



The Weight of It

TEXT
Exodus 17:8–12

June 28, 2020 — Sermon by Rev. Zach Walker

Imagine you are planning a long camping adventure, the kind where you will carry everything in a backpack. When you pack, you consider your trip and choose items you will need, imagining how and when each item might be useful to you. And now you begin the journey confident you have all that you need, and you are out on the trail well-rested and feeling strong.

But you realize after a mile or two or ten that your pack is heavy. In fact, as you continue, it feels as though your pack somehow gets heavier with each step. And, as gravity keeps at it, there are days and miles when it seems like you are not making progress, and surely you should have arrived at camp by now, but it is nowhere in sight. A moment of desperation sets in, and you wonder if, like your backpack, you have taken on a heavier task than you knew, or worse, a heavier task than you alone will be able to accomplish.

Life can contain moments like this. We begin with burdens that are easy, but as we walk along our own trails, it is as though we pick up experiences and memories — some light, yes, but some that are so heavy

they weigh us down. This life can sometimes feel like there are days and miles when not just our arms shake and our legs tremble, but our very hearts doubt and our very hopes flag.

We are living in a time when we all, like Moses, have reason to feel the weight of our own uplifted hands, trembling to stay aloft in prayer or pleading, legs aching as we desire to stay standing despite the weight of our brokenness and our finitude.

It isn't clear from the text why Moses took Aaron and Hur up with him to the top of the hill. Maybe he knew the way in which they would be helpful, or maybe he didn't know those details and just figured that, like most ventures in life, it would be wise not to go alone. Either way, the text tells us that when his hands were up, the Israelites were winning.

Those outstretched hands are an image, to me, of prayer and surrender — of Moses trusting in the mysterious God who saves. But then the weight of it sets in. Gravity, surely, but also the pull of life's weight, of the challenges before and behind them, of Moses, for all his greatness, being human — and his hands would lower, and maybe desperation set in.

Desperation at the realization that this invading force, this force that, according to Deuteronomy, attacked when they were faint and weary¹, cutting them off and killing everyone who lagged behind: the children and the elderly, the sick and the injured. It was an attack that picked on the disenfranchised.

Terence Fretheim writes that Moses being up on the hill would have likely served the purpose of being visible to the Israelites during the battle. So they would have seen Aaron and Hur come to his side, got something for Moses to sit on — to give him rest — and then stood with him, one on each side, holding up his arms, keeping his hands in the air. Because sometimes when a divisive enemy attacks, faith looks like stepping in to support.

The Israelites looked up and saw them there and saw that no one leads alone. No one succeeds alone — not Moses, and not them either, this tribe wandering the desert, this tribe of complainers who were more worriers than warriors, shown that in their weakness their survival would depend not on their own strength but on the strength of God and in their ability to hold one another up.

The image of this story is palpable given recent events. The central image is of raised hands in prayer or even surrender of self while two people use their hands for support. The central image in our country right now — and for many people the central image for longer than just the past few weeks — is that of a person using his body to aggressively hold down someone else to the point of death.

What I see in *that* image is the Amalekites. I see an attack on the disenfranchised. I see those whose hands are up — whose hands have been up — and they are tired from the weight of it. We are all tired from the weight of it, and it feels like a desperation moment. Tired from the weight of the fear and uncertainty of how to best modify our behaviors for the sake of one another, of how to choose between two types of survival — physical health on the one hand and financial survival to pay for groceries, utilities and housing on the other. The weight of systemic racism and use or abuse of power and privilege are once again clear and ugly and demanding that we engage with it honestly and humbly, rather than pointing blame or shrugging off the responsibilities that each of us bear.

We are facing the terrible and truthful reality of who we are today, but also, I hope, the question of who we — as a nation and as individuals — want to be tomorrow.

Frederick Buechner writes, “In the journey of faith it is

possible once in a while to be better than you are.” This story of Moses tells such a moment — a moment when Moses, Aaron and Hur, and the Israelites, too, were all more than themselves; a moment when the tribe of Israel, who had nothing to hope for but death at the hands of starvation or opportunistic marauders — somewhere in there God showed up and they found not just victory, but life better than they knew it could be. They found it in a faith that holds up the arms of those who are tired and fatigued: a faith that both speaks and acts; it fights and comes alongside and supports.

Now, just as then, is not the time for empty, hollow faith. Just like then, this is not the time for posturing as a person of faith with no substance behind it. This is not the time to wave a Bible — or any symbol of faith — as though that means anything substantive when we take no actions to change ourselves or the systems that exist to repress the voices of the disenfranchised. Imagine if Aaron and Hur had stood next to Moses, seeing his arms tremble with the weight of themselves, and then told Moses he needs to complain less. Or that his arms weren’t really tired. Or that this was his own doing.

When Aaron and Hur saw what was happening, of course they reached out in support.

When we see the arms of a fellow child of God straining and trembling, how could we do anything but use our resources and even our own selves to provide support?

Jesus tells us, “For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.”² Might he have added, “I was pinned down and you helped me up”?

When one is weak, we surround and support with our strength because there is no substitute for actually reaching out to hold up another.

In light of that, I want to take three things from this story to give us some hope.

First, there are a lot of things in life that wear us out. What do you do, and who do you surround yourself with when that happens? And are those the kind of people who jump in with support and humility, or are they more critical than constructive? When our arms get tired, we want to know others will be there to hold us up.

Second, there will be times when we will see the burden of life weighing on someone else. Life has difficult moments, and we must be willing to reach out to hold up someone else’s arms. We must be willing to take the time and effort to step in, to be there, to bear the weight, to take the responsibility of recognizing each other’s humanity and dignity.

Third, it takes more than a few leaders for change to happen; the work of justice and the love of one another takes vigilance — and it takes all of

us. Moses could have held up his hands all he wanted, but the Israelites still had to be down there fighting for their survival and existence. We are all in this for the sake of each other — no exceptions.

I want to end by offering yet another image.

When the weather is good, Meredith and I take Silas to a park near our house that has a bridge, and Silas loves to be on that bridge. He likes to run across it. He likes to look at the geese and the water. And one day, quite by accident, we happened to be on the bridge when a group of runners went across it. When they ran by, we were close to the middle; and as those runners' feet pounded, you could hear a kind of booming echo and the bridge would shake. Silas stood very still while it happened, and after they passed, he looked up and simply said, "Again?"

We learned that if you jump in the middle of the bridge and land hard, you can recreate that sound and that shake. We do that just about every time we are on the bridge now, and Silas has started wanting to try it for himself. But when you are 3 and weigh 30 pounds, you just don't get the same effect. And for Silas, that is frustrating.

So now he jumps and I jump — and I'm not sure whether or not he realizes it isn't him causing that satisfying boom and shake. But if I'm honest, it isn't me that's causing it either. The joy and delight isn't there if I'm jumping up and down on that bridge by myself. So it is the two

of us, little Silas and big Dada, jumping together that shakes the bridge with joy. And in doing so, we are renewed together, again and again.

Amen.

¹Deuteronomy 25:17–19

²Matthew 25:35–36

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.