

Leadership is No Picnic

II Samuel 5:1-5, 9-10 and Mark 6:1-13, Key verse Heb. 12:3

How do you feel about underdogs? Have you ever been looked upon as an underdog yourself? Underdogs are individuals or teams that are viewed as predicted losers or “far less favored” to win a contest or struggle. This might be someone considered to be less than exceptionally talented or skilled, at least by conventional definitions; a recurring victim of injustice or persecution; or perhaps an individual or group recognized as disadvantaged or historically marginalized. Everyone loves rooting for an underdog, especially when it’s someone we can relate to, because we’ve all been underrated, underestimated, or overlooked at one or another.

The 1978 Rose Bowl matched the University of Michigan Wolverines against the University of Washington Huskies. Michigan was ranked 4th in the college football polls and led by their legendary head coach Bo Schembechler. The Huskies were ranked 13th and led by Don James, in his third year at the helm at Washington. Michigan was considered a perennial power in college football, while Washington had not been to the Rose Bowl in 14 years. The Wolverines were favored by 14 points, while many Husky fans (of which I was one) accepted their team’s underdog status and were just happy to see them get some long overdue national attention. But Washinton was not content to, what’s the saying, ‘go quietly’. Led by quarterback Warren Moon (an underdog himself, but that’s another story) the Huskies charged out to a 17-0 lead at halftime, and with the help to a couple of heroic defensive play in the 4th quarter, upset the favored Wolverines, 27-20.

When you think about it, many of our favorite characters from movies and literature are underdogs who accomplished great things. Frodo and Sam from the “Lord of the Rings” saga, Harry, Ron & Hermione from “Harry Potter”, Steve Rogers, who was just a skinny kid from Brooklyn before becoming Captain America. And we all know some stories of true life underdogs, such as Rudy Ruettiger, the undersized walk-on who beat the odds to play football at Notre Dame University. And Bernie Webber, the Coast Guard boatswain's mate who led a courageous rescue of 32 crew members of a sinking tanker ship off the coast of Chatham, Massachusetts.

I think the key thing that inspires us about underdogs is that they usually have to face and endure many obstacles before they obtain their goal, and that certainly speaks to us about how we need to persevere and stay the course when we face obstacles to attaining our goals. And we all face obstacles!

A good example of an underdog in the Bible is King David, at least how he started out in life. David was actually the youngest of Jesse’s eight sons, who was out doing the lowly job of tending sheep when the prophet Samuel came to Bethlehem. Samuel came to anoint a new King as God directed him, which we can read about in I Samuel 16.

Samuel thought God would certainly choose one of Jesse's oldest and taller sons, but after the 7 oldest sons passed before him, God hadn't chosen any of them. Finally Samuel asked Jesse to send for his youngest son and when David arrived the Lord told Samuel, "rise and anoint him, for this is the one." So David, the youngest, humblest son of Jesse was anointed as Israel's next King.

But there was one problem, Israel already had a king, a king whom God had rejected from leadership of his people due to his unsteady faith. King Saul had disobeyed by usurping the power of God's priest when he, himself, ordered the offering of a sacrifice before battle, instead of waiting for Samuel, the Prophet & Priest, to arrive. Sadly, Saul learned that "to obey is better than sacrifice" when Samuel called him out for what he had done and then declared to Saul in 1st Samuel 13: "The Lord would have established your kingdom over Israel forever, but now your kingdom will not continue: the Lord has sought out a man after his own heart; and the Lord has appointed him to be ruler over his people, because you have not kept what the Lord commanded you."

David, the newly anointed, loved praising the Lord in song as he watched over the sheep, and he wasn't afraid to fight off bears and lions that tried to kill them. He loved God and he trusted God to give him strength to keep the sheep safe. That's a picture of a man "after God's own heart," a man who would obey God as he courageously carried out God's will. But it took years until David was able to take on the kingship. During those years David's faith and trust in God became renown to everyone, as God helped him overcome obstacles and gave him victory.

One famous early story about David is in 1st Samuel 17. David's three eldest brothers were camped out with King Saul and the other soldiers to prepare for battle with the Philistines. David's father Jesse sent young David to their encampment with food for the troops. While he was there David heard the Philistine giant Goliath spewing a hateful challenge to any Israelite brave enough to face him. But none of them wanted to challenge Goliath. David was offended by Goliath and said, "who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?" When King Saul heard David's words he was surprised because David was just a teenager and didn't think David should accept Goliath's challenge. But David explained how, as a shepherd, he wasn't afraid to face down a bear or a lion who tried to take one of his sheep. He said, "The Lord, who saved me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, will save me from the hand of this Philistine". So Saul said to David, "Go, and may the Lord be with you!"

