

“Partners in faith: Aaron and Hur”

Exodus 17:8-16

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Sometimes you have to go it alone. Today, we are reading a story where Moses had support, when men like Aaron and Hur stood by his side. But there are times when you have to go it alone.

- When the people of Israel came face to face with the waters of the Red Sea, Moses had to go it alone. When Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, there was no one on his left and there was no one on his right. There was no Aaron. There was no Hur. There was Moses. That night at the Red Sea, Moses had to go it alone.
- When it came time to climb Mount Sinai and receive the revelation and take hold of the sacred tablets, God called Aaron and Nadab and Abihu and seventy elders to come with Moses, but at one point we are told Moses was to approach the Lord alone. (Exodus 24:2) On Mount Sinai Moses had to go it alone.
- When the wicked Queen Jezebel was breathing fire and threatening his life, Elijah experienced a long spell of solitude. Hiding out in the corner of a cave on Mount Horeb, Elijah had to go it alone.
- At least Shadrach and Meshach and Abednego had each other to lean on when they entered the fiery furnace. When Daniel was thrown into the lion’s den, he had to go it alone.

Sometimes you have to go it alone. I hope it is not the case today for you, for any of you, that you find yourself having to go it alone. But that might be how you feel. You might feel that as the crisis of the Coronavirus has seeped into almost every crack and crevice of our lives that you have to go it alone. If you do feel like you have to go it alone, know this. Even when Moses had to go it alone, he was not alone. And neither was Elijah or Daniel, or any other person who has to go it alone.

In their times of utter aloneness, these faithful ones discovered the undeniable truth that God was with them.

When we say, “Sometimes you have to go it alone”, know this. God knows what it is like to go it alone. Jesus had to go it alone. Jesus had to walk the hill called Calvary alone...all alone. And though three crosses were on the holy mountain that day he died, neither the thief on the left nor the thief on the right was able to lift the burden for Jesus. Jesus died alone. Because Jesus died alone, and because Jesus experienced the deep darkness of death and isolation and even abandonment, Jesus is able to stand with us, to be with us, to lift us, to support us, to comfort us, and to carry us, in every moment of our lives, even those moments when for all the world it seems like we have to go it alone. People of God, in a real and powerful way, even when we are all alone, even when we have to go it alone, we are not alone. Jesus is with us, and there is nothing in all creation that can separate us from the love of Jesus. Even when we are alone, we are not alone.

Undoubtedly, there are times you have to go it alone. But you don't always have to go it alone. Thank God, you don't always have to go it alone. In fact, as our passage today shows us, there are times, and I hope it is not just a few times, but there are definitely times when God puts people in the right place at the right time to lift our hands, just like Aaron and Hur were there for Moses. Today I want you to pretend you are Moses. I want you to pretend that you are right in the middle of an epic battle. Back in the day it was the Amalekites that Moses was battling. I don't know what your battle is today, whether it is the Coronavirus and the slow rollout of vaccines and the threat of sickness and for some, the loss of loved ones. I hope all of us recognize that we are in a battle to affirm the basic dignity of all people, particularly those of color who for too long have been treated like their lives don't matter, or that their lives matter less. I would not be surprised if some of you are battling with economic difficulties, with bills that keep coming and paychecks that have slowed down or stopped. And even while all these pandemic and racial issues confront us, I know for certain there are some

who are battling the deep emptiness that comes from losing a loved one, from the sadness and sorrow of broken relationships, from the discouragement that just feels like we are never going to turn a corner...on any of this. Whatever your battle, today I want you to be Moses. I want you to envision yourself smack dab in the middle of the battle.

And as you look straight ahead you see the battle being waged in full force. You are lifting your hands and giving it all you have got to win the battle, to persevere in the battle, to sustain the battle, and to endure the battle. Because you are human, because we are all human, as the battle rages your strength ebbs, your strength fades, your strength fails. You just can't keep your hands up. So you drop them. You are looking dead on into the heart of the battle, your strength fades, and your arms drop.

Except when you drop your arms, they do not fall down. How can this be? In your mind you know you dropped your arms. You know your strength is gone. You know your resources are spent. How can it be that when you drop your arms from complete and total exhaustion, how can it be that your arms do not drop. And so you look to your left, and on your left an Aaron is right by your side. Aaron is holding your left arm up. Then you look to your right, and on your right a Hur is by your side. Hur is holding your right arm up. And because there is an Aaron on one side and a Hur on the other, your arms remain lifted. Not through your own strength or your own power. God has put Aaron and Hur to lift your arms. God has put Aaron and Hur to lift your hopes. God has put Aaron and Hur to lift your spirits. Because there are Aarons and Hurs in your life, because there are Aarons and Hurs in my life, because there are Aarons and Hurs in our life, we find the strength to face the battle.

Can I get an Amen for Aaron!

Can I get an Amen for Hur!

Can I get a loud and heartfelt Amen for the Aarons and the Hurs who stand by our side and lift us up? Thanks be to God that you don't

always have to go it alone. Sometimes, hopefully many times, and if you are really fortunate, all the time when you look to your left and to your right, instead of being alone, you will find people who are there to lift you up.

