

Date of sermon: 1/2/2022
Speaker: Pastor Jeff Poush
Bible passage or verse: Exodus 17:8-16
Title of Sermon: The Lord is my Banner

17⁸ The Amalekites came and attacked the Israelites at Rephidim. **9** Moses said to Joshua, "Choose some of our men and go out to fight the Amalekites. Tomorrow I will stand on top of the hill with the staff of God in my hands." **10** So Joshua fought the Amalekites as Moses had ordered, and Moses, Aaron and Hur went to the top of the hill. **11** As long as Moses held up his hands, the Israelites were winning, but whenever he lowered his hands, the Amalekites were winning. **12** When Moses' hands grew tired, they took a stone and put it under him and he sat on it. Aaron and Hur held his hands up—one on one side, one on the other—so that his hands remained steady till sunset. **13** So Joshua overcame the Amalekite army with the sword.

14 Then the LORD said to Moses, "Write this on a scroll as something to be remembered and make sure that Joshua hears it, because I will completely blot out the name of Amalek from under heaven." **15** Moses built an altar and called it The LORD is my Banner. **16** He said, "Because hands were lifted up against the throne of the LORD, the LORD will be at war against the Amalekites from generation to generation."

A new year is upon us. How many of you guys actually still use paper calendars? Less than first service, but still enough. Something about turning the page, starting a new year. It's exciting. At the beginning of 2021, Pastor Mark and I laid out two kind of word pictures for you. As we were starting 2021, we did those two videos. We came from you live from on-location. I stood on the banks of the mighty Willamette River, and Pastor Mark went to this really cool home that was in process of being built, and we laid out two concepts. The first one was, we asked you to build a dream. We wanted you to look forward to the year ahead and set some goals, some personal goals for yourself, maybe some goals for your family. Because we wanted you to kind of have a road map, or a blueprint, that would inspire you and motivate you to strive for a really, really good year. And that was something we did in private. You did that at home. And if you haven't already, we would like to encourage you to go find that envelope that we gave you and maybe pull out those goals. Maybe you've already done that. But if you haven't, I'd like to invite you to do that -- to see how you did, and then maybe to reorient you for the year ahead.

The other thing that we did is, we asked you to build an altar. And we talked about that passage in the Old Testament where God had the men go into the Jordan River and then pull rocks out and lay them on the bank as a memorial, or as a reminder of all the good things that God had done. And over time, we almost filled this jar. I didn't count, but there are hundreds if not a thousand different physical expressions of good things that God has done. What I'm holding in my hand are actual, literal expressions. Maybe it's a rock you put in. Each one of these rocks is a story. I don't know what the story is, but it could be of a relationship that was healed. This could be a cancer that went into remission. This could be a challenging conversation that went well and God showed up. Every single one of these stones is a personal story. It's a personal testimony. You got up out of your chair, and you walked up, and you shared with us what God had done in your life and you memorialized it. And that was a special moment for you -- but you know what? It was also a special moment for our church, because we got to draft off of whatever God had done in your life that was a blessing. You see, this is both a personal and a public moment.

When we come to an altar, it's where we make a personal proclamation public. When we take a literal physical step and we build a memorial, we build an altar, we are acknowledging God at work. It's a personal testimony that God had provided for you in some special way. But we did this one in public, because we don't function as individuals in the church, do we? We function as a community, and we all got to be encouraged by what God did in your life. Altars are places where personal proclamations are made public. They are places where individuals connect with God. They are places that we see the secular and the sacred intersect. Altars are places where ordinary people acknowledge the glory of an

extraordinary God. In the Old Testament, we see altars being built for a variety of reasons. Noah built an altar after the flood waters had receded, and clearly that was an altar of thanksgiving. Elijah built an altar on Mt. Carmel, at the end of his epic showdown with the prophets of Baal. And that was an altar that clearly showed and demonstrated the power and the provision of God. Abraham built a famous altar when he offered up his son Isaac. His altar was one of sacrifice, but God flipped the script, and He made that an altar of provision. See, altars can be built for a variety of reasons, but there is one thing they all have in common. An altar is a sacred place that we pause and we focus on what matters the most. That's why we bow at an altar. That's why we worship at an altar. That's why we pray and we make offerings at the altar. Because it's a holy place where we take a humble position and we lift up the One who is worthy of our attention.

