

SLIDE 1

Journey to the Promised Land – Leaders
Numbers 11:4-30
January 14, 2024 West Valley Presbyterian Church

Last week, we were blessed to have Hardy read out loud the first of six sermons, planned from the book of Numbers; and blessed also to have Pastor Bob preside over the Lord's Supper. Thank you so much to both of you!

Last week we heard about how the Israelites started off on a long desert journey. They didn't know exactly where they were going; they didn't know how they would get there either. But with God's leadership through Moses, they got themselves appropriately organized; they learned from human wisdom; and they celebrated God's presence in their midst. And off they went, into the desert, heading towards Paran.

This week, we're going to read through a section of Numbers 11, vv 4-30, which talks about the importance of shared leadership when we're on a journey filled with unknown unknowns. When we look at our future, we don't even know what it is that we don't know. Which leads to anxiety in our midst. It happened to the Israelites; and it can certainly happen to us as well. Which is why shared leadership is very important – it makes it easier on the leaders, and it reduces overall anxiety.

Hear now the word of God as it comes to us from Numbers, Chapter 11, vv 4-30.

SLIDES 2-22

⁴The rabble with them began to crave other food, and again the Israelites started wailing and said, "If only we had meat to eat! ⁵We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost—also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. ⁶But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!"

⁷The manna was like coriander seed and looked like resin. ⁸The people went around gathering it, and then ground it in a hand mill or crushed it in a mortar. They cooked it in a pot or made it into loaves. And it tasted like something made with olive oil. ⁹When the dew settled on the camp at night, the manna also came down.

¹⁰Moses heard the people of every family wailing at the entrance to their tents. The LORD became exceedingly angry, and Moses was troubled. ¹¹He asked the LORD, "Why have you brought this trouble on your servant? What have I done to displease you that you put the burden of all these people on me? ¹²Did I conceive all these people? Did I give them birth? Why do you tell me to carry them in my arms, as a nurse carries an infant, to the land you promised on oath to their ancestors? ¹³Where can I get meat for all these people? They keep wailing to me, 'Give us meat to eat!' ¹⁴I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me. ¹⁵If this is how you are going to treat me, please go ahead and kill me—if I have found favor in your eyes—and do not let me face my own ruin."

¹⁶The LORD said to Moses: “Bring me seventy of Israel’s elders who are known to you as leaders and officials among the people. Have them come to the tent of meeting, that they may stand there with you. ¹⁷I will come down and speak with you there, and I will take some of the power of the Spirit that is on you and put it on them. They will share the burden of the people with you so that you will not have to carry it alone.

¹⁸“Tell the people: ‘Consecrate yourselves in preparation for tomorrow, when you will eat meat. The LORD heard you when you wailed, “If only we had meat to eat! We were better off in Egypt!” Now the LORD will give you meat, and you will eat it. ¹⁹You will not eat it for just one day, or two days, or five, ten or twenty days, ²⁰but for a whole month—until it comes out of your nostrils and you loathe it—because you have rejected the LORD, who is among you, and have wailed before him, saying, “Why did we ever leave Egypt?””

²¹But Moses said, “Here I am among six hundred thousand men on foot, and you say, ‘I will give them meat to eat for a whole month!’ ²²Would they have enough if flocks and herds were slaughtered for them? Would they have enough if all the fish in the sea were caught for them?”

²³The LORD answered Moses, “Is the LORD’s arm too short? Now you will see whether or not what I say will come true for you.”

²⁴So Moses went out and told the people what the LORD had said. He brought together seventy of their elders and had them stand around the tent. ²⁵Then the LORD came down in the cloud and spoke with him, and he took some of the power of the Spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders. When the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied—but did not do so again.

²⁶However, two men, whose names were Eldad and Medad, had remained in the camp. They were listed among the elders, but did not go out to the tent. Yet the Spirit also rested on them, and they prophesied in the camp. ²⁷A young man ran and told Moses, “Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp.”

²⁸Joshua son of Nun, who had been Moses’ aide since youth, spoke up and said, “Moses, my lord, stop them!”

²⁹But Moses replied, “Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all the LORD’s people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!” ³⁰Then Moses and the elders of Israel returned to the camp.

Here ends the reading of God’s Holy Word. Join me in saying, Thanks be to God.

That’s quite the story, isn’t it? You might have heard it before, as it’s sometimes read at Pentecost, which is also about the Holy Spirit being poured out on a whole group of people, in order to start something new.