Now you would think old Moses would have looked to Aaron on his left and Hur on his right and said, “This is pretty good. I like having people like Aaron and Hur to lift me up.” You would think, but you might be wrong. Chapter 17 in Exodus tells about Aaron and Hur lifting the arms of Moses. In Exodus 17 Moses did not have to go it alone. So what does Moses do after Aaron and Hur lifted his arms? You will never believe this, but Moses decides to go it alone. Chapter 18, the very next chapter, exposes Moses as someone who chooses to go it alone, rather than leaning on the Aarons and Hurs God put in his life. And it takes a wise father-in-law to point out what a mistake Moses is making by not leaning on the Aarons and Hurs God has given him.

In short, Moses is in the role of the judge and there are lots and lots of questions about what to do in certain situations and who is wrong and who is right in disputes and like the vaccine lines we have seen night after night on the news, the line to get to Moses stretches far out into the desert. Moses is judging each and every case. Being the only judge for each and every case is wearing him out...and my guess is the people waiting in line weren't too thrilled either. His father-in-law Jethro looks at what is happening and tells Moses, “What you are doing is not good.” Jethro suggests getting others involved, delegating, training, equipping, or in short, Jethro says, “Moses, you got to lean on your people. They are there for you. You don't have to go it alone.”

Now maybe if you are going it alone right now, that's just the way it is. Maybe there really is no one who will stand with you on your left and on your right. I hope that is not true, but if it is, I say again, even when you feel all alone, you are not alone. God is with you. But if you are going it all alone, I do want to play the role of Jethro and suggest that maybe there are people who would stand by you, who would support

you, who would assist you, who would lift you up, if you just ask. I'll finish this little part of the sermon by saying, if you don't have to go it alone, don't. Don't. Ask for help. Allow others to help. Sometimes you have to go it alone, but life is a whole lot easier if you have someone by your side to help. That is the wisdom of Ecclesiastes, where the preacher simply says, "Two are better than one." And come to think of it, a cord of three strands...now you are getting somewhere.

Have you ever had someone in your life so that there were two of you? Have you ever had an Aaron and Hur to stand by both sides, so that you experienced the truth of those three strands that are not easily broken? Have you ever, and I mean ever had people who lifted you up? If you have, in a real sense you never have to go it alone. I have already said it and I will say it again, you always have Jesus. But now I am talking about not only having Jesus, which is the greatest gift we could hope for, I'm also talking about how those people like Aaron and Hur remain in our lives even when they are no longer in our lives, even we are separated by time and distance and even death, even during this painful time of social distance and social isolation. What I am saying is if you have ever had an Aaron and a Hur, they are still with you.

I will readily admit, it has been such a challenge to go through the Coronavirus without the things that normally keep us strong. When your arms get exhausted by the battle and you just want to drop them, it is better if Aaron and Hur show up in person, if you can feel them by your side, see them by your side, touch them by your side. We have had to go without that presence, that touch, that in person body and bones reality that is so vital to our existence as humans. And yet even as I admit that, today I want to ask you to explore with me the ways that those Aaron and Hurs can still be with us, even when they are not physically with us.

One of the things I have missed, and I know many of you have missed it as much or more, is our Sunday morning coffee fellowship. Back in the day, I felt like people couldn't wait for the sermon to end so they could rush into Fellowship Hall to grab a cup of coffee and see who

brought what to fill our hungry tummies. We all know it was more than the food and beverage. It was the fellowship that we share during fellowship hour. We have not had fellowship hour since Sunday, March 8, 2020. We're coming up on a year. Amazingly, I have celebrated Coffee Fellowship numerous times during these long eleven months. And I have not broken any protocols. Linda Olsen and her sisters love to sign up to host fellowship on the Sunday before Halloween. Linda loves Halloween. The treats are always Halloween themed. She even brings accessories...like this little package of Halloween Kleenex. These Kleenex sit on my desk. Each time I see these Kleenex, it's like Linda is here, with her warmth and her smile and her deep and genuine concern for the whole church family. And by the way, whenever I remember Linda, I remember the powerful story of her receiving a heart transplant, and how she has developed an amazing relationship with the family of the one who donated the heart to Linda. Aaron and Hur come to us in a variety of ways, and with Linda, her Aaron and Hur literally live within her.

I decided to have a little "Where's Aaron and Hur?" treasure hunt. Those rascals turned out to be in a hundred different places, just waiting to lift my arms, my heart, and my spirit.

- On the couch in my office are two lambs, one at each end of the couch. When Barbara Green moved out of her house, her daughters brought those lambs and gave them to me. When I look at these lambs, one on the left end of my couch, and one on the right, it feels like Barbara and Dutch have stepped in for Aaron and Hur. I can almost feel my arms being lifted by these two who supported this church and community in every way possible. Dutch's father Ed Green ran a local store that was somewhere near where the car dealership now sits at Dunn's Corners. Apparently, Ed Green was an Aaron and Hur all rolled into one. When Florence Madison, one of our founding members, would talk about Ed Green, she would always say, "Ed Green carried a lot of people." I think she was saying that when families faced hard times, times like the depression, times like WWII, times when money was hard to come

by, Ed Green found a way to support them, with either credit or out and out help during when folks were feeling exhausted.

