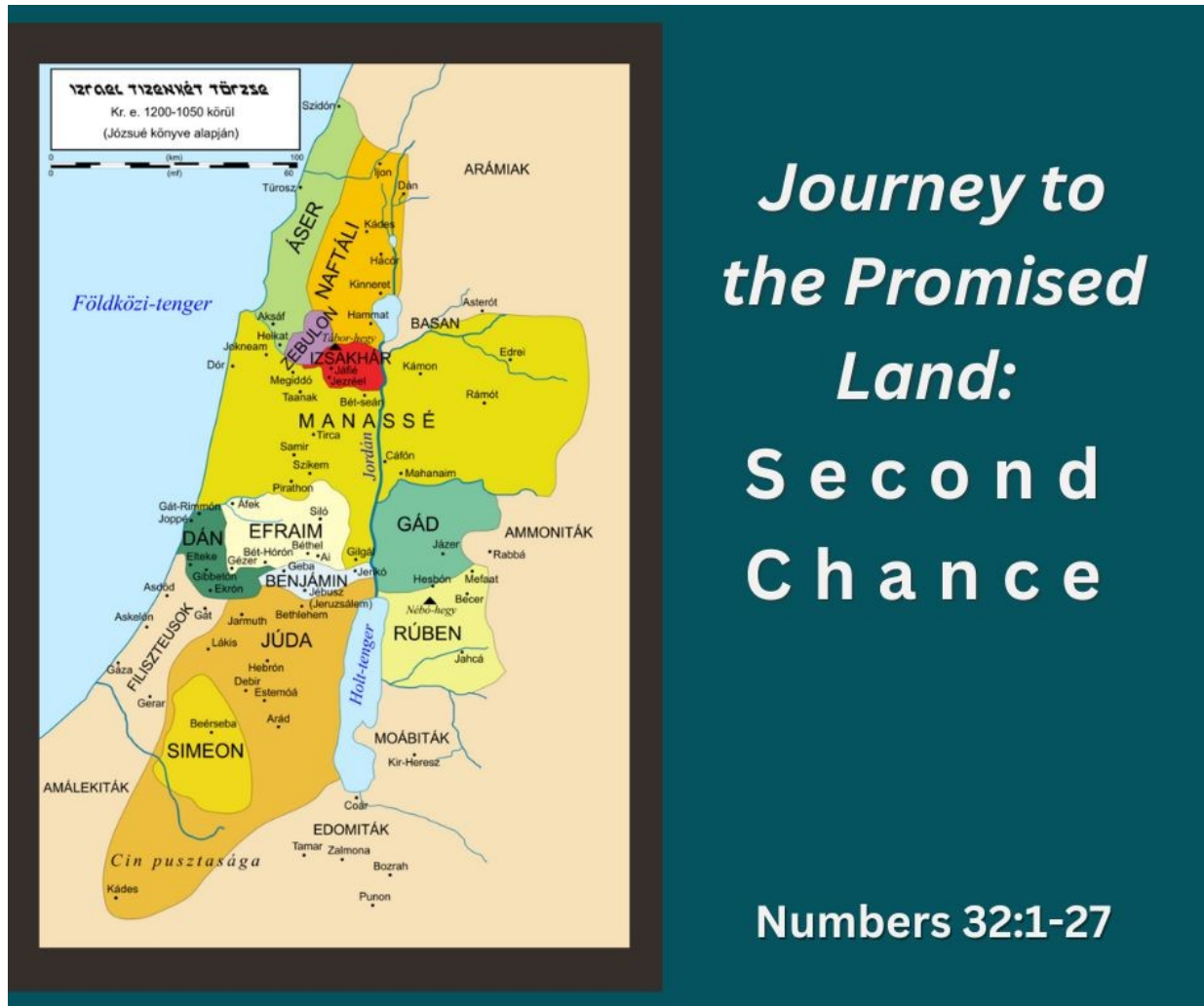


Journey to the Promised Land: Second Chance
Numbers 32:1-27
West Valley Presbyterian Church, February 11, 2024



Last week we read from Numbers 14, and we learned about the consequences of allowing fear to get the better of us. The Israelites disagreed about whether or not to go into the Promised Land; they were persuaded by a fearful report rather than the hopeful report; they allowed their fear to escalate into panic, and their panic escalated into a full scale rebellion against God and their leaders. Their rebellion led to consequences – namely, that they would wander in the desert for 40 years, until all the rebels were dead; and their children would possess the Promised Land instead.