Personally, I love this story, because it reminds me that not even Moses could handle everything by himself! Here he’s devoted years of his life to obeying God and leading God’s people,

ever since the day when he saw the burning bush and spoke with God directly. He's been the intermediary for years. He's made all these sensible arrangements for organization, and advice, and celebrating God's presence. And what does he get in return? His people wailing at him that they are sick of manna and they want some meat and vegetables! That was too much for him, and he just lost it. I love his prayer – it's so honest. "Where can I get meat for all these people?...I can't carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me! If this is how you are going to treat me, then please, just go ahead and kill me!"

BTW, if Moses can be this honest with God about how he's feeling, then so can we. If you're ever really angry with God, it's OK to say so. In fact this passage encourages us to say so. God already knows what we are thinking anyway; he already knows when we're angry. So we might as well be honest when we pray. If we are, then God can work within us to deal with whatever the problem is. God will never force you to tell him what's going on with you. But he does already know. If you are willing to talk with God about what's really going on in your soul, it can be dealt with. It's so much better to just be honest with God, about whatever it is.

God knows perfectly well what Moses needs; and he also knows what the people need. And so he addresses both of those needs. But the first need he addresses is Moses. He needs help in leading the people. If he falls apart, then so do the people. However angry the people might be at Moses, they'd be lost without him, and they know it. So getting Moses some help is top priority. And what God does for Moses, makes lots of sense for us as Presbyterians. The very word "Presbyterian" comes from the Greek word "presbutyros", which means, "elder." God ordained 70 elders to help Moses, that's what he did. He takes some of the Holy Spirit that's on Moses, and puts it on each of those 70 elders. They all prophesy, at least for awhile. So they all had at least some sense of what it's like to be an intermediary. They can understand at least something of what Moses is going through. And now they can be a real help to him. God initiates shared leadership, which is still what we have in churches today, thousands of years later.

The second thing that God does is to teach the people that they really can trust him. They need to learn that God didn't deliver them from slavery just so they could starve in the desert. He really is bringing them to a land where they can grow their own food and live as free people. Yes, God is angry that the people don't appreciate the manna. Yes, God is angry that the people remember the fish and the garlic; but they don't remember that they were slaves at the time, and are not grateful for their deliverance. But for all that, he does answer their prayer. He does send such a huge flock of migrating quail in their direction, that they have more meat than they can possibly eat. In fact a lot of it spoils and causes food poisoning.

Okay. So what do we learn from this passage about our own journey into our future? Well, first of all, we learn that it's just plain human nature to resist change. Even if the change is an improvement. It's just human nature to look back and say, "The good old days were better." Even if they weren't. The Israelites mourned the loss of fish and melons. But they don't give thanks for the gift of freedom. They don't rejoice that they are no longer forced into harsh labor in brick and mortar and field work. Are we that much different?

So as we journey into the future, when we are tempted to say, “The good old days were better”, let’s remember that that’s normal. It’s human nature to resist change. And let’s also remember that complaining about change won’t help. We’re much better off if we look to see what God is doing in our midst right now, and cooperate with what he is doing right now. That’s what strengthens us. That’s what encourages us. That’s what gives us hope. Let’s give thanks to God for what he IS doing, right here and right now!

Second, we see the need for shared leadership in the church. We see how important shared leadership is, and how impossible solo leadership is. Even a faithful prophet like Moses, who talks to God face to face, can’t lead his people all by himself. How much less could an ordinary pastor do that! I am not able to do everything that’s needed around this church – nor should I try. So I am exceedingly grateful for our elders, and our deacons, and our buildings and grounds volunteers, and our teachers, and our ushers, and our missions workers and our morale builders and our pray-ers. We’re already pretty good at shared leadership – and we can get even better! For instance, Bill Day can always use some extra hands on a church clean-up day; and we still could use some more van drivers – right, Greg? And the Shaws are looking for folks to help with Refuge dinners. Thank you, Sandy and Mike, for heading this ministry up for so many years. I think that shared leadership, which we can get better at, will really help us on our journey into our future. So I thank you all, with all my heart.

And third, we can allow God to remind us, once again, that we really can trust him with our own lives and with the church’s life as we journey through the future. Yes, we have been through some tough times. But we’ve gotten through them, haven’t we? And now here we are, starting something new and exciting. Yes, we are smaller and older than we used to be. But we are still here, and the Holy Spirit is still active among us. We are still worshiping and celebrating and reaching out. Remember Simeon and Anna, that we talked about last month. It didn’t matter that they weren’t young. They could talk about Jesus – and they did. And so can we. While we are still on this earth, we are here, and we can reach out to tell people about what God is doing in Jesus, right here and right now. We don’t know what our future holds for sure. But we do know that God is leading us, and will be with us always. We really can trust him, with all that we have and all that we are. Our journey into the future could be, with God’s leading, a time of joy. Amen.