- In my office are countless offering envelopes from one of the children in church, my sweet little friend named Addie. Again, back in the day when our kids would come sit in front and in a real way lift me up with their smiles and kind hearts, Addie would always bring an offering envelope with a one dollar bill in it. And many times there was a note with either my name, or if I was really lucky, with the words I love you. I have to bend way down to get on Addie's level, but when I do that little girl lifts my arms and raises my hopes.
- I have a phone in my office. I have a phone I carry with me. If I just let myself think outside the box, that phone becomes a lifeline to Aaron and Hur. How many times has the phone rang and the person on the other line was bringing a word of encouragement, a word of good cheer, a word of comfort, a word of blessing. How many times did Aaron and Hur reach right out of the phone and lift me up. I developed a very special relationship with Rabbi Walter when we worked together at Interfaith Ministries in Houston. Rabbi was a delightful person, with all kinds of interests and talents, from dancing to weaving to tennis. And Rabbi Walter knew how to be a friend. When my dad died, we flew back to California. We rented a car and were driving from San Francisco to my hometown. We got a call on the cell phone. I answered and the voice said, "Hi Wayne, this is Roy Walter. I just wanted you to know we are praying for you in this time of loss. I hope you feel God's comfort and peace." Rabbi Roy Walter was doing a great impersonation of those fathers of the Jewish faith, Aaron and Hur. The Rabbi lifted me up.
- I have this little soda bottle I keep. The soda was blue at first. About twenty years ago, the soda in this bottle was blue. Those colors have faded to a sort of ugly pale yellow. But the bottle has a picture of Aaron and Hur...or my son Alex and his best friend Scott doing their best Aaron and Hur impersonation. These two buddies are hugging each other by a swimming pool and looking

like they have the whole world wired. They are maybe five or six years old in the picture. They are full of smiles and grins. In the summer of 2012 Scott was diagnosed with cancer. Alex stood by Scott during that difficult time. In the summer of 2018, Alex was diagnosed with cancer. Scott was there. This past Wednesday I was leading a Zoom bible study on this very topic of Aaron and Hur, and Julie spoke about that time when Alex was diagnosed with cancer. She reminded me that as soon as Scott's mother Terriann heard about the diagnosis for Alex, Terriann canceled her travel plans and sat by Julie's side for a week as they scrambled to find doctors and make appointments and just like our boys have leaned on one another, Terriann was there for Julie.

- Oh, my treasure hunt for Aaron and Hur led me to pictures of Aaron and Hur, pictures of Aaron and Hur in various iterations, from mission trips, travel trips, walks on the beach, weddings, funerals, baptisms, and as a true Presbyterian, countless pictures of me eating with people like you. I guess we like to eat...together. Together. Together. Pictures of being together, with Aaron and Hur remind us of the great blessing of friendship and support and community.
- Phone calls, stuffed animals, soda bottles, pictures, pictures, pictures, a small package of Kleenex...art work. Here in my office is a picture of church painted by Joyce Stahl, and here is another painted by Shirley Bartucca. Art in itself, and especially art created by dear friends, just to see these works of art, and so many others...you almost don't need to hang them on the wall, it's like Aaron and Hur are with us to hold them up on display. One on the right. One on the left.
- My offices, the one at church and the one at our home, are filled with books. Many of those books were recommended to me by friends like you, some were given to me by friends like you, and unfortunately, some were loaned to me by friends like you. A moment of confession. I try to be a good friend, but I am terrible about returning books. I apologize. But thanks. A book, connected to a friend, becomes a shared experience, and as books have meant

so much in my life, I look at a bookshelf and it is like the hands of Aaron and Hur are reaching out to grab hold of me and raise me to new levels.

- And last but not least, letters. I probably do not need to say anything else about letters, because you know what I mean. A letter. The distance collapses, time fades away, and the room becomes filled with the presence of loved ones, filled with the presence of Aaron and Hur. Over the holidays I was doing some organizing and I came across several years' worth of Christmas cards. I kept pulling up another chair, and another chair, as Aaron and Hur multiplied and expanded and filled my office, and my life, and my heart, with their presence.

Yeah, sometimes you have to go it alone. But if you don't have to go it alone, don't. Church is meant to be a community, a family, a fellowship. We won't get it right all the time. An extended crisis and quarantine make it even more difficult to get it right. But we keep trying to be on the left, to be on the right, to be there for each other, to lift one another, to be Aaron and Hur. And we do it by using the phone, by stitching and sewing and painting and weaving, and writing notes, and baking goodies, and listening, and caring, and loving, and sharing.

This Coronavirus really is a battle. Remember, we do not have to go about the battle on our own. Together, may we be the Aaron and the Hur that raises, that lifts, that supports, that sustains, that encourages, and that shares both the burden and the blessing of this precious gift called life.