There was a day that Moses built an altar, after a long, grueling battle with the Amalekites. And his altar is unique, because he gave that altar a name. Today is the first Sunday of 2022, so we're at a transition point. And our text today is going to transition us from a jar of stones to another, new visual image for us to focus on. Our text today is found in Exodus chapter 17, starting in verse 8. It says, "The Amalekites came and attacked the Israelites at Rephidim. Moses said to Joshua, 'Choose some of our men and go out to fight the Amalekites. Tomorrow I will stand on top of the hill with the staff of God in my hands.' So Joshua fought the Amalekites as Moses had ordered, and Moses, Aaron and Hur went to the top of the hill. As long as Moses held up his hands, the Israelites were winning, but whenever he lowered his hands, the Amalekites were winning. When Moses' hands grew tired, they took a stone and put it under him and he sat on it. Aaron and Hur held his hands up—one on one side, one on the other—so that his hands remained steady till sunset. So Joshua overcame the Amalekite army with the sword. Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Write this on a scroll as something to be remembered and make sure that Joshua hears it, because I will completely blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven.' Moses built an altar and called it The LORD is my Banner. He said, 'For hands were lifted up to the throne of the LORD the LORD will be at war against the Amalekites from generation to generation.'"

At the end of the battle, Moses builds an altar, and he raises a banner. When do we typically see banners in our culture? Where do we typically see banners raised? Well, we typically see them at a grand opening of a restaurant or a store. We see them when a car dealership is having a huge blowout sale. We see them here at the church, especially on Easter, because we want everyone to know He has risen. We raise a banner before an Upward game, don't we? So that everyone can see what they're there for. What do banners do? Banners draw your attention. They get you to look up and take notice. In the sports world, you hang a banner when you win a championship, don't you? The Boston Garden was one of the most famous sports arenas in the entire world. Why? Because when you walk in there, there are 23 banners hanging from the rafters, celebrating the championships of the Boston Celtics and the Boston Bruins. When you walk in as an opposing team, and you look up at the rafters, there's an intimidation factor, because you know you're going up against a team that's got some history, and they're highly skilled. Those banners were hung up there on purpose. First, to celebrate victory, and secondly, to intimidate every opponent that walked into that arena. See, banners were a sign of strength and invincibility. The banner identified who you were, and it was a sign of accomplishing ultimate victory. And that is exactly why the Nation of Israel raised their banner. To celebrate a victory over their opponents, and then to intimidate anyone that would have the nerve to rise up against them and their invincible God. So, at the end of a bloody, brutal, costly battle, Moses built an altar, and then he raised a banner in victory, exalting the name of his leader.

First, he got low in humility and bowed at the altar, and then he lifted high the name of the Lord. And this is an image I want us to take into 2022. I want us to take into 2022 a posture of humility that says, "God, no matter what battles I face, no matters what struggles I must endure, I believe that you are with me. And I will lift your name high as you fight my battles for me, because the victory is yours. You are my

protector, my provider, and you are my God." So, if this is our goal, if this is our target, how do we get there? How do we get to a place that we can consistently raise this banner of victory that will identify us as a church and as a people that serve and are protected by the One True God? Well, let's look back at a few key points from our text this morning. Look at verse 9. It says, "Moses said to Joshua, 'Choose some of our men and go out to fight the Amalekites. Tomorrow I will stand on top of the hill with the staff of God in my hands.'" Now, why did Moses position himself on top of a hill while the rest of his men were fighting down in the valley? At first glance, it kind of looks like a chicken move, doesn't it? "Hey, Joshua - how about if you go fight the bad guys and I'll go way over there where it's safe, and I'll just watch?" That kind of looks like a chicken move. Why does Moses position himself there, when his men, when his people, when his troops are fighting down in the valley?

Well, I think there were two reasons. First, Moses had a really good view from up there. He could see everything. And secondly, he put himself there because everyone could see him. Why is that important, that everyone could see him? Well, because Moses was their savior. Moses was the one who literally rescued them out of captivity in Egypt and led them out of captivity under Pharaoh. He was their redeemer, their rescuer. He was the mouthpiece of God. He was the embodiment of God in their eyes. He spoke to God on behalf of the people, and then he would speak to the people on behalf of God. He was an important man. He was their apex leader. And what did he have in his hand? He had a staff. And that staff symbolized God's power and His presence and His authority. Remember when Moses was called initially, and he was told, "Hey, Moses -- I want you to go tell Pharaoh to let my people go." And Moses wasn't exactly thrilled at this prospect. Pharaoh was the most powerful man in the world. And Moses began to kind of question God -- "Are you sure you want ME to do this? I mean -- what authority do I have?" God told Moses, "Hey, I want you to take that staff, I want you to throw it on the ground." It turns into a snake. He says, "Hey, Moses -- I want you to reach down, I want you to grab that snake." Bam! Turns back into a staff. Why did God do that? Because God wanted Moses to be absolutely confident that He would be with him in the midst of battle. That staff parted the Red Sea. That staff had just been used to hit a rock, and water came out -- because the staff was magic? No. That staff was the power of God in the hands of Moses. So, as Moses is up on that hill, with the staff in his hand, the Israelites had two choices. In the midst of the battle, they could either look up to their leader, the embodiment of God in their midst, their protector and their provider -- or, they could look at their troubles.

