

## In the Wilderness | The Gospel in the Book of Numbers

“Guide Us, O Lord (at Sinai)”

10.9.16

*Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, <sup>23</sup> "Speak to Aaron and to his sons, saying, 'Thus you shall bless the sons of Israel. You shall say to them: <sup>24</sup> The LORD bless you, and keep you; <sup>25</sup> The LORD make His face shine on you, And be gracious to you; <sup>26</sup> The LORD lift up His countenance on you, And give you peace.' <sup>27</sup> "So they shall invoke My name on the sons of Israel, and I then will bless them."*

*<sup>9.15</sup> Now on the day that the tabernacle was erected the cloud covered the tabernacle, the tent of the testimony, and in the evening it was like the appearance of fire over the tabernacle, until morning. <sup>16</sup> So it was continuously; the cloud would cover it by day, and the appearance of fire by night. <sup>17</sup> Whenever the cloud was lifted from over the tent, afterward the sons of Israel would then set out; and in the place where the cloud settled down, there the sons of Israel would camp. <sup>18</sup> At the command of the LORD the sons of Israel would set out, and at the command of the LORD they would camp; as long as the cloud settled over the tabernacle, they remained camped. <sup>19</sup> Even when the cloud lingered over the tabernacle for many days, the sons of Israel would keep the LORD'S charge and not set out. <sup>20</sup> If sometimes the cloud remained a few days over the tabernacle, according to the command of the LORD they remained camped. Then according to the command of the LORD they set out. <sup>21</sup> If sometimes the cloud remained from evening until morning, when the cloud was lifted in the morning, they would move out; or if it remained in the daytime and at night, whenever the cloud was lifted, they would set out. <sup>22</sup> Whether it was two days or a month or a year that the cloud lingered over the tabernacle, staying above it, the sons of Israel remained camped and did not set out; but when it was lifted, they did set out. <sup>23</sup> At the command of the LORD they camped, and at the command of the LORD they set out; they kept the LORD'S charge, according to the command of the LORD through Moses.*

*<sup>10.11</sup> Now in the second year, in the second month, on the twentieth of the month, the cloud was lifted from over the tabernacle of the testimony; <sup>12</sup> and the sons of Israel set out on their journeys from the wilderness of Sinai. Then the cloud settled down in the wilderness of Paran. <sup>13</sup> So they moved out for the first time according to the commandment of the LORD through Moses.*

Today we begin a new sermon series, looking at the fourth book of the Bible. English speaking...Christians have referred to it, as The Book of Numbers and that may explain why it's not particularly popular.

For us numbers are depersonalizing (a student number, a Social Security number, a credit card number) but for ancient people numbers were often fascinating and symbolic. The book begins

and ends with a census...a numbering and ordering/organization of the people of Israel as they prepare to journey to the Promised Land and then again as they arrive (1-4,26).

In Hebrew the title of the book is “Ba-Midbar” meaning “In the Wilderness”. It’s the story of a road-trip that should’ve taken about a month but instead went on for 40 years...and at the center of the book the reason for this long detour...a series of seven rebellions against God and the fourth of these, the central rebellion is also the heart of the book and the reason for the 40 years wandering “in the wilderness” (“Ba-Midbar”).

There’s a lot of weird stuff in The Book of Numbers – it’s a mix of laws and stories. Some have wondered why a book that’s all about organization is itself so apparently DISorganized and haphazard with laws and stories sort of jumbled together. I like the scholars who press on to find a schematic/unified plan...because I think it’s THERE... It unfolds in three acts...the first and the third mirror each other. The three parts are according to three locations. We begin at Sinai...where the Israelites have camped for the last year and God gave them Leviticus/Tabernacle and all these laws.

Today, they get their instructions on how to move ahead – follow the pillar...the cloud that lights up at night like a peaceful tornado.

Today we think about getting guidance from God – “lead us, O Lord” (something we all want, right? To be led by God...to be in God’s will...) I’ve heard people say, “The safest place in the world is at the center of God’s will” – Is that true? ‘Good bumper sticker but is it TRUE?

