

Wait Training: Role Playing

Exodus 17:8-13

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Good morning Chapel Hill. I'm sometimes amazed at how impatient I can be. Like when I'm stuck on I-5. Does this sound familiar? I'll be creeping along in one lane, notice that the next lane is moving slightly faster, make a quick dash into THAT lane...only to discover that the lane I was JUST in is NOW moving faster...and all those cars I had passed are suddenly ahead of me. So I grumble and growl and re-change lanes...and...well, you know how it goes. If I had just waited where I was I would have been ahead of the game...and far less frazzled.

Nobody likes waiting. On the highway, in the dentists' office, for test results. But waiting is a part of life. And we've certainly been reminded of that during this season of Covid. We've waited five months...and it appears we will wait a while longer. Well...it could be worse. It could be the 40 years that Israel waited and wandered in the wilderness.

We're in a sermon series called "Wait-Training" in which the Israelites are teaching us...sometimes by their bad example...how God uses waiting to train his people. This morning, we are going to learn that God has a role for each of us to play...especially when we are waiting in the midst of crisis. Our story comes from Exodus 17.

Then Amalek came and fought with Israel at Rephidim. So Moses said to Joshua, "Choose for us men, and go out and fight with Amalek. Tomorrow I will stand on the top of the hill with the staff of God in my hand." So Joshua did as Moses told him, and fought with Amalek, while Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed, and whenever he lowered his hand, Amalek prevailed. But Moses' hands grew weary, so they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it, while Aaron and Hur held up his hands, one on one side, and the other on the other side. So his hands were steady until the going down of the sun. And Joshua overwhelmed Amalek and his people with the sword.

As we've seen, the people of Israel did a lot of whining as they waited in the wilderness...even though the Lord continued to care for all their needs. But now...now they really have something to whine about. The Amalekites.

You know the term "blindsided." It means to attack someone when they aren't looking. One of my LifeGroup guys, a college football player, told of running down the field on a kickoff return and being laid out by a guy he never saw coming. Another guy, a Navy pilot, told of being attacked from "his six" when he was on a mission and pulling up just as the shell exploded right where his plane had been. Blindsided. Well, the Amalekites were blind-siders; a nomadic tribe that made their living sneaking up on caravans, attacking them from behind and stealing their goods. That's what they did to the Israelites. Deuteronomy 25 describes it this way:

Remember what Amalek did to you on the way as you came out of Egypt, how he attacked you on the way when you were faint and weary, and cut off your tail, those who were lagging behind you, and he did not fear God.

The Amalekites didn't attack from the front. They snuck in from the back...picking off the stragglers; the women...the children...the elderly. They "cut off their tail." It was a despicable and cowardly attack and God says to Moses, "Don't stand for it. Got get 'em."

This is the way Satan, attacks us. Not from the front. He sneaks up on us when we are weak, weary, discouraged, alone...and picks us off, one at a time. It is a reminder of why community is so important; there is strength in numbers and, in a season like this, we NEED to pull together, to provide encouragement and reinforcement against our spiritual enemy who would like nothing better than to use this pandemic to discourage and dispirit and divide the people of God. We must not let it happen. We must not buckle; must not surrender. We must stick together. And as this story reveals, there are four different roles we can play together as we endure this spiritual battle: We lead, we lift, we fight or we follow.

Some of us are called to Lead. Moses was the leader in this moment. He went up on a hill where all the people, especially the troops, could see him, and lifted his hands to the Lord. Perhaps it was in prayer. Perhaps it was in blessing. But the upraised hands of their leader inspired them in battle...so much so that when his arms grew weary and sagged, the troops became discouraged and began to fade. They were looking to their leader.

One of our maxims around here is this: everything rises and falls on leadership. As we wait through this critical moment, we need leaders...people who will step forward, who will step up, who will stick their necks out, who will say unpopular...even risky things,

who will cast vision and encourage and rally the troops. We need leaders in this moment.

Now you might say, "Well...that was Moses. The greatest of leaders. I'm no Moses." Well, at first, MOSES was no Moses, either! He was timid, uncertain, reluctant. An 80-year-old man out in the middle of nowhere, he would have been content to tend sheep for the rest of his life. But God had plans for him and called and equipped this unlikely man to become the great emancipator. It wasn't all smooth sailing. Moses made mistakes. And the criticism...the whining...never stopped. Frankly, that is one inevitable response to strong leadership; you are certain to make some people mad. But that's the price you pay when you rise to God's calling.

I wonder if God is raising up a new crop of leaders here in the midst of Covid? You don't like what's going on in the schools this fall? Well, you can whine about it...or you can step forward and do something. Protest. Launch a co-op. Rally parents. You don't think the governmental mandates are fair? You can whine about it, or you can do something. Send letters, start a petition, campaign for your favorite candidate, run for office! You're feeling isolated? You can whine about it or you can step up to lead a LifeGroup.

One woman came to my office this week. She feels a prompting from the Lord to do more to train and empower under-resourced people in this community...and she is willing to lead the charge. How about you? Is God stirring you leadership in this season? If so, he will fill you with his Spirit and equip you to do his will, no matter how inadequate you might feel!

And how did Moses lead in this moment? He lifted his hands...just like we do at the end of our service... to bless his people and intercede with God on their behalf. And when his men saw this, they were inspired! Isn't this a vivid image of the power of prayer? God could do whatever he wanted to do. He could have won the battle all by himself. But God chose to link his power to the prayers and worship of his people. Isn't that amazing! Somehow...for some reason...our sovereign God honors our prayer. Our prayers move the hand of God!

