

LIVING WITH A HOLY GOD WHO HAS A PLAN FOR HIS PEOPLE

Numbers 1:1-2:34

INTRODUCTION

I want to interrupt your life this morning. Wherever you are at in life's journey, whether you are a young person, just starting out or an older traveler coming to the end, I want to ask you to stop and get some perspective. I'd like to invite you to climb a tree up out of the jungle of the details of your life and get a look at the lay of the land. On the jungle floor it's easy to become consumed with survival and the work of slashing your way through the underbrush and so this morning I'd like to have us climb a rocky outcrop to look at where we've been and where we are going. You began this journey at your birth and one day you will end it at your death. This morning I want us to leave behind the details of living that life to remember together that this is a journey with a purpose. We are not simply trying to survive the jungle; we're on a journey through it. The fourth book in the Bible, the book of Numbers is admirably suited to help us in gaining some perspective for it also is the story of a journey through the wilderness.

This book is the story of two generations of people. Both generations have been delivered from slavery in Egypt and both generations are stuck in the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land. The story of the first generation begins here in Numbers 1. It is the adult generation of the people of Israel who saw God's great plagues poured out on Egypt and crossed the Red Sea between two walls of water and watched the Egyptian army perish as the walls of water crashed upon them. This is the generation that came to Mt. Sinai and received the Law of Moses there. It is the generation that built the golden calf and then, after Moses' timely intercession turned aside God's anger, built the tabernacle. The story of this first generation ends in 25:18 as the last members of those counted in Numbers 1 die in the wilderness.

The second generation is the children of this first generation. Their story is told in Numbers 26-36. If you'll turn over to Numbers 26 you will see that like their parents' generation their story begins with a census, a numbering of the generation while in the wilderness, outside the Land of Promise. However, unlike their parents, the second generation ends up in the Land of Promise as reported for us in the book of Joshua. So the second generation is set in contrast to this first generation whose story we begin this morning. This is the main structure of this book: chapters 1-25 describe God's dealing with the generation of adults who came out of Egypt from Mt. Sinai to the border of the land of Canaan and chapters 26-36 describe God's dealing with the second generation, the children of that first generation while they live in the desert, east of the Jordan River, across from Jericho, preparing to invade the land.

While the book of Numbers contrasts these two generations of Israelites and their response to the circumstances in which God has placed them, yet the main theme of this book is God's resolute determination to bring his people safely into the Land of Promise. It is the story of how God lives and travels with his sinful people and contrary to what they deserve, directs and protects them in such a way that he brings them into the land he promised to give to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. This book of Numbers shows that God's plan cannot be thwarted by human opposition, whether from his people or from their enemies. It is the story of God's leading his saved people, delivered from their captivity in Egypt through the wilderness and into the land of milk and honey.

But this is not just the story of ancient Israel; it is our story as well. We are in the same condition as this nation. We have been delivered from our captivity to sin by a Savior. His name is Jesus, not Moses. We have been promised a new land where we will live with God and enjoy his blessing forever, not the land of Canaan but the new heavens and the new earth. However, now we are on the journey, through the wilderness to our final destination. While we are in the wilderness, yet our steps are being directed by God to that final end. Our lives are not defined by random events or even by our sinful choices. Our lives are not simply about getting through

the various stages of life. Rather God himself is dwelling among us and leading us ever onwards to that final, glorious destination. Today, as we look at the first two chapters of this book we will see that...

MAIN POINT

The only true and living God is working out his plan...

I. To save an innumerable host of people (1:1-46)

The story of Numbers begins where the book of Exodus ended. On this first day of the second month of the second year after Israel left Egypt the people are camped in the wilderness in front of Mt. Sinai where God had appeared to them in fire and smoke and earthquake and spoken to them the 10 Commandments. They have been in this spot for about eleven months while Moses received the Law from God and then the tabernacle was built. 30 days prior to this day Moses had set up the tabernacle and the glory of God, in the form of a cloud had visibly filled it. Aaron and his four sons had been ordained to the priesthood in the previous month and had begun to carry out their duties as priests. Now on this first day of the second month of the second year after leaving Egypt God, speaking to Moses in the tabernacle, commands that he take a census of Israel, that he count the number of adult men in Israel.

