

We are continuing in a series of sermons focused on the Hebrews journey out of slavery and through the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land. God led the Hebrews through this desert journey for the same reason we are led onto the hard road— to learn how to be free, most of all from our fears. Last week we looked at our anxieties about resources and God’s faithful provision of daily manna and water that flowed in the desert. Today the text describes God’s faithful response to the inevitable conflicts along the way on the journey.

As soon as the people arrived at Rephidim, a place near the southern tip of the Sinai Peninsula they were attacked by Amalek, the name of nomadic warriors. I’ve always thought of Amalek as a wandering motorcycle gang who prey on defenseless travelers through the desert. When the attack began, Moses told Joshua to choose some men and go into battle to defend the people. Then Moses went to the top of a nearby hill and held up the “staff of God” in his hands.

This is the same staff Moses learned to hold by faith at the burning bush when God turned it into a snake. And the same staff Moses used to confront Pharaoh, to part the waters of the Red Sea, and to bring water out of the rock when the people were thirsty. Now when Moses held the staff of God up to heaven, Joshua and his men prevailed in the battle against Amalek. But when Moses hands grew tired, and the staff dropped to the ground, Amalek prevailed.

Clearly this battle is being decided not by Joshua and his sword but by Moses and the staff he held above his head toward God. So, you have to wonder what’s the point of Joshua? Why doesn’t God just blow fire down on Amalek? Maybe, it is because the point of this battle isn’t to defeat the enemy. Maybe, the point is to teach the people not to be afraid of their enemies.

There are always going to be enemies. At the end of chapter 17 we are told that Amalek perseveres from one generation to the next. He just keeps showing up, in some form throughout the biblical story, as he does in the unfolding of history, and as he does in the high drama of our own lives with God.

Who is your Amalek? Who is the enemy that tempts you to doubt your faith in God, and makes you afraid you’ll never make it to the Promised Land?

Is it the familiar old voices from the past you tried to bury in the cellar of your soul, but they keep seeping up through the floor to say, “You’re not good enough.” “You’re not smart enough.” “You’re not very loveable.” That’s the enemy speaking. Or is Amalek the person who has been your nemesis for many years? Perhaps it’s the boss you think may be the antichrist? Or the family member whose hurts have cut too deeply to heal? Collectively, would we say that Amalek is the social injustice preventing people from being truly free today?

Or does Amalek live within you? There is no one who can hurt us as powerfully as we can hurt ourselves. Is Amalek the guilt over what you have done or left undone? Or the temptation that is so hard to resist and seems to have power over your will? Is Amalek the fear of losing your blessings, that is so overwhelming you can’t enjoy them for the fleeting years you have them?

You can pray and pray to live a life free of Amalek and all his conflicts with you, but the way I read this story, that’s not going to happen. Again, Amalek perseveres from one generation to the next. You may overcome one enemy, but there are always more to come. Different faces, different names, but the same destructive goals. You’ll find him at high school, college, work, social circles, the retirement center, even the church. With Amalek, it’s constant déjà vu.

But remember God brings us onto the hard and threatening road through the desert for a purpose. And here at Rephidim we discover contending with your enemies—either around you or within you—reveals your strength.

Some of you are thinking, “I’m not comfortable with preachers talking about battles and enemies.” Neither am I, but I didn’t write our sacred text. You may say, “I don’t come to church to learn how to be strong, but compassionate.” Compassion is wonderful and we spend a lot of time focused on it here, but today we’re thinking about Amalek who is not impressed with your capacity for empathy. He just wants to hurt you. We may have to love our enemies, but we don’t have to let them hurt us.

Amalek has spent his life beating up defenseless people in the desert while the Hebrews spent their lives making bricks for Pharaoh. Who were they to take on an enemy as fierce as Amalek? I’ll tell you who they were—a people who had a dream. And no one is as strong in this world as those who have a dream. That’s true in your own life, and it’s true for our congregation.

If our dreams are worthy of us, though, we should count on them having some enemies. There always have been. When I am at a conference on ministry, sometimes I will hear a pastor boast, “There are no conflicts in my congregation.” Maybe that’s because there is also no leadership in the congregation. You cannot lead without moving toward a dream, and someone, out of fear, will always want to go back to Egypt instead.

I used to teach a class on conflict at the seminary. The first time I taught it, I was amazed at how many students were in the class until I got halfway through the first lecture, and discovered many of them were hoping I would show them how to avoid conflict. So, I retooled the class, and we began again with a Bible study on Jesus’s conflicts. Then we discovered that most of the conflicts Jesus had were conflicts he started. He could have left well enough alone, but it wasn’t well enough so he didn’t leave it alone. But he chose his conflicts. He turned away the conflict about the adultery issue and the conflict about the taxation issue because they weren’t his conflicts. But the self-righteousness issue? He couldn’t leave that alone. That’s because self-righteousness is the enemy of living by the grace of God, and Jesus was dying to give us that dream.

Again, it wasn’t the sword that was the strength of the people’s battle against Amalek. It was Moses holding his hands and his staff up to God in a posture of prayer, asking for the grace of heaven. That grace was the true source of the Hebrews strength in the conflict, and certainly ours as well.

Moses eventually got tired of holding up his hands, and they dropped to the ground. It is striking that Moses grew tired in prayer before Joshua did with the sword. That’s because praying is harder work than fighting. Seeing Moses exhaustion, Aaron and Hur came up beside him to hold his hands high up to the sky. If you are going to take on something that is wrong, diseased, hurtful, or something that just wants you to be afraid, you had better have your spiritual act together. And this passage is telling us that eventually it is impossible without having someone help you hold your hands up to God. Everybody needs an Aaron and a Hur; everybody needs to be an Aaron and a Hur. That’s because it is in community that we find our great strength in the grace of God, which we never need more than in times of conflict.

When two or three come together in Jesus’ name, he promised to be in their midst. What Jesus is doing among us, is holding us up to the God who gave us holy dreams. This is part of what he meant in our New Testament lesson when he said he has called his disciples his friends. And it is why he called us to love one another—as spiritual friends.

Again, the dreams that are worthy of us will always be resisted by someone, maybe even by some voice from within you. And you’ll never make it to the Promised Land on your own. You need Jesus the Savior, who appears beside the friends who hold up your hands to the heavens. And then you discover it has always been God holding your hand every day of the journey. Amen.