

In a sermon about three years ago, I talked about how much I love numbers. Whether it's baseball stats, patterns in repeating decimals, library call numbers I've memorized, I love numbers.

The book of Numbers – not so much.

That's probably the case for many of us.

I'm guessing that many of us, when we got our Bible reading bookmarks, looked at the last week of October and groaned. Boorrrrrinnnggg!!!! Perhaps our only consolation has been to think – oh well, at least it's not Leviticus.

But as I started digging into the book over the last few weeks, I realized that Numbers has gotten a bad rap. Perhaps that's because it has a bad title.

“Numbers” takes its English name from *Arithmoi*, the title of the book in the Septuagint, the early Greek translation of the Old Testament. Read the beginning of the book, and you can understand the title.

- Look at chapter 1 – it's a census.
- Chapter 2 – tent assignments and marching instructions. If you have a camping trip for more than 600,000 men (plus women and children), you probably want to make tent assignments.
- Chapter 3 – a short genealogy, instructions for the priests, ... and a census.
- Chapter 4 – jackpot! Not one, not two, but three censuses.
- Chapter 5 – several laws, mostly having to do with women suspected of adultery.
- Chapter 6 – a summary of the Nazarite vow.
- And then Chapter 7 – in a book in our church library called *How to Enjoy the Boring Parts of the Bible*, this is called the “Goliath of boring parts.” It's 89 verses long. But when you read it around the end of October, you'll find something that I think is very fascinating. It's why the author calls it one of the most moving parts of Bible. But that's for another day.
- Chapter 8 – instructions for the Levites.
- Chapter 9 – instructions for the Passover. And marching instructions.

Boooooorrrrrinnngggg!

But then we get to chapter 10. And for the rest of the book, only one census! The rest of the book, you see, tells the story of the Israelites in the wilderness. That's why a better name for the book is perhaps the original one. In the Hebrew, the book is called *Bemidbar* – “in the wilderness,” a word that is used in the very first sentence of the book – “The Lord spoke to Moses in the wilderness.”

Last week, Neil described the Exodus as one of the highest points in the *Heilsgeschichte* – the salvation history. But the wilderness is very closely linked – the wilderness is a significant place. In fact, the Christian singer/songwriter and theologian Michael Card suggests that “every significant event in the history of salvation happens in the wilderness.” Significant as the Exodus is, it can't be fully understood without the wilderness.

The book of *Bemidbar*, then, tells many stories of what will be a 40-year detour for the Israelites. Many of the stories that we know about the wilderness journey happen in this book.

- They begin to journey toward Kadesh.
- At Taberah, the people complain and a fire burns some of them.
- The people complain for meat. God sends quail, but a plague strikes some of them after they eat.
- Aaron and Miriam speak out against Moses.
- As they approach Canaan, Moses sends spies into the land. Of the 12, only Joshua and Caleb trust Yahweh to fight the Holy War that Neil described last week. Yahweh's judgment for this lack of trust is that everyone 20 and older will die in the wilderness and not enter Canaan.
- On the detour, there's a revolt against Moses's and Aaron's leadership, resulting in the death of the revolutionaries. Aaron's rod buds and bears almonds, confirming his priestly leadership.
- Once again, the people complain to Moses about a lack of water. Rather than speaking to the rock as Yahweh has instructed, Moses hits it with his staff. His punishment is that he, too, will not be able to enter the Promised Land.
- The people complain about food and are bitten by poisonous snakes. In an act of grace, Yahweh tells Moses to make a bronze snake on a pole that works healing for the bitten people.

- Two different kings refuse to let the Israelites through their territory. Yahweh and the Israelites defeat the second in battle, taking possession of a part of Canaan. When another king fears destruction, he tries to get the prophet Balaam to curse the Israelites. Instead, thanks to a talking donkey, Balaam blesses the Israelites.