I believe this is the same choice you and I have every single day, my friends. Every single day, when we face our own battles, our own struggles, we have a choice to make. And I believe that we raise a banner when we have our eyes lifted up. Because it matters where you look, doesn't it? It matters where your eyes are. We've got kind of a blind corner in the office. We've got a spot where kind of our two walking paths intersect, and we've had a couple close calls over the years -- to the point where we went so far as to buy one of those really cool rounded mirrors, and we put it high on the ceiling so that we could avert disaster. And even though that mirror is there, we still had a couple moments that got a little dicey -- you're like nose-to-nose with your BFF. You got the coffee cup right here just about ready to spill. And there's a consistent reason why we almost collide every single time. Someone's looking down. Someone's distracted by their phone. They've got papers in their hand as they walk to the copier. Maybe they're lost in their thoughts. But when we're not looking up -- when we're looking down, we potentially run into danger.

There's an old phrase that says that the eyes are like a window to the soul. And that axiom exists because you can really learn a lot about a person by where their eyes are, by what they're looking at. Where do a sad, broken-hearted, dejected person's eyes look? Their eyes are always looking down. A broken-hearted, sad, despondent person -- they're called "downcast" because their eyes are downcast. They're defeated. They're weary. They've got nothing left in the tank, and their eyes declare their state

of hopelessness. Maybe it's shame. Maybe it's despair. Maybe it's hurt. Whatever it is, their eyes tell us that a broken person's eyes are always down.

Where does a self-reliant, self-assured person look? They look straight ahead. This person will not be deterred no matter what stands in their way. They can get the job done -- they don't need any help from anyone. They've done it before alone, and they'll do it again alone. Just get out of their way, and let them plow ahead. Nothing will stop this individual, and they are often praised for their iron will and steely determination. This person doesn't need any help. Their eyes are fixed dead ahead, and nothing is going to stop them from accomplishing their mission.

Where does a fearful, paranoid, suspicious person look? Well, this person's always looking over their shoulder. They're looking for who's out to get them. This person is always looking around at the next potential pitfall or bit of danger. This person is never looking at anything, because they're looking at everything. Circumstances cloud this person's vision. A fearful person looks at their surroundings, and they simply forget to look up for help. And I think this is where Moses' decision to place himself high on that hill was absolutely genius. Because it gave the people something physical to focus on. When they began to rely on their own physical strength, they could look up for perspective. When they began to feel overwhelmed and fearful because of their attackers, they could look up for encouragement and get a reminder that God was with them.

Friends, when we are under times of trouble, we need to remember where to look. Because we all have Amalekites in our lives. We all have attackers that want to distract us from our relationship with God. We all have burdens that cause us to suffer and feel pain. We have financial Amalekites. We have relational Amalekites. We have mental Amalekites. And we have physical Amalekites. And just like the Israelites, we all have a choice to make when we're under attack. We can look up, or we can look at our personal Amalekites. And I want to share something with you today -- if you focus on the Amalekites, you will lose hope; but if you focus on God, you will find help. There are so many distractions and burdens that we face every day, and those battles are real. I don't mean to diminish the personal struggles. Because the Israelites were in a real battle with real people with real swords. Those battles are real. But -- if we lose focus on our source of help, we will see nothing other than our troubles. If we're not careful, we can get so distracted by our circumstances that we forget God is there. And we all know that we have no control over our circumstances, do we? But we have total control of where we look. If you focus on the Amalekites, you'll lose hope; but if you focus on God, you'll find help.

If we want to raise a banner of identification this year, if we want to celebrate victory as a church and as a people that believe in the one true God, then let's keep our eyes lifted up to the One who can truly overcome the Amalekites in our lives. So, we've got a battle down in the valley, we've got Moses up on a hill with a staff, and this is where things get really interesting. Verse 11 says, "As long as Moses held up his hands, the Israelites were winning, but whenever he lowered his hands, the Amalekites were winning." So, there's a direct correlation between the success of the Israelites and the height of Moses' arms. Now, watch what happens -- this is critical. Verse 12: "When Moses' hands grew tired, they took a stone and put it under him and he sat on it. Aaron and Hur held his hands up—one on one side, one on the other—so that his hands remained steady till sunset." Moses got tired. Moses -- the man. The one who they make movies about. Moses, the one who spoke to God like a friend speaks to a friend. Moses, the one who saw the glory of God and his face was shiny for a couple days. This guy was human. This guy got tired. Now, I don't mean to disrespect any one of you and your personal relationship with God. But you're not Moses. Moses had a very unique, close relationship with God, and even he got tired.