Let’s look at 1) Launching into certain uncertainty 2) Wrestling God in the Wilderness 3) Living By Faith (and what that really means)

We have seen this column of smoke or vapor or cloud before... almost a year ago at the first celebration of the Passover when they first left Egypt and now they celebrate the yearly Passover feast again and the column of cloud appears again...and then it (six days later) it moves.

Right after the second Passover... they're reminded of how this works. When the cloud (a symbol of God’s Presence), when the cloud lifts up, they all get in line behind it (in the order, by tribe, as outlined and “Numbered” in chapters 1-4) and they follow God’s Presence. The priests and their assistants (the Tribe of Levi) go first and then the other tribes follow.

The instructions are really, really clear. The shining column of cloud lifts up and moves and the people follow. Seven times (a significant NUMBER) seven times it says, “At the command of the LORD” (18 [twice], 20 [twice] and 23 [three times]). But it’s all very clear, no guess work: the cloud lifts and moves – they follow and the cloud stops – they stop.

“But what if it lifts and moves again the next day?” No problem, we’ll take it from the top – cloud moves, we move. Cloud stops – we stop.

“But what if the cloud stays in one place for a while – what should we do then?” No problem! There’s no such thing as a dumb question – we’ll take it from the top: if the cloud lingers for two days, we stay for two days...if the cloud lingers a month, we stay for a month...or a year...or a thousand years – however long it lingers is how long WE linger. Any other questions?

Now you may think, “That would be pretty nice – to always know that you are where you’re supposed to be – no guess-work! Always at the center of God’s will... that would be pretty nice...” But do you know what lies ahead? There will be a lot of uncertainty in The Book of Numbers. The people will be asking, “Really? This is where God wants us to go? I’m pretty sure He wants us to go that way...this way doesn’t seem the best way.”

And that’s why Moses has to be ridiculously clear –“Nope! When the cloud moves WE MOVE and when the cloud stops WE STOP – totally certain, “metaphysical certitude” (John McLaughlin)... God’s leading is unambiguous and totally certain and THAT’S what makes it so hard...we’re always uncertain about WHY HE IS LEADING US THIS WAY? It’s NOT the way I would go. They are launching into certain uncertainty.

I’m not so sure that on any of their chariots they had the bumper sticker, “The safest place in the world is at the center of God’s will.” They are launching into certain uncertainty...Certain Uncertainty. Would you really like to be led in this way?

It turns out that they have fallen into the Hands of the God who wrestled with the Father of the Twelve Tribes. Remember, Jacob wrestled with this God and Jacob wanted His blessing and Jacob would not let go and Jacob got the blessing... but also a limp that never went away? And he got the name Israel, “One who wrestles with God.”

Oh yes...His leading is sure...but His leading is so often totally counterintuitive... it’s NOT illogical but it sure SEEMS illogical. The whole book, “Ba-Midbar” is God wrestling with the children of Jacob, the Israel of God – Israel: “one who wrestles with God”.

There’s a lot of confusing stuff in this book – for one thing WHY does a journey that should take about a month, instead take 40 years? (Let’s start there!)

You know there are a couple places in the book that just make NO SENSE at all unless they have some sort of symbolic value and future fulfillment... it’s a struggle to even read them...it’s spiritual wrestling!

Let me tell you about two of these super strange sections: The first we’ll look at later but I’ll just mention it. The people are bitter against God because they don’t like how He’s leading them and

they sort of slander God...and their words were just toxic and poison like venom... So God sends all these poisonous snakes to bite them and when they cry out, God tells Moses to make a little figurine of a snake and put it on a pole and everyone who looks at this symbol of their problem will be healed.

I had a Jewish doctor once and he led a very serious Torah study group and I asked him about this section from Numbers Ch. 21... and I could tell he was a little embarrassed, because it's a clear case of sympathetic magic (which God entirely opposes).

Another situation is from Chapter 5, where a man who suspects that his wife is unfaithful, but has no proof, can bring her to the priest and the priest puts the wife through an ordeal... makes her drink water with dirt in it (Bitter Water) and if she becomes sick and infertile that means she's guilty but if there's a miracle and she's fine – that means she's innocent.

Again... Lord, what are you doing? Why would you give us this counterintuitive stuff... this is sympathetic magic... It's abusive...it's like the occult.