So 40 years passed. The Israelites had various adventures; learned a lot from the mistakes of their parents; and managed to defeat two kings who would not give permission for the Israelites to pass through their territories. And now, once again, the Israelites are at the border of the Promised Land. They are on the east side of the Jordan River, and trying to figure out how to settle in the west side, in what is now the land of Israel. And once again, there's a problem. How are they going to handle the problem this time?

Hear now the word of God as it comes to us from Numbers 32:1-27.

The Reubenites and Gadites, who had very large herds and flocks, saw that the lands of Jazer and Gilead were suitable for livestock. ² So they came to Moses and Eleazar the priest and to the leaders of the community, and said, “Ataroth, Dibon, Jazer, Nimrah, Heshbon, Elealeh, Sebam, Nebo and Beon - ⁴ the land the LORD subdued before the people of Israel— are suitable for livestock, and your servants have livestock. ⁵ If we have found favor in your eyes,” they said, “let this land be given to your servants as our possession. Do not make us cross the Jordan.”

⁶ Moses said to the Gadites and Reubenites, “Should your fellow Israelites go to war while you sit here? ⁷ Why do you discourage the Israelites from crossing over into the land the LORD has given them? ⁸ This is what your fathers did when I sent them from Kadesh Barnea to look over the land. ⁹ After they went up to the Valley of Eshkol and viewed the land, they discouraged the Israelites from entering the land the LORD had given them. ¹⁰ The LORD’s anger was aroused that day and he swore this oath: ¹¹ ‘Because they have not followed me wholeheartedly, not one of those who were twenty years old or more when they came up out of Egypt will see the land I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob— ¹² not one except Caleb son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite and Joshua son of Nun, for they followed the LORD wholeheartedly.’ ¹³ The LORD’s anger burned against Israel and he made them wander in the wilderness forty years, until the whole generation of those who had done evil in his sight was gone.

¹⁴ “And here you are, a brood of sinners, standing in the place of your fathers and making the LORD even more angry with Israel. ¹⁵ If you turn away from following him, he will again leave all this people in the wilderness, and you will be the cause of their destruction.”

¹⁶ Then they came up to him and said, “We would like to build pens here for our livestock and cities for our women and children. ¹⁷ But we will arm ourselves for battle^[a] and go ahead of the Israelites until we have brought them to their place. Meanwhile our women and children will live in fortified cities, for protection from the inhabitants of the land. ¹⁸ We will not return to our homes until each of the Israelites has received their inheritance. ¹⁹ We will not receive any inheritance with them on the other side of the Jordan, because our inheritance has come to us on the east side of the Jordan.”

²⁰ Then Moses said to them, “If you will do this—if you will arm yourselves before the LORD for battle ²¹ and if all of you who are armed cross over the Jordan before the LORD until he has driven his enemies out before him— ²² then when the land is subdued before the LORD, you may return and be free from your obligation to the LORD and to Israel. And this land will be your possession before the LORD.

²³ “But if you fail to do this, you will be sinning against the LORD; and you may be sure that your sin will find you out. ²⁴ Build cities for your women and children, and pens for your flocks, but do what you have promised.”

²⁵The Gadites and Reubenites said to Moses, “We your servants will do as our lord commands. ²⁶Our children and wives, our flocks and herds will remain here in the cities of Gilead. ²⁷But your servants, every man who is armed for battle, will cross over to fight before the LORD, just as our lord says.”

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

So what was the problem this time? This time, the problem was about lack of unity. It was about the Israelites splintering into their different tribal groups. (Which continued to be a problem for the Israelites for many more decades to come, as you can see in the books of Judges and First Samuel.)

God had said that the land west of the Jordan would be the Promised Land for the Israelites. But the land east of the Jordan was more suitable for cattle, since it wasn’t as hilly. And guess what, two of the tribes - Reuben and Gad - had a lot of cattle. They preferred to stay east of the Jordan, where it wasn’t so hilly. So they came to Moses and Eleazar (who is now the chief priest; Aaron died in the desert, and Eleazar is Aaron’s son), and said that they didn’t want to cross the Jordan, that they wanted to settle down where they were.

Moses didn’t like that idea at all. Which is entirely understandable, considering that Moses nearly got stoned to death the last time Israelites refused to go into the promised land. So he reminds the Gadites and the Reubenites of what happened 40 years ago. He reminds them that because of Israel’s disobedience, they wandered in the wilderness for 40 years, until the whole generation who rebelled had died. He says, “And here you are, a brood of sinners, standing in the place of your fathers and making the Lord even more angry with Israel.” Moses is afraid as well as angry; and we can hear his fear starting to escalate into panic in his next sentence: “If you turn away from following him, he will again leave all this people in the wilderness, and you will be the cause of their destruction.”

