Samson, part 3
Too close for comfort
Judges 15 – When life is such a drama – 22/07/2012

The story so far:

In part 1, Judges 13: We spoke of the way the book of Judges functioned like an aircraft black box helping us understand the nature of a spiritual and national disaster and learn from it, so we might do better in the future.

Israel's special design features

1. Strong informing culture
2. Spirit-filled leadership
3. Spirit-filled worship

The coming storm

- Rapid change
- Progress slows (Judges 1:19).
- Cultural breakdown (Judges 21:25)
- Loss of leadership (Judges 1:1)
- Loss of Spiritual guidance (Judges 18:31, Judges 17)
- Generational fracturing (Judges 2:10)

- We recognised that Israel’s situation resonated strongly with our own contemporary situation.
- That the question they were asking is resonates strongly with the question we are asking; how do you reach a lost generation that has drifted away and is no longer interested in God?
- In this context Samson is an amazingly nuanced story of someone that young Israelite’s would both identify with but who would challenge their life direction.

In part 2, Judges 14, Rise of the party boy: We noted that on the surface, the story of Sampson is about a young man who is powerful, irresistible to woman, who takes ridiculous risks, is easily bored, reckless, impulsive, and rebellious. However as we entered more deeply into the text we also saw that Samson represented a truly lost generation characterised by three life patterns.

1. Detached from family and God
2. Hollow of values and vision
3. Unwise

- We noted the resonance between Samson's story and the story of some young people today.
- We compared Samson with Corey Worthington – the young man who trashed his parents place while they were away on holiday.
We reflected on that part of youth culture which justifies a lifestyle of not giving a rip about anyone or anything except your own buzz. And we asked what can be done?

We then recognised the amazing capacity of biblical story to address the crises of our times, give guidance to people of all ages and touch the human hearts in the centre of all this in a way that creates hope and new life.

Reframing the old old story

In part 3 we will continue to explore the power of biblical story while recognising that we, believers living in Australia in the early part of the 21st century, need to do what Israel did – which was reframe the biblical story for their time. The original Samson story occurred during the time of early occupation of the land of Israel, but the version that we have in front of us has been re-framed for a people living in exile in Babylon 400 years later. It’s the same characters, plot and message but the style, language and issues have been re-framed to also speak effectively into a new situation.

One way of thinking about this is to look at the way portraits of Jesus have been re-framed over time.

I remember a picture hanging in a Sunday School room when I was quite small. The framing of this scene is rural England, Jesus looks English, and the sheep, pasture and sky all look English. However it still communicates an authentic quality of Jesus the good shepherd which makes complete sense and is totally appropriate for an English setting. And perhaps it is reasonably appropriate for my ancestors, immigrant Brits in Australia with strong ties to the mother country. However there is a real question mark about the images appropriateness for 21st century urban Australia. It is not that this picture is wrong or bad but simply that it lacks real cultural traction or connection for new generations that we would love to be attracted to Jesus.
In April this year (2012), Newsweek magazine featured a very different image of Jesus on its cover (Jesus has been a cover feature for Newsweek on seven other occasions, each occasion has bumped its readership by as much as 45%). While this Jesus is still an Anglo Saxon, the setting and style is now unmistakably contemporary urban while the image still posses that timeless quality which we recognise as Jesus. Both pictures show a calm but mysterious man with a steady gaze, who is seeking to connect with people.

In 2011, artists filled a Bakersfield parking lot in California with contemporary images and one of the images was this striking re-framing of Jesus. Although the character in this chalk picture is African American and contemporary looking, it still maintains the qualities we associate with Jesus; a calm but mysterious man with a steady gaze, who is seeking to connect with people.