It is quite the journey. A physical one yes, but also a spiritual one. This band of ex-slaves who had traveled through the Red Sea, to Mt. Sinai, and through 40 years of the wilderness, had to learn about the God who had delivered them from Egypt. **They had to unlearn the ways of Egypt and learn the ways of this God, Yahweh.**

According to Marion Bontrager, in learning the ways of Yahweh, the Israelites had to learn four primary things:

First, **they had to learn trust in a faithful, trustworthy God.** The only god the slaves had known in Egypt was the exploitative Pharaoh God. Learning to trust a god who sought their welfare rather than exploiting them was no small task. The isolation and harshness of the wilderness provided the context for the people to learn to trust Yahweh for provision and protection.

- The water sweetened at Marah and the manna and quail they received revealed a faithful God who could be trusted to provide.
- In the manna, they learned to trust God for sufficiency. Except on the Sabbath, any manna that they hoarded beyond that day's need spoiled. And yet, there was always enough.
- And Holy War success taught the people to trust in Yahweh for protection.
- But at the same time, the Israelites also learned what happened when they did not trust in Yahweh. When they didn't trust the words of Joshua and Caleb, they were forced to wander for many more years!

Second, **they had to learn leadership and theocracy.** The leadership they knew in Egypt was brutal and coercive. Now they had to learn about servant leadership. Moses learns to delegate; amidst jealousy and conflict, the tribe of Levi was chosen for the priesthood. The people learned not to undercut their leadership from the experiences of Miriam and Korah, Dothan, and Abiram. Moses wasn't perfect, but he provided Yahweh-like leadership who was willing to sacrifice even his own life. In Numbers 14, he was even more gracious than God, speaking to Yahweh on the people's behalf. And even when he found out that he, too, would not enter the Promised Land, he continued to lead.

Third, **the people had to learn how to worship Yahweh.** The slaves had known *involuntary* servitude to the Egyptian Pharaoh God, a son of the Sun god. For the Israelites, their worship was now directed to a God who acts in history, not one who follows the cycles of nature. Their worship was to be rooted in history. It is founded on remembering. They needed to learn gratitude and joy in a God who had delivered and then provided.

The tabernacle and its furnishings in the center of the tribes symbolized that Yahweh dwelt in the heavens, but was also present in the midst of the people. The Ark of the Covenant represented a God who combines grace and law, story and command. Worshiping Yahweh was a way of living, not just a ceremony. Worship worthy of this God combined praise and justice, liturgy and living. This reminder that God dwelt among them is a hint of why Numbers 7, that Goliath of boring parts, is both fascinating and meaningful.

All of Israelite worship was rooted in God's mighty acts of deliverance in the Exodus. The Passover became central and foundational for Hebrew worship. The Feast of Tabernacles celebrated Yahweh's faithful provision and protection in the wilderness. The Day of Atonement reminded people that Yahweh is not only a moral, just God, but also a gracious and forgiving God. And Pentecost was a reminder of Yahweh's faithful blessings. The sacrifice of first fruits to feed the priests, the alien, and the poor was grounded in remembering Yahweh's act of forming a holy, just, shalom community of right relationships.

And that leads us to the fourth, and perhaps most radical learning. **The Israelites had to learn to be a theocratic, *shalom*, missional community.** Learning to trust Yahweh, learning leadership, and learning to worship all contributed to Yahweh's continuing to form a chosen nation in the wilderness. Not a law-and-order nation-state like they had known in Egypt, but a dynamic society devoted to people's needs, freedom, equality, and social justice – a society devoted to when all things are in right relationship; to “the way things ought to be”; to *shalom*.

The Eleven Words Neil talked about last week pointed toward shalom. The Sabbath day rest set boundaries around economic gain. When manna hoarded beyond the day's need spoiled, it robbed any ambition toward self-sufficiency that would have disrupted shalom. On the Sabbath everyone, including animals, was given rest, just as God had given them rest from Egyptian bondage.

