

Make Our Way
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From Psalm 18: “For you girded me with strength for the battle; you made my assailants sink under me. You made my enemies turn their backs to me, and those who hated me I destroyed. They cried for help, but there was no one to save them; they cried to the LORD, but he did not answer them. I beat them fine, like dust before the wind; I cast them out like the mire of the streets.”

Our first Scripture today is a Psalm of gratitude, a Psalm from David thanking God for delivering him from Saul, who was threatened by David’s popularity with the people and wanted to destroy him. Like all the Psalms, it is beautiful and has powerful imagery – the Lord is David’s strength, the cords of death encompassed him, and then the Lord scattered his enemies. David’s enemies were great, but not greater than God.

The section I chose has these very vivid descriptions of how David feels he was prepared for his struggles by God. Throughout the Psalms from David there are parts where he is very doubtful, and struggling with God’s calling for him – by contrast, in this one he is very confident and assured. In this passage he talks about how God is the one God – there is no one else like God. And then he goes on to describe how God prepared him for his trials, and the images are evocative – God girded him with strength, made his feet like that of a deer so they would be secure in high places, trained his hands for war, gave him a shield of salvation. All the credit goes to God, but we are to understand that God equipped David specifically for this task.

This passage is very attractive. It is very comforting to put ourselves in David’s place, to think that God may have chosen *us* for a specific task, that God has prepared a way for *us* to go, and that we will have all the tools and all the training that we need - whatever that might look like. It is also very appealing to think that God calls us to a path and we have absolute and total assurance that it is right, that we will be victorious, and God will give us the power to, as the Psalm says, “crush our enemies to dust and cast them to the wind.”

This passage got me thinking some things in our popular culture. It made me think about all of the superhero movies that have been released in the last ten or so years. It made me think about the popularity of books like the Harry Potter series. And it also made me think about video games that have been enormously popular, like Skyrim and Assassin’s Creed. Obviously hero stories are nothing new - all of these different stories follow a similar plot and a similar basic form - a form that has been followed for centuries. They all feature a hero who is unique in some way, a hero who is specifically equipped to deal with a threat. The imagery that David uses in this Psalm, about being prepared for battle, is very literal in hero stories - the hero usually has to undergo a period of training, where they learn to use the tools that they will need to destroy an enemy.

While this passage may speak to us, we know that we don’t always get the exact tools and training that we need - or we may not get them in the ways that we expect. This doesn’t mean we’re all unequipped for life - we are all gifted. We can develop our gifts, we can study whatever it is we think we’re good at. But our “enemies,” if we can define them that way, are not always clearly and easily defined. And even if we pursue a certain objective from a young age, there are always periods of doubt and frustration, and times when we just want to ask God, “Really, what were you thinking when you asked me to do this?”

Hero stories aren’t popular just because they have cool characters and great action sequences - though that certainly helps. The truly good ones portray characters who have intense struggles with their calling. That is part of the hero’s journey, after all - to doubt and worry about what it is you’re doing. Heroes often come to resent the lives that they chose - or that they feel were chosen for them. They are often bitter in their work, realizing that even as they sacrifice to give people freedom and choices, they can never be free from what they have done. The violent, soul-rending things that they did

in the name of the greater good. And they often have to watch their lives pass by, their chances to have a family, and the chance to have a quiet, simple existence disappears into the abyss of their responsibilities.

Hero stories draw us in because we use them as a mirror - we hold them up to our lives and hope to see ourselves reflected back. They all feature individuals who have a path laid out before them, and it's a hard path, and it's not very fun, but it's the path they have to walk because they are the "Chosen One." Only they have the skills, only they have the training, only they have the ability to change the world. They take on a mantle, whether they want to or not, and go try to make the world a better place, usually through violent means.

That is very appealing.

It's appealing for us to think, yes, I, as an individual, am called to do a hard thing. I am called by God to do something great, something terrifying, something that people will remember forever. Obviously video games and superhero movies and fantasy literature are really extreme and made-up examples of what a person might be called to do, but it's tempting to think that our ways are made for us, bright, shiny, clear, and that we really just don't have any choice.

And, after all, if God's already decided that I'm going to do something, don't I kind of have some assurance that it's all going to work out in the end? On top of that, I probably don't have to think very much about it, and I may not even have to work that hard to find whatever it is I'm supposed to do. I just have to wait around for that shining moment when I suddenly hear God say, "THIS IS YOUR TIME," and then leap into action - like a superhero. I don't have to look for an opportunity, I just have to wait for the thunderbolt and then I'll know. Our desire to be action heroes can actually make us complacent, and it can also make us blind to the real opportunities we have to serve.

