

Exodus 17

This lesson examines only Chapter 17 verses 8-16. We do so because verses 1-7 were connected more with material in Chapter 16 than they are to the material in this final portion of Chapter 17. This section of the chapter has two parts, the battle with Amalek and the charge to remember the conflict between Israel and Amalek.

We begin with the battle. The battle is between Israel and Amalek. There is no indication as to why Amalek wanted to do battle with Israel. Perhaps they appeared to be an easy target; a nation loaded with the spoils of Egypt and unprepared for war. Or perhaps it is that Amalek might have feared an invasion from such a large group of landless people. Whatever the reason for this conflict there are several things we ought to understand. First, Amalek is a descendant of Esau. What this means is that the ancient conflict between the brothers Jacob and Esau did not die with them; that it was somehow passed down from generation to generation. Second, we witness Moses grow into his role as the leader of the people. Granted, Moses was the one who led the people out of Egypt and into the wilderness, but he was working under explicit instructions from God. God told him what to do and when to do it. Now however, Moses operates on his own as a leader. When he sees that the people of Israel are about to be attacked, he takes action. He chooses a second in command (Joshua, whose name means God Saves), tells Joshua what to do (recruit soldiers) and then lays out a plan of action (Moses will go to the hill with the magic staff of God in his hand). There is no hint that God is telling Moses what to do. Moses takes charge. He is maturing as a leader, which bodes well for the future. Third, Moses understands the power of presence and symbolism, meaning that he understands that while he holds the staff of God aloft, the men fight well. There is no mention of the staff channeling God's power, simply that the men seem inspired by Moses' actions. Fourth, this is a test for Israel. Before the battle there is an open question as to whether this rag-tag band of slaves is willing to and capable of defending themselves, rather than submitting to slavery under another foreign power. The answer is that they are indeed willing and able. Israel has begun to be a nation. Finally, we have been shown that Joshua is a capable military leader. It is he who "defeated Amalek and his people with the sword." This bodes well for the future.

We continue our examination of the chapter with the command from God to record and remember this event by reciting it "in the hearing of Joshua." This seems odd since Joshua was the leader of the Israelite forces which would imply that he needs no reminder of the battle. But it is not the battle that the people are to record. It is that God will utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek. No explanation is given as to the reason for God to make this claim. One thought from Kass (*Founding God's Nation: Reading Exodus* pg. 256) is that it is to be a reminder that Israel will always exist under the threat of attack from other nations and so the military leaders need to be vigilant and brave. Finally, we have Moses building an altar not to "god" but to YHWH, the God who revealed God's self in the burning bush, who sent Moses, who parted the sea, who fed the people and who is always present. The name of the altar, "The Lord is my banner" reminds the people that the Israelites fight not just for their own lives but for God; God who goes with them into battle.

Reflection: Nation building is a complex task. It requires a national narrative and a common set of values. The narrative for Israel consists of the rituals they have been instructed to keep (Passover, etc.). These rituals not only remind the people of their history but of their identity. We too as a nation (the United States) use our rituals to remind us not only of our past but of who we are to be (the Fourth of July for example). The challenge of these rituals is to keep them from being only about past glories, but instead to make their intent present realities such as making the Fourth of July a reminder that we need to insure true freedom for all.

Questions:

1. Are there portions of this story that disturb you and why?
2. What can we learn from Moses and his leadership style?
3. What would you name our communion table (remembering Presbyterians have no altars)?