This is actually the second time God has required that every male who is 20 years old and up is counted. The first time, recorded in Exodus 38, was a simple head count for the purpose of collecting a ½ shekel of silver from each person to be used in the construction of the tabernacle. However, this time the count is to be far more detailed, obtaining the names and the clan and family associations of each male individual who was twenty years or more, who was ready to serve in the army of Israel. Thus the end result of this tally is not simply a total number of men but is aimed at organizing the men of Israel into an army with its divisions and companies and platoons and squads, to use our language. The “generals” of each division in the army, that is each tribe, are identified in vv. 5-16 and they help Moses and Aaron in the actual performing of the census.

While the practical and immediate purpose of God in having Moses count the men is so that they can form an army, yet there is another, more theological purpose to the numbering. If you have ever tried to read the first books of the Bible you know that interspersed throughout the stories of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and their descendants are lists of names of people. Most of us skip over these lists as we find them tedious and incomprehensible. However, they are not placed in the biblical record because God is some kind of a genealogy freak. Rather, they stand as signposts showing how God is being faithful to fulfill his promise, his blessing to his chosen people. Remember, God told Abram in Genesis 15, “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.’ Then he said to him, ‘So shall your offspring be.’” So these lists are signposts of God’s fulfilling his promise to multiply his people.

The last list of names and numbers of people that was made prior to this is in Exodus 1. Turn back to Exodus 1 and look at what vv. 1-7 say. So when Israel went to live in Egypt some 450 years prior to Numbers 1 there were 70 people plus Joseph and his family. These, we are told in v. 7, were fruitful and multiplied and increased greatly in the land of Egypt. Here in Numbers 1 we find out how much they increased. They grew from about 70 people to a total population of around 2 million. What God does for Israel by his requiring them to count these men shows how faithful he has been to his promise. He has done the impossible. He took the “good as dead” Abram and Sarai, both beyond human ability to have children and through them has made a great nation of over 2 million people, just as he promised.

However, God not only shows his faithfulness in this counting but he also shows that his plan is not complete. He told Abram that the number of his descendants would be uncountable, like the stars in the heavens and like the sand on the seashores. But this nation of people is countable. Moses and Aaron determine that there are 603,550 men over 20 in the 12 tribes of Israel. Therefore, this numbering shows that God is not done, he has not finished his plan. There is a future nation that is going to surpass this nation in size. At various times throughout Israel’s history the people are numbered but they never reach the innumerable condition.

Countable Israel thus points ahead to that uncountable host of people from every tribe and tongue and language and nation gathered around the throne of God who are part of the people of God not by biological descent or religious performance but through God's gracious salvation in and through Jesus. God is right now gathering together that one, uncountable nation out of all the nations of the earth. We are part of that nation through our faith in Jesus. He, the prophet greater than Moses, is the one who is going through the nations and counting the total of God's chosen people. He is doing this through his church. We can know with certainty that right now God is at work to fulfill his plan to save his innumerable people out of Janesville and out of all the nations of the world. Everything that is happening in the world and in our lives is in part happening so that this entire innumerable host is gathered together and counted as part of the people of God by Jesus.

II. To bring them through warfare and wilderness to his Promised Land (1:3, 2:1-2)

As I mentioned before, the obvious and practical reason God gives for counting these men is a military purpose. The word that is translated "you shall list them," is a word that is regularly used for the act of a military officer mustering and inspecting his troops. The men who are to be counted are to be "all who are able to go to war." Those who are not able to go to war are not to be counted. In chapter 2 God orders the camp to be organized into four fighting groups surrounding the tabernacle. Instructions are given as to how they are to organize themselves for defense and then how they are to march through the wilderness with the largest fighting force at the front of the nation. These former slaves are to become an army of God to accomplish his purpose of destroying the wicked inhabitants of Canaan and securing the land for themselves.