In other words, when we pray, stuff happens that might not otherwise happen. We had a powerful "Kingdom Come" prayer time on Tuesday night. People were weeping as the Spirit moved! It was a good turnout...and I couldn't help but wonder... why weren't we all there? Do we, as a people, believe our nation is in trouble? Do we, as a people, believe that the Church is under attack? Do we, as a people, believe intercession

matters? That prayer changes things? Or not? We are going to do this again on September 15. I hope you'll be there.

Maybe you are called to lead as we wait in this moment. Maybe your call is to Lift. Moses stood on that hill, arms in the air, interceding for his troops. When they were up, the troops prevailed. But Moses was an old man. His staff was heavy. Just imagine any of us holding up our hands for hours at a time. And every time his arms sagged, the troops faltered. Moses couldn't do it alone. He was too tired, too weak. He needed to be lifted up. And he had just the men to do it! Aaron and Hur...rolled a rock under him to let him sit, each took an arm...and lifted them up...until the victory was won. How desperately we need lifters in this moment!

I feel this passage very personally. I think of people in this church...especially elders...who have stepped up to me over the years...when I was down or discouraged or felt beaten... taken hold of my arms and lifted them when I could not lift them myself. You know who you are! You have been such a gift to me...and a reminder that I cannot possibly bear the burden of leadership alone. Maybe God is calling you to be a lifter. An encourager. To step alongside, speak a word of affirmation, help bear a load that might otherwise be crushing. One elder pointed out that EVERY ONE OF US ought to be lifting up our church in prayer. I agree! But there are some who have a particular call of encouragement and empowerment...and if that is you, you need to lift! We need you to be lifting!

Some of us lead, some of us lift and some of us Fight. This is the first time we meet Joshua. Joshua will become Moses' faithful assistant. He will take over for Moses and lead the people into the Promised Land. But right now, he is just a brave, tough young buck. Moses says, "Joshua...we need to deal with those Amalekites. Can you do that for me?" And it was like saying "sic 'em" to a dog. He was ready to fight!

I hosted a men's baby shower for our son Cooper the other day. Some of his buddies came, including a young man named Elias. Elias is a brand-new police officer in Seattle. When I heard that, I was a little shocked. The LAST place I'd want to be a cop right now is in Seattle. But Elias is excited. He's ready to hit the streets, ready to step in and protect citizens; ready to fight injustice. It was so inspiring to listen to him! And I'm glad we have people like that who are ready to step up...and fight for us, if necessary. Aren't you?

We need the same in the Kingdom's work. Perhaps you'll do spiritual battle as an intercessor, agonizing before the Lord upon your knees. Perhaps you are called to be

the point of the spear in difficult church matters or in a reconciliation or an intervention. Perhaps you feel called to tackle some thorny social issue, carrying out a vision of a respected leader. At times, we need hard-nosed, courageous warriors ready to do battle against evil and injustice for the sake of the Kingdom. And God knows there is plenty that is evil and unjust in the world around us!

I also see something generational here. Moses (and Aaron and Hur, for that matter) were old men. Their fighting days were behind them. But they could still lead and inspire and pray and guide. Joshua was young, strong, fearless and ready to be turned loose. Those generations needed each other...and depended on each other.

We're not doing very well at that today. Generations always squabble back and forth, but this seems more caustic than normal. Boomers are quick to criticize millennials as entitled or lazy. Millennials are quick to criticize Boomers as selfish and materialistic. But we NEED each other! As a Boomer, I love my millennial teammates. If you cast a compelling vision for them, they will work their hearts out for it. We...all of us...all generations...are in this together...and we will be MOST effective when we welcome, honor and seek to understand each other.

Lead, Lift, Fight...or maybe you are called to Follow. Joshua only chose a few men to fight with him. The rest of the people watched and waited...I'm sure with some anxiety. This was their first armed conflict since Egypt. The brutality of the Amalekites would have been terrifying. It might have been tempting to turn tail and run back to Egypt. Sure, it meant slavery ...but at least they were "safe," right? (I think we are being reminded today how much people are willing to forfeit for "safety.")

So the Israelites could flee...or they could freeze. Sometimes people just freeze up. Faced with crisis, they don't do anything. They just wait...and hope things will get better. Stick their heads in the sand. Try to ignore the conflict. That doesn't work. Or...you can do what the Israelites did. They waited, watched, prayed ...and ultimately, they followed their God-appointed leader, Moses. There is nothing passive about being a great follower. Most people are followers...and all of us are at some time. We need good and godly and faithful followers. But the question is, who to follow?

Jesus said, "Follow me and I will make you fishers of men." And of course...that's the secret, isn't it? To make sure we are following Jesus...and those who are called by him and speaking his word faithfully. Thoughtful, prayerful, discerning followers are a great gift. They aren't lemmings. They aren't sheep. They weigh carefully what they are

being told and, only when they are certain it is of the Lord, they join in. Followers cannot move forward without leaders, lifters and fighters. But without the support of godly, discerning, courageous followers, we in the front can never accomplish what God intends.

Leader, lifter, fighter or follower...to which role is God calling you in this moment? Remember, roles change. In an instant, in a season...God might suddenly thrust you into a role you would never have imagined. That's what the Holy Spirit loves to do...put us in situations for which we are ill-equipped and then amaze us with his powerful provision. I'd like to close by praying that the Holy Spirit will renew and clarify His call upon every single one of you. Wherever you are, turn your hands up and receive this prayer.