Okay now. The Reubenites and the Gadites have a choice. They could choose to do what their fathers did, and what Moses is afraid they will do. They could stomp out in a rage and tell the other tribes that Moses treated them badly, so therefore he should be pushed aside and the people should elect themselves a new leader.

But this time, they don’t make that bad choice. Why don’t they? Well, in part, it’s because 40 years have gone past since their fathers’ mistakes. The Israelites in today’s Scripture reading have had 40 years’ worth of experience of being with God and learning his ways. God has been with them for as long as they can remember; slavery might have been a distant memory for some of them, but it was unknown for most of them, who had been born in the desert. They’ve always experienced God being with them. So they are not as frightened of the future as their fathers were.

And because they were not so frightened of the future, they were able to be calm. They were able to overlook the tone of Moses’ voice and acknowledge the truth of what he said about Israel’s disobedience in the past. They were able to calm Moses down too. They were able to show Moses

that they weren't the same as their fathers, and they weren't doing what their fathers did. They came up with a compromise that all the parties involved – including God – could accept.

They said, "OK, tell you what. We want to protect our families and our livestock. But we think we can do that by building pens for the cattle and cities for our families. And once we've done that, we will come and fight alongside you until all the tribes have gotten themselves settled into their inheritances. We don't want to break the unity of the Israelites. So we won't go home until all the rest of us have homelands on the west side of the Jordan."

Moses isn't thrilled with that compromise; but he can accept it. So he lays out the terms of what they have agreed to, as a covenant. He says, "If you fulfill the promise you have made, and fight until God's enemies have been driven out, then you can return and live in the land you have chosen, and you'll be free from your obligation to the Lord and to Israel. But if you don't, you will be sinning against the Lord; and you can be sure your sin will find you out. Go ahead and build the cities and the pens; but do what you have promised."

The Gadites and the Reubenites accept the terms of the covenant. And they fulfill those terms. You can read about that in Joshua 22. They do what they promised to do, and then they return to the land east of the Jordan. This time, a major disagreement was handled well; a split was avoided; and all the Israelites eventually had places to call home. Their wandering days were ended.

So what does all this have to do with us? After all, we are not wandering around in the wilderness. Our church has been at this location for 70 years! And we know that we can trust God. We know that God lived among us as one of us, in the person of Jesus our Lord. We know that God is at work in our midst, right now, through the Holy Spirit.

But we are in a period of change; and when there is change, there can be uncertainty and fear. There can be disagreement about how to handle the change, and the disagreement can spin up the fear into panic. We saw that in last week's Scripture. We saw what happens when we allow fear to escalate into panic, and from panic, into rebellion against God. That rebellion had consequences – 40 more years in the desert.

Fortunately, the people learned from their mistake. This week we've talked about the RIGHT way to handle change. We saw that the Reubenites and Gadites listened to Moses' concerns and his fear; they stayed calm; and they proposed a compromise that would work for everyone. Listening to concerns, staying calm, and compromising, makes handling change a lot easier. More important, it pleases God.

For example: Suppose a very talented skateboarder lived right nearby this church; and one day he asked us to build a skateboard park on the patio so he could have more opportunities to practice. Obviously that's not really going to happen. But let's pretend it did. Turning the patio into a skateboard park would certainly be a major change, wouldn't it?

What would be the wrong way to respond to that proposed change? “AAAK! No! Someone would break their neck on our property and we’d have to pay his medical bills for the rest of his life, which might be for another 80 years, and we’d go bankrupt, and there’d be nothing left of us! We’d better just sell our property to Walmart right now!” What’s wrong with that response? Well, first, in that pretend example, we didn’t bring it to God and pray about it. Second, we let our fear spin up into panic. And third, we let our panic lead us to reject everything that God has done for us.

What would be the right way to respond to that proposed change? “Let’s ask him why he thinks a skateboard park would be a good idea, and then let’s take some time to pray about it and ask God what he wants us to do. Let’s see if there’s a way to reach out to skateboarding community in our area, that would work for us as well.” And what’s right about that response? It involves listening; bringing things to God, staying calm, and coming up with a compromise.

The book of Numbers clearly shows us what we should NOT do when we are facing a major disagreement about change. It also clearly shows us what we SHOULD do when we are facing a major disagreement about change. When we disagree, we have a choice. We can choose to give in to our fear and let it escalate to panic and rebellion, with terrible consequences. OR, we can choose to lift our fear to God; allow God to calm us; listen to what the people we disagree with are saying, and negotiate a compromise. Which is the better choice? Well, what does God’s Word tell us to do? Let’s pray.