And even though there's no history of the Israelites actually employing this weird ordeal... it's still in the book and it makes no sense... unless... the God who wrestles with His Beloved Sinners... unless the God who actually has a wife who is ALWAYS AND ONLY HABITUALLY UNFAITHFUL... unless that God, came for His Bride...and when He caught her...caught US... caught YOU...and caught ME... unless that God took in His own hand the Bitter Poison Cup and the Groom drank the Bitter Cup that the Bride deserved.

And...of course THAT'S exactly what the Christian Gospel proclaims. God in Christ came for us...found us not "allegedly unfaithful"... but manifestly, proven beyond a shadow of a doubt, repeatedly, resolutely, habitually living in spiritual adultery...and He, our God and Savior drank the Bitter Cup...on our behalf.

Isaiah 51.22 - "Thus says your Lord, the LORD, even your God Who contends for His people, 'Behold, I have taken out of your hand the cup of reeling, The chalice of My anger; You will never drink it again."

And of course Jesus Christ, fulfills both these Scriptures when He said to Peter in the Garden, "the cup which the Father has given Me, shall I not drink it?" HE Drinks the Cup... HE UNDERGOES THE ORDEAL FOR US – His unfaithful Bride!

The Book of Numbers -"in the wilderness" ("Ba-Midbar") is ultimately about the God who wrestles with His people, takes them on long detours, leads them counter-intuitively in order to free them from the lovers who will only seduce us in order to use us and assault us and shame us and violate us and mock us and then leave us empty and broken and unfulfilled.

See in chapters 5-6 God gives His holy people, four laws...reinforcing their identity as belonging to Him, the Holy God and then a fifth law... The Aaronic Blessing...we receive it at the end of the worship service. God is saying to them, to His Beloved and stubbornly rebellious people, "I will lead you in the way YOU HAVE TO GO... you won't like...you won't understand it... you will think I mean you harm... but in the end, I will satisfy you with SHALOM... I will bless you and keep you...I will lift up My face on you... I will beautify you and liberate you from all your abusers (all the false gods who seduce and hate you) and I will plant you where you can flourish in truth...and be ALL YOU WERE MEANT TO BE...

I will put My Name on YOU – and give you My peace... in the end, I will give you the only thing that can make you whole...I will give you My VERY SELF... I will incarnate and I will bleed and die for you... NONE of the gods will do that.

You can trust Me...when My leading doesn't make sense...when you disagree with how your life is unfolding...(the detours) when you grumble and complain and find yourself saying, "If I WERE GOD – this is NOT HOW I WOULD RUN THINGS!"

"When you see My Face...in the Face of Jesus Christ...and My face shines on You... when YOU SEE MY PRESENCE IN Jesus Christ...when I come for you...when I live and die and rise in your place – when I do it for everyone to see on the stage of human history...in the fullness of time (Gal 4.4) then YOU WILL FOLLOW/TRUST ME EVEN WHEN IT DOESN'T MAKE SENSE."

My ultimate goal is shalom – is well-being and flourishing for YOU and for the world...a New Creation – and in Jesus Christ, YOU SEE MY INTENTIONS MOST CLEARLY – now trust ME."

In the meantime...we buy a new car...we think it was God's will...and then it throws a rod and blows the engine (right as the warrantee expires) or an engagement breaks up...or I fail to get accepted into that graduate program... or a debilitating injury or illness...or we lose a loved one...and we wonder: DID I MISS GOD'S LEADING?... We may think: if I only had that pillar!

And the God who wrestles with Jacob says, "Trust Me to bless you... not with car-success or health...or wealth... or whatever else leaves you feeling invincible and independent and self-sufficient – trust Me to lead you pilgrim through this barren land. You are weak, but I am mighty; I hold you with thy powerful hand... Living by faith when all you have is the blessing and promise of the God who drank the Cup.

I am giving you My very self... the Cross and empty tomb prove it... trust Me and walk with Me... in thick or thin...the face of God shining on you because of Jesus Christ: THIS IS THE BLESSED LIFE. This is what it means to be led/guided by God. This is living by faith.