The Israelites were to remember that they were suffering aliens and slaves in Egypt, and this memory was to be the driving force behind their ethics. The Israelites were to care for aliens because they, too, were aliens and had suffered under Pharaoh. Even the land was to lie fallow and rest. Debts were to be canceled with joy. Slaves were to be set free with liberal provisions to help them start again. And perhaps the most radical ethic of all – the jubilee – where every 50 years, people were to return to their ancestral property, with ownership of the land reverting to its original property holder.

Though it's likely that the Jubilee year was not practiced regularly, David Baker notes that "the values enshrined in the institution were not completely forgotten. The prophets reminded Israel that the land was a sacred inheritance, given by the Lord God to his chosen people, and [they chastised] those who amassed an unfair share of its wealth for themselves by exploiting the poor and needy."¹ He highlights Isaiah's use of the Jubilee image in looking to the messianic age in chapter 61.² That is the very text that Jesus quotes in opening his ministry in Luke 4.

These stories from the wilderness can be seen as a low point in the *Heilsgeschichte* of God's people. But later prophets looked back and saw it as a high point in the existence of God's people. In all these ways, the Israelites were unlearning the ways of Egypt and learning the ways of Yahweh. They were unlearning the ways of slavery to Pharaoh, and learning the ways of freedom in God.

The same things happens today. We, too, must unlearn the ways of slavery, slavery to sin, and learn the ways of freedom in God. This morning, I would suggest that we have the same four primary tasks that the Israelites did. We, too, must learn trust in a faithful, trustworthy God who seeks our welfare and offers provision and protection. That is not easy when relationships break down, when our when our dreams for the future fail, when we experience job loss. But in all of these, we trust in a God that is faithful. We must learn a new way of leadership, modeled by the one who stooped to wash another's feet. We must learn to worship God, not the idols of our society – idols like money, sex, and power. And must learn to be a *shalom*, missional community, one that cares first and foremost for the least among us.

¹ David L. Baker, *Tight Fists or Open Hands? Wealth and Poverty in Old Testament Law*, Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009, p.97.

² Baker, p. 97.

And then we come to the river. We won't spend as much time with the book of Joshua as we have with Numbers, but I want to make a few points. Near the end of Numbers, Joshua is appointed as Moses's successor. The books of Joshua and Judges tell the story of Israel's entry into the Promised Land, the conquest of the people, and the tribal confederacy. Compared to Judges, Joshua is pretty integrated, and the book makes it sound like the conquest was pretty easy.

Last week, Neil described a changing understanding of Holy War, and it's in Joshua that Israel fights *with* Yahweh. The view that is present is very much one of Yahweh rewarding faithfulness and punishing unfaithfulness. I had to wonder if it's this book that shapes much of our view of history, even in the United States today, as we use language like "America is a Christian nation and we have to get back to being faithful so that God will bless us." But we must also remember what Cindy talked about a few weeks ago, about how the understanding of being a "chosen nation" does *not* equate with being God's favorite nation-state. Much of that mindset, I believe, stems from the book of Joshua.

Another significant point from the book is that Joshua is presented as a new Moses. There are parallels – just as Moses led the people through the parted Red Sea, Joshua leads them through the parted Jordan. In the Exodus, Yahweh's pillar and fire and Moses' staff lead the people; in crossing the Jordan, the Ark of the Covenant leads them. Moses has the covenant at Sinai, and Joshua has covenants at Mt. Ebal, Gerizim, and finally, Shechem. Both Moses and Joshua give significant farewell addresses to the people.

A third point: the invasion and conquest of the land is told as three overpowering, holy war campaigns, followed by Joshua dividing up the land according to the sons of Jacob. That happens in Joshua chapter 12.

But, if you look in Joshua 13, you see that Yahweh tells Joshua that "much of the land still remains to be possessed." And Judges chapter 1 lists the peoples that weren't driven out of the land after they were supposedly defeated. In Judges 1:8, we are told that Jerusalem is conquered. But we're also told in II Samuel 5 that David conquered Jerusalem. And back in Joshua 10, we hear that Joshua defeated the king of Jerusalem as part of a victory over a five-king coalition.

