

TITLE SLIDE

Journey to the Promised Land: Desert
Numbers 10:11-13, 29-36
January 7, 2024, West Valley Presbyterian Church

This past year, amazing things have happened, for which we are grateful.

A. Last year at this time, we were feeling discouraged. GRX didn't work out; we wanted to incubate a new church plant but had no idea how to do that; and Pastor Morgan had just left for a new call in South Carolina.

B. But this year, God has done amazing things! We baptized two people, and a third person reaffirmed her baptismal vows. We took in new members. AND, our denominational leaders found a church planting couple for us – Caitlin and Joel Rhodes-Karahadian. You heard them preach and lead worship just last week. What did you think? We are so fortunate to be able to support and sponsor them!

C. You know what really makes me think that God is setting this up? It's true that Caitlin and Joel would be a great fit for this area. It's true that Caitlin has spent 10 years working in Beijing, and is familiar with the culture that Chinese immigrants bring with them. It's true that Joel is a musician who is working on getting his MDiv as well, and plans to reach out and minister with non-Christian musicians in our area. Which is its own subculture.

D. But here's what really showed me God's hand at work: In the last conversation I had with Marvis Eldridge before she passed on, she told me that this church started with dinner and Bible study meetings in people's living rooms. That's our church's DNA. We are built up from it. And guess how Caitlin and Joel are planning to start the WVNC? By starting and multiplying Alpha groups, which involve meeting in homes, sharing dinner together, and talking about what Christianity is!

E. So the DNA of the church plant is familiar to us. We'll be able to understand each other, even though our worship styles and needs will be different. Sort of like how grandparents can understand and love their children and grandchildren, even if the children do things differently than we did. Shared DNA makes it a lot easier to understand each other.

F. So to all of that, I say, "Thank you, Lord!" I am GRATEFUL for the great things he has done and is doing in our midst!

And, I am so grateful to God for all that he is doing in Caitlin and Joel's lives! Last week they spoke about all of us allowing ourselves to be flexible wineskins, so that we can all be filled with the new wine of what God wants to do in our lives. They have themselves been excellent models of flexibility! Things haven't been happening exactly the way they planned, either. Yet the shifts they've needed to make, because of financing and moving issues, have turned out to be good for them. They are amazed, delighted, and reassured that God is with them as WVNC begins.

Caitlin and Joel are here. And now it's time for us, WVPC, to move into the future God has for us. What might that future be? I don't know. But God knows; and God is at work in our midst right here and right now. I don't know where God is leading us, exactly; neither do any of us. And that's OK! Fortunately, there's lots of guidance in the Bible for such a time as this. One of the very best resources for us right now is the book of Numbers, the 4th book of the Bible.

So we are going to look at six different passages from Numbers during January and February. We're going to learn how God leads his people during a time of transition. In the case of the ancient Israelites, after they were delivered from Egypt, they spent two years at Mt. Sinai. There they learned the basics: how to live together as God's people, and how to worship God. But after two years, it was time to move on. God had never intended them to be at Mt. Sinai forever. God said he would lead them into the Promised Land, and now it was time to go.

Today's passage is two sections from Numbers 10 – verses 11-13, and then 29-35. Hear now the reading of God's Holy Word.

SLIDES 2- 3

¹¹On the twentieth day of the second month of the second year, the cloud lifted from above the tabernacle of the covenant law. ¹²Then the Israelites set out from the Desert of Sinai and traveled from place to place until the cloud came to rest in the Desert of Paran. ¹³They set out, this first time, at the LORD's command through Moses."

That's the first section. In between our two sections are 14 verses describing the marching order of the Israelites. It lists the large groups called camps, and the smaller groups within the camps called tribes. We're going to pick up our second section starting at verse 29.

SLIDES 4 - ?

²⁹Now Moses said to Hobab son of Reuel the Midianite, Moses' father-in-law, "We are setting out for the place about which the LORD said, 'I will give it to you.' Come with us and we will treat you well, for the LORD has promised good things to Israel."

³⁰He answered, "No, I will not go; I am going back to my own land and my own people."

³¹But Moses said, "Please do not leave us. You know where we should camp in the wilderness, and you can be our eyes. ³²If you come with us, we will share with you whatever good things the LORD gives us."

³³So they set out from the mountain of the LORD and traveled for three days. The ark of the covenant of the LORD went before them during those three days to find them a place to rest. ³⁴The cloud of the LORD was over them by day when they set out from the camp.

³⁵Whenever the ark set out, Moses said,

“Rise up, LORD!

May your enemies be scattered; may your foes flee before you.”