And at first Saul wanted David to put on his own armor to face Goliath. But after trying it on, David could tell that he couldn't wear it because he wasn't used to it. David then simply took his staff in his hand and chose five smooth stones from the wadi and put them in his shepherd's bag, with his sling in his hand. When the giant Goliath saw young David coming without a sword, he sneeringly said, "Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks?"

David replied, “You come to me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied...and all this assembly will know that the Lord does not save by sword and spear, for the battle is the Lord’s and he will give you into our hand.” David then took one of his stones, put it in his sling, ran toward Goliath, slung the stone and struck the Philistine on his forehead. Goliath then fell face down on the ground. Thus, David triumphed over the giant; talk about an underdog story!

Besides serving King Saul by playing soothing music for him on his lyre, David also became renowned as a successful warrior in their battle against the Philistines. In fact, the people began saying, “Saul has killed his thousands, and David his ten thousands,” which made Saul wary of David. Saul became jealous and suspicious of David, even though David married his daughter Michal and became close friends with his son Jonathan. That suspicion forced David to escape from King Saul and for about 15 years David and his band of men had to hide from Saul’s army in the wilderness. Fifteen years is a long time to wait for God’s plans for him as the new King to become clear, and that covers about 11 chapters of the Bible.

During those years David gathered people around him who felt themselves to be outcasts, those who were in distress, in debt or discontent, about 400 men altogether. Of course, they were hoping that when David became King, life would get easier for them. David’s control over this band of men shows his resourcefulness and ability to lead and motivate others. Saul’s army chased David and his men throughout the countryside in order to kill David. And David had opportunities to kill Saul, but didn’t use them.

Once when David and his men were hiding in a cave, Saul came into the cave and David could have easily killed him, but he didn’t, even though his men urged him to do so. David’s refusal was not an example of cowardice, but of courage, the courage to stand against the group and do what he knew was right. Although Saul was sinning and rebelling against God, David still respected the position he held as God’s first anointed king. David knew he would one day be king, but he also knew it wasn’t right to strike down the man God had placed on the throne. So he resisted that temptation and instead proved his good character to the people. David persevered in adversity and trusted in God’s timing. He learned patience, courage and integrity through what he practiced in the face of tough circumstances. And friends, that is a strong example of discipleship, walking by faith with your eyes on the Lord through trying times.

After Saul eventually dies in battle, David does become King, first over Judah and then, seven years later, over all Israel, as we read about this morning in 2nd Samuel 5. What David went through during those years on the run in the wilderness strengthened his character and leadership abilities. And we can certainly see that leadership was no picnic for David, during those years in the wilderness, as well as during those years of his actual kingship, as we can read about in further chapters of 2nd Samuel.

And there were times after becoming King that David made some serious mistakes which affected his leadership. But David knew that he needed God's forgiveness and strength to keep going, and because of his passion for God, he was known by God as "a man after my own heart."

As we know, Jesus was a descendant of King David and the one who would be the ultimate leader of Israel and our Savior and King. And it's interesting to me that the book of Hebrews describes a kind of learning or growth process of Jesus, himself, in his days on earth. Hebrews 5:7-9 says, "During the days of Jesus' life on earth he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him..." Like David, Jesus learned that leadership is no picnic as he persevered in the face of adversity. A good example of that is from the scripture reading we had this morning from Mark 6.

In this passage Jesus goes back to his hometown of Nazareth and begins teaching in the synagogue and the people are amazed at his teaching. But then many of them become offended because they can't believe this man who grew up with them, Jesus the carpenter, the son of Mary, brother of James and Joseph could possibly have this kind of wisdom. It's like they were saying, "Just who does he think he is, anyway?" Despite the fact Jesus performed miracles there and he was amazed at their lack of faith. He said, "Only in his hometown, among his relatives and in his own house is a prophet without honor."

But being dishonored by their faithlessness was nothing compared to their hostility. Luke's record of Jesus' homecoming to Nazareth is even scarier. Not only did the people question Jesus' authority, but they became downright hostile when he mentioned the faith of some Gentiles in the time of Elijah and Elisha. Luke 4 says that the people in the synagogue became furious. They drove Jesus out of town and would have thrown him off a cliff, but he was able to walk away from them. And that wasn't the only time Jesus was threatened with death for speaking the truth. Jesus persevered in the course that God had mapped out for him, becoming obedient even to the point of death on a cross.

And the author of Hebrews reminds us that we, too, are to run with perseverance the race that is marked out for us, keeping our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith. For the joy set before him, Jesus endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. And, as we meditate on Jesus, who endured so much opposition from sinful men, it should enable us to not grow weary or lose heart when we face opposition and adversity.

We are called to persevere and to endure hardship as discipline. To me that is one of the main themes we can get from reading about the leadership of King David and Jesus, himself.

These are truly the themes of any great work of fiction or any true-life underdog story that we hear about today. So, as you go through all the ups and downs of life, remember there is no greater power than that of Jesus Christ. He can help us overcome obstacles to faith and be steadfast through all adversities.