So, it's pretty clear that we have a faith-constructed history, what Neil described on our first Sunday as a "geschichte." In reality, the land was probably conquered by a combination of several patterns. First, following the biblical story, archeological evidence

verifies the destruction of some cities in the 13th century BCE. But I already named some inconsistencies in the Joshua and Judges stories. Second, because Egypt itself controlled Canaan over the centuries, it's also possible that some of the Israelites had actually moved to the area before they were enslaved. And third, other ancient documents would suggest that native peasants who were in the area revolted against the city-state kings in the 14th and 13th centuries. When they heard of an incoming wilderness people who taught of a God of the poor who liberates, they joined forces in a peasants' revolt and gained control of significant parts of the land. Likely there are pieces of truth in all three explanations.

However, that happened, it's also clear that the people of Yahweh who gathered at Shechem to hear Joshua's final addresses in chapters 23 and 24 were not all blue-blooded descendants of Jacob. From the beginning, in fact, that wasn't the case. Exodus 12:38 says that "a mixed crowd went up with them as the Exodus began, suggesting that other groups of captured slaves came along. Other groups probably joined the people of Yahweh in the wilderness, and other groups joined through intermarriage or being captured before they crossed the Jordan. And then even more did the same after they crossed the river.

So, to create a unified people of Yahweh was an ongoing task for Yahweh and the leaders. That is what is happening in Joshua chapters 23-24, and this is where we will end our day. At the beginning of chapter 23, it says that Joshua was "well advanced in years" and so he summoned all of the leaders of Israel for his farewell address. First he reminds the people of the Divine Warrior, a god who had kept the promises that were made. Then, Joshua offers a warning – if you do not remain faithful to Yahweh, Yahweh will not remain faithful to you, he says.

In chapter 24, Joshua reminds the people of their history, beginning with Abraham and the patriarchs, then retelling the story of the Exodus, and finally reviewing his own leadership. In verse 1, we read that Joshua gathered *all* the people into the *very presence of God*. In the next verses, we read that God "took, led, made many, gave children, sent Moses and Aaron, plagued Egypt, brought the Israelites out, handed over, blessed, rescued, sent the hornet, and gave a land." Yahweh's purpose and direction are clear. Yahweh is the actor. Yahweh has *given* the land to Israel – a land on which they had not labored, towns they had not built, and with fruit and vineyards they had not planted." Covenant, indeed, begins with God. All that we do, all that we have, all that we are, in the core of our being, begins with God.

Verse 14 brings the “therefore.” And as the saying goes, when you see the word therefore, you ask what it’s there for. Here are the implications of what God has done, says Joshua. The people must revere the Lord, put away other Gods, and serve the Lord. The word “serve” hardly appears in the rest of Joshua, but it’s there 18 times in chapters 23 and 24. It is God’s call to action.

In verse 15 of chapter 24, we have what are probably the most well-known words in the book of Joshua. “Choose this day whom you will serve,” says Joshua. “But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”

Those words sound great on a plaque that we give as a wedding present. And those plaques look great when we put them in the entry ways to our homes. It’s an important commitment that people make all the time. It’s a good commitment.

But that kind of individual household commitment is not what Joshua is in mind. Remember that back in verse 1, Joshua had gathered all the people. When Joshua says “choose this day whom you will serve,” it’s not a singular “you.” It’s “All of you, choose this day whom you will serve,” whether it’s the Pharaoh God whose ways you have unlearned, or the gods that they served along the way, or Yahweh, the one who has led in ways they could have never imagined. Who will you serve? It’s the critical question, and it’s a joint one.

Next week we will return to this passage as we take communion together. In some of our pasts, we prepared for communion with a service called counsel meeting. That service was where we also thought about where we had been, where we came together in confession, and where we said, “By the grace of God, I would like to commune.”

That is what I call you to this week. As you prepare for communion this week, I invite you to think about your own wilderness experiences, to remember the times when you have grumbled or struck the rocks in your life, but also to remember that you have been freed by the one who lives, and breathes, and walks among us.

Let it be so.