Telling the biblical story for a new generation

Listen again to psalm 78 that Fiona shared last week

1 O my people, hear my teaching; listen to the words of my mouth.
2 I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter hidden things, things from of old-
3 what we have heard and known, what our fathers have told us.
4 We will not hide them from their children; we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD, his power, and the wonders he has done.
Psalms 78:1-4

Scripture says that we will tell stories of God to the next generation that these stories will not be hidden; they will be clear and effective. One of the ways we can do this is to really work at reframing the biblical stories. This means reflecting deeply on the biblical stories, reflecting deeply on the times in which we live and then creatively bringing these two things together so that the bible lives and bites into our world.

(If you would be interested in exploring this we will be running a story-telling workshop Sunday afternoon at 3pm on the August 5. There will be more information about that in the next week.)
So speaking of reframing biblical stores let’s now go to part three of the story of Samson.

Judges 15:1-20 (NIV)
1 Later on, at the time of wheat harvest, Samson took a young goat and went to visit his wife. He said, "I'm going to my wife's room." But her father would not let him go in.
2 "I was so sure you thoroughly hated her," he said, "that I gave her to your friend. Isn't her younger sister more attractive? Take her instead."
3 Samson said to them, "This time I have a right to get even with the Philistines; I will really harm them."
4 So he went out and caught three hundred foxes and tied them tail to tail in pairs. He then fastened a torch to every pair of tails,
5 lit the torches and let the foxes loose in the standing grain of the Philistines. He burned up the shocks and standing grain, together with the vineyards and olive groves.
6 When the Philistines asked, "Who did this?" they were told, "Samson, the Timnite's son-in-law, because his wife was given to his friend." So the Philistines went up and burned her and her father to death.
7 Samson said to them, "Since you've acted like this, I won't stop until I get my revenge on you."
8 He attacked them viciously and slaughtered many of them. Then he went down and stayed in a cave in the rock of Etam.
9 The Philistines went up and camped in Judah, spreading out near Lehi.
10 The men of Judah asked, "Why have you come to fight us?" "We have come to take Samson prisoner," they answered, "to do to him as he did to us."
11 Then three thousand men from Judah went down to the cave in the rock of Etam and said to Samson, "Don't you realize that the Philistines are rulers over us? What have you done to us?" He answered, "I merely did to them what they did to me."
12 They said to him, "We've come to tie you up and hand you over to the Philistines." Samson said, "Swear to me that you won't kill me yourselves."
13 "Agreed," they answered. "We will only tie you up and hand you over to them. We will not kill you." So they bound him with two new ropes and led him up from the rock.
14 As he approached Lehi, the Philistines came toward him shouting. The Spirit of the LORD came upon him in power. The ropes on his arms became like charred flax, and the bindings dropped from his hands.
15 Finding a fresh jawbone of a donkey, he grabbed it and struck down a thousand men.
16 Then Samson said, "With a donkey's jawbone I have made donkeys of them. With a donkey's jawbone I have killed a thousand men."
17 When he finished speaking, he threw away the jawbone; and the place was called Ramath Lehi.
18 Because he was very thirsty, he cried out to the LORD, "You have given your servant this great victory. Must I now die of thirst and fall into the hands of the uncircumcised?"
19 Then God opened up the hollow place in Lehi, and water came out of it. When Samson drank, his strength returned and he revived. So the spring was called En Hakkore, and it is still there in Lehi.
20 Samson led Israel for twenty years in the days of the Philistines.
When life is such a drama

As I read this chapter of the story of Sampson it connects very strongly with my experiences of people for whom everything was always a drama, do you know what I mean? Do you have people like that in your own life? Particularly when I was a youth worker there seemed to be people with drama everywhere. This chapter is just one drama after another.

Drama 1 – My wife is sleeping with my friend (Judges 15:1-2)

As the chapter opens up we discover that Samson has cooled down enough to realise that he loves his wife, even if she did betray him. So he grabs a young goat (read box of chocolates), arrives at his wife’s house and heads off to her room. Except that his father-in-law is standing there blocking his way, presumably because she is sleeping with Samson’s friend and Samson walking in on them might be super awkward. We can surmise that Samson is probably not at all pleased to find out his wife is sleeping with his friend so his father in law, justifiably afraid of what Samson might do, tries to appease Samson by offering him his younger daughter. Isn’t it grand to be a girl in this day and age and be passed around like a packet of biscuits?

