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The Power of Partnership: Putting Faith into Action “Are Your Arms Tired?”

Exodus 17:8-13

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The Israelites have their first battle after leaving Egypt. Joshua is the military commander. He is given the task of leading the counter attack against the Amalekites. Joshua attacks the threat with great physical effort. Moses attacks the threat of the Amalekites with great spiritual effort. Moses went to the top of the hill with the staff of God. Moses and Joshua are partners in the great fight against the enemy. Aaron and Hur are great partners in assisting. Moses and God are great partners in ministry. Please hear these words from the Book of Exodus, Chapter 17:

Amalek came and fought Israel at Rephidim. Moses ordered Joshua: "Select some men for us and go out and fight Amalek. Tomorrow I will take my stand on top of the hill holding God's staff."

Joshua did what Moses ordered in order to fight Amalek. And Moses, Aaron, and Hur went to the top of the hill. It turned out that whenever Moses raised his hands, Israel was winning, but whenever he lowered his hands, Amalek was winning. But Moses' hands got tired. So they got a stone and set it under him. He sat on it and Aaron and Hur held up his hands, one on each side. So his hands remained steady until the sun went down. Joshua defeated Amalek and its army in battle.

You've seen the movie, right? The movie "The 10 Commandments" with Charlton Heston? I remember watching it with my grandma and I remember her saying, "I just know that's what Moses looked like ... I just know it." If you haven't seen THE movie, you've heard the stories ... the story of Moses from the Book of Exodus.

You do know from the story or from watching the movie that Moses carries something with him. He carries God's staff. It's just a piece of wood ...there's nothing very special about that, is there? The staff Moses carried was just a simple tool used by shepherds to help guide sheep and defend the flock.

That ordinary piece of wood was used to do some extraordinary things. It represented the power of God. When Moses stood before God at the burning bush the staff became a snake to prove to Moses that God had power and ability. When Moses went to Egypt, he took the staff because God told him miraculous signs would be done through it. God used that ordinary staff and that ordinary man to change the course of the world.

Quite a partnership, God and Moses. God never told Moses he'd have to do all of this – all of this changing the world stuff – on his own. God said at the moment of meeting Moses in the form of a burning bush, “I am with you.”

The simple lesson here is, if God is your partner, make your plans big because God promises to be with you the whole way.

Moses and Joshua ... another partnership. In our reading today, this is the first we see of Joshua, but it's certainly not the last. Would Joshua have won the battle without Moses? Could Joshua do both the physical work and the spiritual work? Both were needed to confront the threat they were facing. They needed to partner together in order to accomplish the work that God placed before them.

The simple lesson here is, as partners we accomplish more together than we ever could separately.

What about Aaron & Hur? They partnered with Moses. We hardly know anything about Hur, but we do know something about Aaron. He's the brother of Moses and is actually the first partner that God provides for Moses in this huge undertaking of freeing the Hebrew slaves. In the story of

the battle, from our scripture reading, Moses goes to the top of the hill, but he doesn't go alone. Just as Joshua gathered others to move into battle, Moses gathers others to help with the spiritual struggle.

As long as Moses held up his hands, holding the staff, the Israelites were winning the battle. When he would lower his hands, the Israelites would start losing.

I don't know if you've heard about this or not, but last night at the football game, the Sun Prairie Cardinals won because Coach Tim Bass had his arms up during the whole game. And when he couldn't hold 'em up any longer, two other assistant coaches held his arms up for him. And the Sun Prairie Cardinals won, beating the Amalekites ... oh, I mean the Middleton Cardinals.

As long as Moses held up his hands, the Israelites were winning. But his arms got tired. Aaron & Hur, his assistant coaches, helped him out. They gave him the support and the strength he needed.

The lesson here: we need each other to accomplish the work of God. WE need each other to accomplish the work of God in the church, in the community, in the world. Serving Jesus Christ and doing ministry is not a one person job; it must be the mission and the effort of the entire church. It's about partnership and partnership is about support and encouragement.

We are smack-dab in the middle of a sermon series, focusing on the power of partnership. And today we hear about Moses. His whole story is about the partnerships he creates and the relationships he builds. He wasn't very

excited about serving God and freeing the Israelites from Egypt. He complains. He makes up excuses: “I’m not a leader. Suppose they don’t listen to me. I’m not a very good speaker. I can’t ever think of what to say. I have sheep shearing at 8 and goat herding at 10. I can’t help you. Send someone else.” In the Bible it says that God becomes very irritated with Moses and suggests a partner... his brother Aaron. “Fine,” says the Lord, “Aaron will work with you.” To which I’m sure Moses breathed a huge sigh of relief.