Remember, God's promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was always both that they would be an innumerable people and they would inherit the land of Canaan. Thus, just as the numbering of the people give evidence of God's faithfulness to making them a great nation, so his organizing them into a fighting force reminds them of his faithfulness to give them the land. They do not need to fear or wonder. God has a plan and he is putting that plan into action and so they can be absolutely sure that the land is as good as theirs. Even though they must cross the wilderness and fight the Canaanites, yet God is assuring them that the end is secure, it is a done deal. This organization into an army is aimed to communicate to the Israelites that the wilderness is not the goal. It is not God's plan or purpose for his people to live here permanently. It also communicates however, that getting through the wilderness and into the Land of Promise is going to take a fight. It is not stroll in the park without risk or trouble but the people of God are a fighting force, a people at war until the land is secure.

Jesus, following his baptism begins his ministry by spending 40 days in this very wilderness. In that wilderness as well as when he returns to the land of Israel he is in mortal combat with the forces of evil. In the wilderness he is met by Satan himself and overcomes him by quoting three passages from the book of Deuteronomy, each of which is related to Israel's wilderness journey. The NT epistles regularly refer to his death on the cross as a military conquest of Satan and sin and death. Listen to this one example from Colossians 2:15, "He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, triumphing over them by the cross." Israel marching through the desert, conquering the land of Canaan is a foreshadowing of that infinitely greater warfare and conquest accomplished by Jesus as he resisted the power of the devil and lived in perfect obedience to the Father and then suffered the death we deserve so that all who trust in his conquest, conquer with him and join him in that land of rest.

So we too follow where our Lord led. We live by faith in him as we pass through this wilderness world on our way to God's Promised Land. We must fight the fight of faith and put on the full armor of God as we resist the power of the world, our own sinful nature and the devil himself. Our enemies are not flesh and blood but rather spiritual forces arrayed against us, aimed at convincing us that the wilderness is a better home or that we cannot succeed in making it home and so we might as well quit now. Listen to me, life is war. You are in a fight for your life as you travel through this wilderness world. You will not make it if you fight alone. You will not make it through this wilderness unless you go in the company of God's people. The enemy is everywhere and the wilderness conditions of want and need are overwhelming. So I urge you to make sure that you are joined

to a fighting unit, both a local church and then a squad within that church so you can successfully fight through to God's land. This wilderness is not your home and the way home requires you to fight; so stop being surprised that life here is often not very comfortable. Renew your resolve to travel and fight your way to the end.

III. To safely live among them now and forever (1:47-54, 2:17)

The "tribes" of the nation of Israel are named after the 12 sons of Jacob. If you are familiar with the story of the birth of these 12 sons, recorded in Genesis 29 & 30 you will notice in the list of tribes in chapter 1 that two sons are missing and there are two names that are not sons but grandsons. Joseph, Jacob's 11th son, born of his favorite wife, Rachel has been replaced in the list of tribes by his two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh. And Levi, the third born son of Jacob, by his wife Leah, is not in the list. Verse 47-53 explain why it is that the tribe of Levi is not counted with the other tribes and not included in the total of the nation.

The reason they are not counted is because God told Moses that he had chosen the members of the tribe of Levi for a special function within the people of Israel. It was their job to take down and to erect the tabernacle during the course of their travels. They were to carry all the furnishings that belonged to the tent of meeting and make sure they were put back where they belonged each time Israel stopped to camp. In addition they were to guard the tabernacle from any unauthorized people coming near. In fact, if an unauthorized person came near to the tent they were to kill that person. They were to camp around it and guard it "so that..." as v. 53 says, "...there may be no wrath on the congregation of the people of Israel." The purpose of the Levites was to act as a shield between God and the people of Israel so that God might not destroy Israel. I want you to let that sink in. Without the tabernacle and the Levites guarding it God's wrath would burn up his chosen people, Israel.

Israel had already had some experience with this wrath, this just anger of God. When they complained about God not feeding them in the wilderness God provided them with manna and quail but he also killed many by a plague as a response to their unbelief. When they made the golden calf it was only the prayerful intercession of Moses that kept God from wiping out the entire nation. And even though God did not destroy the entire nation, yet by the hand of the Levites and by a plague he did kill a significant number of them. In the aftermath of that rebellion the Lord said to them that while he was still going to give them the land of Canaan, yet "I will not go up among you, lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people." God's justice and holiness and Israel's hard-hearted sinfulness was too incendiary of a combination and so to keep from destroying Israel in an outpouring of his just anger against their sin he said he would not go with them. At that time Moses again was able to persuade the Lord by his intercession to go with Israel and it was at this point that the tabernacle was built, the priesthood ordained and the sacrificial system instituted. Thus the Levites represent God's gracious provision for the sin of Israel. The Levites and the entire religious system of which they were the overseers is the means by which God is able to safely live with Israel.