Drama 2 – Revenge is a dish best served cold (Judges 15:3-5)

After discovering that he has lost his wife to another, the big surprise is that Samson does not tear the place apart. We can only assume he still has feelings for his wife and he doesn’t want to hurt her or her family. However he is powerfully frustrated and angry at the world in general and decides to take out his frustration on everyone in the area by destroying their food crops, kind of like Lex Luthor poisoning Gotham’s water supply in Batman. Except in our story Samson expends considerable time and effort in trapping hundreds of foxes and tying burning torches to their tails. I imagine that this is so Sampson can stay hidden while his foxes run all over the countryside as his remote control crop burners.

Dramas 3 – Murder most foul (Judges 6:6)

The Philistines are duly mystified as to the identity of the saboteur, so they ask around and discover that the trouble maker is Samson. But this raises a big question, if the Philistines did not know Samson was the cause of their problems; who told them and why? We will discover the answer to this puzzle shortly. In the meantime the Philistines anger is directed not towards Samson, because presumably they are afraid of him, but towards Samson’s Philistine wife and father-in-law who, ironically, has spent the whole story trying to avoid trouble and is murdered along with his daughter by his own countrymen. Perhaps the Philistines did this terrible thing in order to make an example of people who would give hospitality and comfort to an Israelite, but we are not told.
Drama 4 – Blood red rage (Judges 15:7-8)

The murder of Samson’s wife and father-in-law impacts Samson in a huge way. The young party boy prankster disappears as a dreadful rage and thirst for revenge takes hold of him. Overwhelmed by these feelings he viciously attacks and kills many of the Philistines and then retreats to a cave, hiding out from the incredible chaos and confusion that has taken over his life.

Drama 5 – Betrayal! (Judges 15:9-13)

We now discover the shocking truth. The ones who have betrayed Samson were, in fact, his own people – who were the only ones who knew what he had done. Now they will betray him a second time out of fear of the Philistines. We also discover the answer to the other really big question, why is God using such a goof ball like Samson as a deliverer? The answer that is becoming clear is that Israel has accepted Philistine dominance and is just too scared to follow a leader and throw off the yoke of the Philistines. What means that Israel is no more than a generation away from being swallowed up by the Philistine nation and permanently disappearing from the pages of history. However, God is unwilling to let it go at that. As God recognises that raising up a leader is useless when there are no followers, God fashions a wrecking ball called Samson in order to bring dramatic change to this situation.

Drama 6 – Jawbone Justice (Judges 15:14-17)

Samson allows his Israelite betrayers to tie him up and deliver him to the Philistine army, who, having caught sight of Samson all tied up and harmless and at their mercy, cry out in triumph. What follows is the central plot of every action movie that has ever been made. No matter whether it’s Bruce Willis in Die Hard or Harrison Ford as Indiana Jones, all the heroes come to this place where for all intents and purposes it looks as if the baddies have won and the hero’s goose is cooked. Yet they always find a way out. In this case the way out is God. God has not accepted Philistine dominance and the Bible says: the Spirit of the LORD came upon him in power (Judges 15:14). So filled with supernatural strength, Samson tears apart the ropes binding him and begins a dreadful slaughter of the Philistines with the jawbone of a dead animal which incidentally violates his Nazarite oath, but that doesn’t seem to matter any more because Samson is completely lost in a red haze.

Postscript – Seeking a way out (Judges 15:16-20)

The only part of this whole chapter that is not a drama is the poignant ending. When the last Philistine falls to the ground Samson cries out in triumph. But as his voice fades into the empty sky so does his rage and Samson finds himself betrayed and standing alone in a blood-soaked field of corpses. Painfully alone, exhausted, dehydrated and surrounded by death, he hurls away the blood stained jaw bone of the donkey because it is just one more dead thing in his hands. There is no life here, not in the field, not in Samson. If I had been there on that day in the blood-soaked field there would have been a look on Samson’s face I would have recognised, because I have seen
that look before. I have seen that look on the face of people lacking any strong, guiding inner belief, having succumbed to the endless drama of a directionless life and to a destructive firestorm of emotions and impulses that have completely taken over. At times they have sat in my office with their heads in their hands, feeling incredibly alone as they survey the wreckage and corpses of the things they have done.

