

Stand by Me.... Exodus 17:8-13 (Gratitude)

"I don't know why I don't remember that story....!" I heard it a dozen times if I heard it once. Just this week! And it's true – this isn't the most famous or well-studied story in the Bible. Nobody gets saved from the Lions or a giant. No babies get plucked from the Nile just in the nick of time....but it's a great story....

The Israelites are making their long journey across the wilderness toward the Promised Land, and it's not surprising that they would come into conflict with other people – settlements and nomads, and their battle with the Amalekites is one of the first encounters they had with an enemy army. These people were a nomadic people that had a habit of attacking from the rear and thereby killing the women and children, the elderly and the infirm first. Scholars seem to think that is probably why God promised total annihilation of the Amalekites.

In this scene from the Israelites travelogue we hear about Moses, the great leader; we hear about Joshua, the future great leader; and we hear about Aaron, Moses spokesman and future high priest of the entire Israelite nation. All of these men were great leaders and Old Testament heroes in their own right, each playing important roles in the development of the new nation; I don't begrudge them that... But there is another man mentioned in this story – a man who steps out of nowhere, does something amazing, and disappears back into the shadows of the Hebrew Bible, never to be heard from again. That got my attention – who was this guy? His name is Hur. When people ask about favorite Old Testament bible heroes, how often have we ever think to include Hur on that list of heroes?

Now, people always look to Moses and Joshua as great leaders and role models of the Bible, and rightly so... They really are true heroes of the faith, but I think the real heroes of this story are Aaron and Hur. When Moses is holding up his arms -- and the staff of God, the one Moses performs all kinds of signs and miracles with -- when Moses' arms are up, the Israelites prevail. And when Moses' arms are down the Israelites start to lose. So Moses holds up his arms and that heavy staff as long as he can, but after a while he gets tired. Who wouldn't?

Cue Hur and Aaron... These two guys step up and hold Moses' arms up until the battle was finished, sometime around sunset. Now these guys are what I call heroes – especially the one nobody ever talks about or even remembers – Hur. We know almost nothing about Hur but he helped bring an entire nation to victory.

This morning, in honor of “World Gratitude Day” yesterday, I want to take a moment to thank all the Hur’s in the church and in my life...all those who support us – me – and take the back seat. The unnoticed, the un-thanked, and the unappreciated out there....The people we lean on – the people who stand by us in times of weakness and struggles, ...because we all need that sometimes....

People like Hur are indispensable. Where would we be without them? Where would you be without those folks who hold you up when you’re not strong? I think I know where I would be....

In AA, the recommendation is to find a sponsor – someone to mentor and guide you through the early stages of sobriety. My sponsor, Cal, and I set a schedule where we would meet for coffee or something once a week to catch up, but the weirdest thing – or so I thought – was that he wanted me to call him every day... Every day!

So I called him – every day, just like he asked, although I have to admit I usually called him when I knew he wouldn’t be there and I could just leave a message... It just seemed kind of awkward to me to be calling someone who was practically a stranger every day, but I did it. Every single day... for 5 years... I called my sponsor.... and I don’t know if I would be here today if it weren’t for Cal – even though we hardly ever actually spoke to each other, except through voice messages.....

But somehow I always get the credit. “You have such will power” they say....”You’ve done so well!” “I’m so proud of you...” And I think that the credit goes to God and to the unsung supporters like Cal who were there for me -- who stood by me when I wasn’t able to do what I needed to do by myself.

There are Moses’es in the church....and Aaron’s and Joshua’s...people who get the credit...who get seen and do the headline-grabbing work, and we’re grateful to all of them....But behind each of them is an army of Hur’s. Think of all the people fasting and praying and carrying their load so that the others can do their work. Those praying in the background who pray and seek the Lord’s face...these people are lifting the hands of those who are weary in the Lord’s work...and they are indispensable.

There was a veteran of the Vietnam War who bravely served his country for 6 ½ years.

He was well trained to search out booby traps, mines, tunnels and weapon caches. He was wounded five times. He had five confirmed kills in close combat.

He dragged other wounded soldiers to safety. He warned his platoon when danger was nearby. The Viet Cong put a price on his head. He protected and saved the lives of uncountable numbers of American servicemen. And in thanks for his service, the military leaders awarded him the death penalty.

Buddha, was a German shepherd. During his service, he partnered eight different handlers, all of whom lived to return to their families in the U.S., no doubt due in part to Buddha.

Talk about your unsung heroes...

America's war dogs prevented over 10,000 casualties in Vietnam alone. And at the end, these hero dogs were declared "surplus armaments" and euthanized.

Finally, America's Dogs of War now have a long overdue memorial. And there are several good websites if anybody wants to know more.

People like Hur are also frequently invisible.

I can imagine what it might have been like after the battle...I can see Joshua leading the men back to camp for the victory celebration... All the people are slapping him on the back and shaking his hand, "Good job, Joshua!" and, "Way to go, J-man!" ...

Ok, they might not not have called him "J-man," but you get my point. Moses probably even had a few folks congratulating him. After all, he is known as the greatest prophet and leader of the Old Testament, and all he did that day was sit on rock while two guys held his hands in the air!

...But what about Hur? Can you see him? ...walking quietly back to his tent... nobody's patting him on the back. Maybe somebody even calls out to him: "Hey Hur! We missed you in battle today....!" In fact, only a few people even know what he was doing that day...all day.... He is, for all practical purposes, invisible, but he knows, ...and Aaron, Joshua and Moses all know, as does God Himself....that he did a great job that day on the hill. "Well done, thou good and faithful servant."

We've all heard the saying that behind every great man is a great woman....

When William Booth, the founder of The Salvation Army, felt the call of the Lord to go into the streets of London and begin ministering to street people, he stood in a Methodist Conference meeting and requested permission from the bishop to be released from his church to go into the streets and preach. The

bishop heard the request and denied it - telling Booth that they would not waste a man of his education and talent on the people of the streets.

Upon hearing this, Booth sat down, resigned to defeat. His wife was seated in the balcony -- women were not allowed on the first floor, you know.... She stood up and leaned over the rail. And called to her husband and told him, "Listen to God - not to man." She vowed to stand with her husband against every foe. She came down from the balcony, Booth took her by the arm and they left the building to go into the streets to win people to Jesus. He was ready to quit, but his wife, a lady who usually stayed in the background, stepped out of the shadow of her husband to hold up his arms at a critical time in his life!

Being a pastor is kind of like that. Called to lead some people through the spiritual wilderness we call life – and church! Full time school and only 20 hours to do all the things I want so badly to do. It's clear that, like Moses, I can't do it by myself. I need people – the lay leaders need people -- to hold our arms up, and take the opportunity to really be a part of this family. You'll be given a chance to volunteer for stuff in the next week or so, and I ask that you prayerfully consider how God might be calling you to do a little more – a little more than an hour a week – a little more than just financially – of course that's good too -- and the stewardship campaign is coming pretty soon as well...

That's it – end of commercial...

I don't know how many will remember the name of Derek Redmond. ... Derek Redmond was one of Britain's greatest Olympic runners. Derek found out the importance of having someone to lean on during the 1992 Barcelona Olympics when he snapped a hamstring during the semifinals. Derek, a medal favorite, struggled to his feet and hobbled the remaining 250 meters in what has become one of the most enduring scenes in modern Olympic history. In closing this morning, I want to show you a video clip that I found quite by accident.....this is a clip that really shows just how important the people we lean on can be...and not just physically...

(Derek Redmond video)