Moses had a job to do. He was to lead the Israelites into the Promised Land. But do you know the end of the story? He himself never entered the Promised Land. It was that blasted staff and all of its power that got him into trouble. The Israelites complained all the time and they complained they didn’t have enough water. God told Moses he could get water from a rock if he simply commanded the rock to produce the water. Moses, probably exhausted, angry and frustrated, did not speak a command. He chose the easy method: he hit the rock with the staff and water gushed forth. He disobeyed God and was told right there and then, “you refused to believe in my power and took the easy way out. I told you to **speak** the command, but instead, you used the staff, abusing the power I have placed in your hands.”

This moment of bad judgment doesn’t really take away from all the good stuff Moses did. Both Judaism and Christianity place a great deal of emphasis on the leadership of Moses. The story of the Exodus still teaches us today that God uses the ordinary to do the extraordinary. Even with this blip of disobedience, Moses still leads the people **TO** the Promised Land, but it’s Joshua who is chosen to take them in.

That's right, Joshua ... the same Joshua who won the battle against the Amalekites. Right before he dies, Moses places his hands on Joshua, and blesses his leadership. There is a transfer of power and I assume, a transfer of the staff.

Joshua ... a partner in ministry and in the leadership of a community. Joshua is an apprentice, a disciple, a student, a *padawan*.

I don't have a staff, but I do have a light saber (remove light saber from lectern and open it up) ... do not attempt this at home.

Okay, I've just jumped light years ahead ... light years... from wandering around the wilderness to wandering around the galaxy. Joshua is a padawan and Moses is the teacher, the instructor, the leader, the master.

The word "padawan" does not come to us from Scripture – it comes to us from Star Wars. You've seen the movie, right? ... All of them? Even if you haven't, you know the story. Star Wars is a classic example of good vs. evil, dark vs. light. Star Wars is just another way of telling the timeless tale of why it's important to choose the harder right rather than the easier wrong. Throughout the whole Star Wars story (there are 6 movies), the characters see and feel and rely on the eternal presence. They call it the Force. In the faith community, we call it God.

In the 2nd movie of the original trilogy, *The Empire Strikes Back*, Luke Skywalker is training to become a Jedi. He's a padawan, an apprentice, a disciple, a student. And it's not just training to become a warrior ... it's training to become a spiritual being, recognizing and understanding the gifts of the Force, because the Force provides you with everything you need. The Force never leaves you. The Force calls upon you to be a witness.

And just who is the master who teaches and challenges Luke? Yoda.

In my understanding, partnership happens in community. Partnership implies connectedness. Luke & Yoda connect as partners in resisting the Dark Side. Yoda points out that the Dark Side is not more powerful than the light side of the force, but it is quicker, easier and the more seductive path. Ummmm ... I can just hear Jesus telling his disciples that the gate is open to the wide road that leads to destruction, while the path to righteousness is straight and narrow.

What better way to talk about connectedness than with a film clip from *The Empire Strikes Back*. Let me set up the scene for you:

Luke is being trained on the remote planet Degobah. As you watch the clip, notice Luke's fighter ship as it sinks into the swamp. Yoda focuses on Luke's constant weakness in judging things by how they appear. Yoda is trying to teach Luke to believe in the Force – the energy that surrounds us and binds us. He's trying hard to teach Luke to believe in the gifts the Force provides.

FILM CLIP (scene 31)

Luke says, “I don’t believe it.”

Yoda replies, “That is why you fail.”

Ummmm ... with the Force all things are possible.

Do Moses and Luke Skywalker have anything in common? C’mon ... work with me. Say “YES, Susan!” Both stories are examples of partnership – relationships built on common vision, love, trust, survival. Relationships built on support and encouragement – Aaron & Hur hold up the arms of Moses. Yoda and many others in the Rebel Alliance support and encourage Luke Skywalker. Both stories stress a partnership with God. Both are examples of the blessings, gifts, energy, challenges and life that only God can offer.

Both stories are examples of being called ... called by God. Jesus places the same expectations and the same experiences on his disciples ... and we’re the disciples. We are a part of the calling of the faithful. Moses, Luke Skywalker, you, me ... we live the wonderful phrase:

“God doesn’t call the equipped. God equips those who are called.”

When I was called into ministry, I didn’t receive a shepherd’s staff and I didn’t receive a light saber ... I actually took this one out of Henry’s toy box. What I did receive: partnerships in ministry. Love, support, encouragement. What I pray we can offer to one another: partnerships in ministry: love, support, encouragement.

May the Force be with you. Amen.