. Listen again to what he said next: **"We are doomed to die!" he said to his wife. "We have seen God!"**

Manoah thought they were going to die because they had actually looked at God. Why did he think that? God told Moses, **"You cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live."** But Manoah's wife pointed out that God was acting in grace. Just as he had found a way to show himself to Moses by hiding his face, so God found a way to show himself to Manoah by hiding the full effect of his glory. God appeared as the angel of the LORD, just as he also appeared a few times in the Old Testament in the form of a human being.

But Manoah and his wife were talking to God. And we can even be more specific than that. The Hebrew word for angel really means "messenger." In the opening verses of the gospel of John, God speaks of his Son before he entered the womb of the Virgin Mary. He calls him "the Word" because God communicates to us through Jesus. So, sometimes in the Old Testament, the angel of LORD is Jesus before he entered the womb of the Virgin Mary or even took that name. The true Deliverer came to prepare the parents of the deliver of that time. If that seems difficult to you, consider the answer the angel gave when Manoah asked him his name. The NIV says, **"It is beyond understanding."** But the footnote has a better translation. "It is wonderful." This is the same word that God used in Isaiah when he said "To us a child is born, to us a son is given ... and his name shall be called Wonderful." Not wonderful in the sense that we use that word today: really, really nice. Wonderful in the sense of being a wonder – of being a miracle that we cannot grasp. God has come down to us in human form. This angel was the child who would be born in Bethlehem, who was also the Mighty God.

When the Son of God entered the womb of Mary and lived there for nine months and traveled inside her from Nazareth to Bethlehem and was born there in a stable, God came to us. God the Son entered into our creation to conquer our greatest need and to rescue us from all that sin does to us here. Now when he came to Manoah, it was different. He did not yet make himself a part of our creation. But when he came on that day, he was preparing his people to accept him when he came again a thousand years later.

But Manoah is a reflection of us. He didn't realize who he was talking to. He didn't know how to treat an angel and when he had seen God's grace, he was afraid. In our case, the particulars might be different, but we all struggle to understand who and what God really is. That confusion comes from sin. If we were perfect, we would live in harmony with God. We'd understand all that he says and we'd gladly follow it. But our hearts are not perfect. You know how hard it is for us even to understand all that God says. And when we do understand it, sometimes, it's even harder for us to accept it, let alone live by it. We have so many questions and objections. There are so many times when we go off half-cocked because we just don't like what God has.

Like Manoah, we are all sinners. Left to ourselves, we would always be wrong about God. Left to ourselves, we would believe that God wanted us to do something so that he was happy with us. And we'd believe we could. That could only drive us to hell. But God did not leave us to ourselves. He sent his Son to be the Deliverer, the Rescuer, the Savior. Jesus became a part of our creation. And he lived and died in our place. He died to pay for the ignorance that sin breeds in our hearts. He died to pay for all the times and all the ways that we misunderstand what God is telling us. He died and paid for all the ways that we think that we can earn points with him and earn eternal life. Then he rose and forgave it all. Then he sent to each and every one of us a person like Manoah's wife to show us the truth: in Christ, all our sin is gone. In Christ, we will live forever.

In the second service this morning, we're going to baptize a baby girl. Like Manoah, like us, that baby girl is a sinner. Left to herself, she would never be able to find God or understand him. She would be doomed

to hell. But Jesus came to save her. In the waters of baptism, he applies that gospel directly to her. He forgives her and calls her his own. He gives her faith. He does the same for all of us. Every day that we live in this sinful world is a day of confusion and defeat. The sinner inside us rebels. The sinners around us hate our faith. The devil does all that he can to destroy us. But Christ keeps coming to us in the Word and in the Sacraments – in the gospel. And he calls us his own. One day soon, Christ will return. He will deliver us from all that sin has ever done to us and we will live with him in a perfect world forever. Until that day comes, he promises to keep our faith alive through his gospel message. Come and hear that message about your Deliverer. Amen.