Now, if Moses needed some buddies to make him a chair to sit on, please don't be ashamed to ask your Christian friends to help you when you need to take a load off. Friends, this is so important. We need

each other if we are going to make it through the struggles and the challenges and the battles of life. We are not meant to go through life as individuals. We were built for community, and that's why we did this. Each one of you individually put a rock in here, and it shows us the power of community. This is a physical, tangible reminder of the good, of the great things God has done. We are not created to live in isolation. We are created to live in community. Think of all the times the Scriptures use the phrase, "One another." Over and over and over. And it tells us to do things, like "Love one another." "Pray for one another." "Honor one another." "Spur one another on to love and good deeds." "Forgive each other." "Submit to each other." "Serve and encourage one another." Friends, we can't do any of this in isolation. We can't be obedient to the Scripture, nor can we take advantage of all of the blessings that exist when we function in community with each other. When we lift each other up, like Aaron and Hur lifted up and supported their friend Moses, we raise a banner, because we are living in unity with one another.

Now, not only were Aaron and Hur really good friends -- they were good friends to Moses, because they saw he was getting tired. And they kind of had a little planning session. "Hey, what can we do for Moses?" "Hey, let's get him a rock to sit on." "Let's hold his arms up." Aaron and Hur were good friends to Moses, but don't miss the fact that Moses, as their leader, was willing to receive help. He didn't reject them. He didn't say, "I am Moses. Be gone from me, peons, for I am your leader with a really cool staff in my hand." No, Moses received their help. We have got to be humble enough to let people come around us and to serve us when we are in time of need. Moses was humble enough to receive help because God's victory, God's name was at stake. In the midst of this battle, we see three godly men, unified in lifting up Moses' staff so that victory might be won. And when we live in unity with one another, we show the world what God is like. Because God lives in perfect harmony with Himself. Three distinct persons -- Father, Son, and Holy Spirit -- all exist as one unified God with one unified mission: to rescue lost people. To redeem lost people and restore broken relationships. And when we live in harmony with one another, when we sacrifice for, and we serve, and we love, and we forgive and support one another, we show the world what God is like. And if God wants us to live in unity, if God wants us to live in harmony with one another, then the enemy is going to send all sorts of Amalekites into your life to distract you, to abuse you, to torment and deceive you, in order to divide you from community. The enemy doesn't want your eyes up. The enemy doesn't want you functioning and fighting as one unified body. Because the enemy knows that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. When we function as one, there's a supernatural essence, there's a supernatural power that takes up and makes us strong, because God is in our midst. If we want to be a powerful, dynamic, victorious church, let's raise a banner by lifting each other up and supporting one another this year.

Israel emerged victorious from this fight. And when it was over, Moses built an altar, and he called it "The Lord is my banner." When it was all over, Moses went off by himself and he built an altar. He built a sacred place where he could humbly bow in reverence to God, and then he lifted up a banner, identifying where his hope and his victory was found. First, he worshiped God by getting low, and then he lifted God's name high. I believe that we raise a banner when we lift God up in worship. The psalmist says in Psalm 95, "Come, let us sing for joy to the Lord. Let us shout aloud to the rock of our salvation." That's what we did this morning. Those first two songs -- we're lifting up, we're exalting the name of God in song, celebrating the good things that He has done. To worship is to exalt God as our salvation, our savior. That's what we do when we come to an altar. We worship. That's what we do when we raise a banner. We worship because we lift high the name of the Lord our God.

The Israelites looked to Moses as their intercessor -- the one on the hill, with his arms raised in victory. And today, you and I, we look to Jesus, the One who was lifted up on a cross on the hill of Calvary, with His arms stretched out, proclaiming victory over sin and death. He is our banner, and we exalt Him when we keep our eyes lifted up for help. We exalt Jesus when we live in harmony and in unity with one another.

And we exalt Jesus when we humbly approach Him in worship, acknowledging His protection, His provision, and His presence in our lives. I want this to be a banner year for you personally. I want this to be a banner year for your family and for the family here at First Baptist. Because when we raise a banner for the Lord, we declare that victory is ours, because the battle is His. You see, the battle has been fought and won. So, let's raise a banner of victory and identification that tells our friends who we stand for, and our enemies who they have to deal with.

Copyright by First Baptist Church, Salem OR (January 2, 2022). Please do not copy without written permission of the copyright holder.