Clearly we are to see that the Levites are the foreshadowing of our great high priest Jesus the Messiah. God has come to dwell in our midst by his Holy Spirit and we are not consumed because Jesus, our high priest, our sacrificial lamb stands between us and this holy God who is a consuming fire. This picture of the people of God living around the tabernacle but unable to come near to it because either the Levites will kill you or, if you were to get through the cordon of the Levites, the wrath of God would burn you up ought to shock us out of our complacent, nonchalant, take-Jesus-for-granted approach to God.

You and I cannot approach God on our own. We are sinners and a sinner coming into direct contact with the holy God will only result in one thing, the immediate combustion of the sinner. The fact that we can call God our Father and come to church every Sunday morning and sing these songs and walk out of here alive is only because of this amazing act of grace on the part of Jesus. He took the fire. He took the wrath. He was burned up, consumed in the fire of God's wrath because of our sins and so we don't need a cordon of Levites surrounding the church building, keeping everyone out. The whole Levitical system, as we will see in this book is a foreshadowing to the people of God that the way into the Holy of Holies was not made known until the

coming of Jesus. All of it points to him and so at his coming all of it is done away with. However, we must not forget by the absence of these burdensome laws and these numerous priestly guards that we are dealing with the same holy and just God. It is only safe to live with this holy God in our midst because we have a greater priest than any Levite who always lives to intercede for us in the presence of this great and holy God.

IV. To lead them home by Judah's son (1:5, 20, 2:3, 9)

The last thing I want you to notice in these first 2 chapters is that while Reuben is the firstborn son of Jacob, and he is mentioned first in the tribal lists of chapter 1, yet the tribe of Reuben does not have the place of pre-eminence in the placing of the tribes around the tabernacle. Rather, Jacob's fourth son, Judah is not only the largest tribe numerically but it also is given the place of prestige to the east of the tabernacle, at its entrance and is given the privilege of leading the whole people of God on its march through the desert and into battle in Canaan. Why is Judah given first place among the tribes of Israel when he was the fourth born son, not the firstborn son?

Turn back to Genesis 49. Here we have the account of Jacob, that is, Israel blessing his 12 sons. These "blessings" are God's prophetic word through Jacob as to the future of each of these sons and their descendants. If you will look at vv. 3-4 you will notice that while Reuben is acknowledged as the firstborn and therefore at the moment he has preeminence yet his preeminence is not permanent, it will come to an end. The reason he lost his pride of place is because he seduced Bilhah, the servant girl of Rachel and his father's concubine. Now look at vv. 8-12. Here we discover that Judah is a lion who is feared by all and will be praised and submitted to by his brothers. He shall bear the scepter of the king among his brothers. In fact, Jacob says there is going to be one particular descendant of Judah who will permanently possess that scepter and to whom the peoples, not just the nation of Israel, but the peoples of the world will submit. Thus the Lord places the tribe of Judah at the head of the nation of Israel because it is his intention to bring the Messiah into the world through Judah. According to the pleasure of his own will he determined that the Messiah, our savior, Jesus would be a member of the tribe of Judah. Thus Jesus is called in the Revelation, based upon this prophecy in Genesis 49, "The Lion of the tribe of Judah."

So as we see Judah camped in front of the tabernacle and leading the people of God through the wilderness and into the Promised Land we are to see our Lord Jesus at the head of his church, leading us safely through this wilderness world, defending us and bringing us safely to his heavenly kingdom. We are defended by the one who fears nothing for he is king of the jungle and who all must obey. Nothing and no one can harm us. When we belong to him, when we travel in the company of his people there is no enemy, no loss, no pain, no power that we need fear for there are none who dare to rouse him.