³⁶Whenever it came to rest, he said,

“Return, Lord, to the countless thousands of Israel.”

Here ends the reading of God’s Holy Word. Thanks be to God!

It’s time for God’s people to move on from Sinai. To where? The first stop is Paran. But there are some problems. First, they’ve never seen Paran, and they will have to go through the desert to get there. Second, they don’t know how to survive as nomads in the desert any more, because in Egypt they’d lived in the Nile delta area. And third, they don’t have a map. God gave them his presence; but he didn’t give them a GPS. So even though they were excited to go to a land God had promised them, they were also anxious and scared. Understandably so. Even today the desert can be a dangerous place.

What will help them get to Paran, and from there, to the Promised Land?

Well, first, the Israelites need to get organized, which they’d never had to do before. When they left Egypt, they just left as fast as they could. And God himself led them through the sea; God himself drowned their pursuers; and God himself visibly led them to Mt. Sinai by day and by night. But now things are different. Now they are leaving Mt. Sinai, and going on a long journey where God’s leading will not be as obvious. So now they need an organization which will work for them in the years ahead. And that’s why they set up the camps and the tribes. God commands Moses; Moses commands the camp leaders; and the camp leaders command the tribes. Sort of like the Army!

The next thing they needed was a desert expert to travel along with them. That is why Moses begs his brother-in-law Hobab to go along with them. Hobab is from Midian, which is where northwest Saudi Arabia is now. So he’d lived in deserts his whole life. He knows how to find an oasis and where the dangers are. Moses also knows a thing or two about deserts; but he regarded Hobab as the real expert. So he pleads with Hobab, saying, “Please do not leave us. You know where we should camp in the wilderness, and you can be our eyes.” God’s wisdom is often conveyed through human beings; so Moses very sensibly relies on human wisdom when it’s available.

And the third thing they needed was to recognize and celebrate God’s presence in their midst, to keep up their morale. Their journey from Egypt to what is now Israel will take them 40 years. More than once they will be tempted to turn around and go back. They need encouragement to keep going. So that’s why the ark of the covenant goes before the people, as the physical sign of God’s presence in their midst. Everyone could see it and be encouraged. And Moses reminded the people that God was leading them, every time they set out and every time they stopped. He would pray, “Rise up, Lord! May your enemies be scattered; may your foes flee before you” when they set out.

And he would pray, "Return, Lord, to the countless thousands of Israel" when they stopped. The people are reminded, all day and every day, that God is right there with them.

What can we learn from this passage, as we head into the future God is giving us?

I was surprised by the importance of organizational structure. The 14 verses in between our two passages from Numbers 10 are all about structure. For example, "The divisions of the camp of Judah went first, under their standard. Nahshon son of Amminadab was in command. Nethanael son of Zuar was over the division of the tribe of Issachar, and Eliab son of Helon was over the division of the tribe of Zebulun." The Israelites needed a rigid structure to ensure their survival during their years in the desert; so that's what they had.

We don't need the army-type structure that the Israelites needed; there are not that many of us, and we won't thirst to death. What we need is flexibility, because we are heading into a future of unknown unknowns. Do you remember last winter, when we got hit by a whole series of storms, including a bomb cyclone which knocked out the church's power for awhile? We couldn't have predicted that; we just had to cope with it when it happened. In the same way, because we are on a journey that very few Presbyterian churches have ever made, we won't be able to plan for everything. There will be things we won't expect; and we'll need to be flexible as we respond to whatever God is doing in our midst right now.

Second: fortunately, we can learn from human wisdom and experience, just as Moses did with Hobab. Specifically, we've got the National Gathering coming up at the end of January; and you are helping Nancy Hobbs and me to go and learn as much as we can from our colleagues in other ECO churches. For example: remember Luke Parker? You met him last spring? He will be leading a seminar on how to become a church planting church. Yes, we are already into it; but there's still a lot we can learn. As another example, there will be sessions on how to imagine a future for our church, and what our steps towards that future might be. When Nancy and I come back from National Gathering, we'll share what we have learned from our sister churches.

And third, we already recognize and celebrate God's presence in our midst, and we will continue to do so. I can't imagine a clearer way to do that than by celebrating the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. As God's presence was made specific in the ark, so God's presence is made specific for us in Communion. Jesus himself set it up for us, knowing that we would need a way to see and touch and smell and taste his presence, once he was no longer physically present on earth. We don't know the details of the future. We do know that we can be flexible, that we can learn from our colleagues, and that Jesus is right here with us in this sacrament. We can trust God with our future. Amen.

And now I would like to invite Pastor Bob to lead us in the celebration of communion.