When we look at our second Scripture, from Philippians, we can see what is almost a reverse image to the passage from Psalm 18. Rather than David being armed, we see Jesus being emptied. Rather than David being exulted, we see Jesus being humbled. Rather than David casting his enemies to the wind, we see Jesus *submitting* to enemies, and asking God for *their* forgiveness. Everything that appeals to us about those arming-for-battle parts of Psalm 18, about action heroes, about video games and hero stories, Jesus takes and reverses. Jesus shows us a way that is new, that submits physically to the violence and hatred and anger of human nature, but spiritually cannot be overcome. This is a victory that humans, in our limited understanding of violence as power, could never conceive - a victory not from death back to human life, but over death to life eternal.

Violence, hatred, anger. There are times when we feel like we are built for nothing more than these things. These are human emotions and human actions and we all have them and we all do them. They come as easily as breathing to us when someone wrongs us. That rush of boiling blood that tells us to lash out at the world, to make us feel powerful again when we feel powerless. But Jesus calls us to walk the hard path, the scary path. Jesus walks ahead of us and says, look at me, I am the way. Walk the extra mile. Turn the other cheek. Love your enemy and pray for them. Patience, love, endurance - these are Jesus emotions and Jesus actions and we are all capable of them.

They require practice, they require thought, they require the ability to overcome our anger and say, "What can I do here to make this situation better?" Because, after all, while violence and hatred and anger come to us at times as easily and thoughtlessly as breathing, if you make your way with them as your companions, over time they become too much to bear.

There are many people we can think of, many we know, who accept that they might inflict damage on themselves to protect others. There are people who take up that mantle and we honor them for their hard work, their dedication, and their willingness to put themselves at risk. And of course, when we think of superhero figures, we don't always think of people who fight physically to achieve something. Many of our most respected leaders and visionaries have used and continue to use non-violent means to make their point. Even so, very few, if any of us, are called to be such a leader - a Martin Luther King, Jr., a Malala Yousafzai.

As we face the day to day grind of our lives, as we witness the racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, and hatred that permeates our days - this may wear us down. What can we do, if we are not called to sacrifice, to take brave action in the face of danger? What can we do, if we are not called to

lead, to inspire others with our words? We must remember that even if we are not called to be heroes, a spokesperson, the voice of a generation - we are still called. We are called, persistently and specifically, to act in our world. We are called to emulate the one who did things differently, who served, who submitted, who died to show how great is God's love for us. We are called not just to worship God, but to follow God, to worship by following.

In the whole span of our lives, there will likely be few, if any, shining moments where God bellows in our ears, "THIS IS YOUR TIME." There will be innumerable instances where God quietly nudges us and says, "You should say something." When a coworker makes a tasteless, sexist comment about another colleague. When a friend is telling embarrassing, racist jokes at a party. There will be innumerable instances where God taps us on the shoulder and says, "That thing that scares you? You should do it." When we shy away from listening to someone's experience because it might make us confront our own privilege. When we have an opportunity to be in solidarity with someone who is oppressed. Often, we do not violate our moral codes with our actions, but with our inaction. We do not fail in our calling by speaking up and saying the wrong thing, but by remaining silent.

Some of us may have been called to be a superhero, some of us may have had a big shining moment - most of us haven't. But all of us have had moments that we look back on and say, "I wish I had spoken up," or "I wish I had done something." It is not like having your hands trained for war, with feet like the deer, and overtaking your enemies until you consume them, beat them to dust, and scatter them to the wind. Rather, our "enemies" are usually people more like us than we care to admit, trying to do their best. It is more like walking in a dark hallway, and opening a door to let in the light, just a little bit at a time.

Our opportunities to open the door are, in fact, innumerable. Because our world is burdened with hatred and fear, because there are societal ills that infect us all, we have but to step back and look at our lives to see the small, everyday instances where we can say or do something to let in the light. Our passage from Philippians reminds us that we can set aside the titles and privileges that we cling to, that we can humble ourselves, empty ourselves, and look out not for ourselves, but for other people. Our paths are long, our opportunities to show God's love are endless, and Jesus himself walks before us, showing us how to make our way.