Over the years I have tried to help people like this without a great deal of success. What I have discovered is that there really is only one way out for us all, that same one small exit sign that Samson began heading towards. He turns from the ruin around about him and utters his first recorded childish prayer, a small heart-filled cry of loneliness and hurt, seeking for someone in this bleak landscape to care and give him a reason to believe that life is actually worth living, to give him hope. And then it happens, God gives him water, just ordinary water, but extraordinarily delivered. It is hard to understand how precious it is for lonely souls to discover that they are not alone after all. We use the phrase of people “finding God” so glibly in this day and age without quite understanding the depth of suffering that arises out of acute cosmic loneliness and what the touch of God’s eternal presence means to such a soul. In that context, finding God is everything.

The one who ends the drama (Mark 5:1-20)

Hundreds of years later, and a few hundred kilometres to the north east of Samson’s home, on the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee, another man was grappling with exactly the same experience. At some point in his life a terrible drama had enveloped him. An uncontainable rage and darkness had engulfed his mind and worked its way from the inside out, until his skin crawled like it was on fire. To escape these feelings he would rip off his clothes and run screaming through the darkness. At one point in his mad flight he had found a sanctuary, a boneyard full of bone boxes, a place that people avoided. He didn’t like people; he didn’t like the looks on their faces, the looks of mingled pity and horror, those little human mirrors reminding him that he was freakishly different and repugnant. He spent most of his days sitting naked and alone amongst the bone boxes wailing for company and cutting himself just to feel something, something to think about that wasn’t his own madness.

Then one day he heard the dull groan of wooden oars and the swish of water that warned him that a boat had arrived on the shore of the boneyard. Glaring from between the bone boxes he spied a large group of men stepping out of the boat and one, in particular, caught his eye. Immediately he was gripped with a terrible feeling of fear erupting from deep within and something else, a feeling that was new, he could sense something, a light in the man, which both terrified and attracted him. With a strangled cry he rose from his hiding place and charged the group of men to drive them away, only to be transfixed by the piercing gaze of that one man. Stumbling to a halt he fell forward and the man said: “Come out of him you evil spirit”. And then someone was talking, someone he knew but whose voice was quickly fading away into the distance, and he couldn’t quite remember what it was that he was doing there in the boneyard, and he felt very tired but light. It was like he had been carrying great rocks around and he’d just let them all go. Slowly it dawned on
him that he was free of those terrible impulses, he was free of the endless dark drama of it all, the noise in his head was gone, the man from the boat had done something inside, and he was free.

**There is only one way out**

There is only one way out of the drama, because drama is the child of emptiness, it seeks to fill the gap where real life should be. It is the substitute life, our drama, or the drama’s of others through which we live vicariously, are the noisy distractions that fill the void. As I said drama is the child of emptiness and that emptiness can only be filled by someone who is the very essence of the fullness of life; life incarnate (John 1:14), the bread of life (John 6:35), abundant life (John 10:10), the way the truth and the life (John 14:6), eternal life (John 17:2,3). In my experience there is truly only one way out of the drama and it is Jesus.

God says that he will write his word on the tablets of our heart (2 Corinthians 3:3). The truth emblazoned on my heart is that as an 18-year-old lost in my own endless drama, in a little chapel in Narrandera, country NSW, the power and presence of Christ set me free and gave me life. And I know, in the same way that I know I must keep breathing, that Jesus is the only way out. Are you trapped in drama? Are people you love trapped in drama? Do you believe that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life? That Jesus is the only way out? Jesus says come to me (Matthew 11:28). Jesus says I stand at the door and knock (Revelations 3:20). What do want him to do?