

## “Wilderness Stories: Generational Impact”

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**Numbers 14:26-45**

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Today we begin a new series for Lent called “Wilderness Stories.” Lent began 10 days ago with Ash Wednesday, so last Sunday was the first Sunday in Lent. We were blessed last week with Rev. Steve Cuss’s visit to us and his words on anxiety, or rather anxieties (plural). Though it wasn’t directly mentioned last week, you will inevitably notice certain ties between some of the subject matter last week and what we’ll explore over the next few weeks. We’ll be looking at stories in the fourth book of the Bible, the Book of Numbers.

And right now you’re thinking, the Book of “numbers”—worst book ever. The reason it’s called the Book of Numbers is from its title in Greek, the word for numbers, so titled because of the censuses the book includes. It’s title in Hebrew, however, isn’t the Hebrew word for “numbers,” but rather a phrase, meaning “In the Wilderness.” And we come to a part of Israel’s story where things could have gone very differently and much for the better, but instead things went horribly wrong, the consequences for which would be felt for decades. Fair warning, though. Things get pretty sharp right out of the gates in this one. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

*And the Lord spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying, “How long shall this wicked congregation complain against me? I have heard the complaints of the Israelites, which they complain against me. Say to them, ‘As I live,’ says the Lord, ‘I will do to you the very things I heard you say: your dead bodies shall fall in this very wilderness, and of all your number included in the census from twenty years old and up who have complained against me, not one of you shall come into the land in which I swore to settle you, except Caleb son of Jephunneh and Joshua son of Nun. But your little ones, who you said would become plunder, I will bring in, and they shall know the land that you have despised. But as for you, your dead bodies shall fall in this wilderness. And your children shall be shepherds in the wilderness for forty years and shall suffer for your faithlessness, until the last of your dead bodies lies in the wilderness. According to the number of the days in which you spied out the land, forty days, for every day a year, you shall bear your iniquity, forty years, and you shall know my displeasure.’ I the Lord have spoken; surely I will do thus to all this wicked congregation gathered together against me: in this wilderness they shall come to a full end, and there they shall die.”*

*And the men whom Moses sent to spy out the land who returned and made all the congregation complain against him by bringing a bad report about the land, the men who brought an unfavorable report about the land died by a plague before the Lord. But Joshua son of Nun and Caleb son of Jephunneh alone remained alive, of those men who went to spy out the land.*

*When Moses told these words to all the Israelites, the people mourned greatly. They rose early in the morning and went up to the heights of the hill country, saying, “Here we are. We will go up to the place that the Lord has promised, for we have sinned.” But Moses said, “Why do you continue to transgress the command of the Lord? That will not succeed. Do not go up, for the Lord is not with you; do not let yourselves be struck down before your enemies. For the Amalekites and the Canaanites will confront you there, and you shall fall by the sword; because you have turned back from following the Lord, the Lord will not be with you.” But they presumed to go up to the heights of the hill country, even though the ark of the covenant of the Lord and Moses had not left the camp. Then the Amalekites*

*and the Canaanites who lived in that hill country came down and defeated them, pursuing them as far as Hormah.* (Numbers 14:26-45)

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? God of Mercy and Righteousness, we pray for your guidance this morning, for at once we see testimony of what can feel harsh alongside mercy. We pray that your Spirit would open your Word anew to us this morning, and that you would strip away all that which holds us back from stepping into the faithfulness of your promises to us. And for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Well this wasn't the first time that Israel had messed up, but this was a doozy, and the consequences would truly be felt long term, generationally, wandering in the wilderness for forty years.

Here they're in a place called the Wilderness of Paran, part of what is better known as the Negev Desert, south of the Dead Sea. But about a year or so earlier, the Israelites had been in a different place, a different wilderness, the Wilderness of Sinai. The people of Israel, led by the prophet Moses and his brother Aaron, had been delivered out of slavery in Egypt. You may know some of those stories: the ten plagues, the Red Sea crossing. Powerful stuff there. After that they came to a mountain called Sinai. Moses goes up the mountain to converse with the Lord, and he's up there a while. The people get a bit antsy. Never mind all they had seen with the plagues and the Red Sea. They wanted a god they could see. So they get all their gold together and make a golden calf, declaring "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt." You may have heard of that story.

That was bad. But a common misconception is that it was the golden calf that led to Israel's wandering in the desert for forty years, and in turn, one of the points of inspiration behind a season like Lent: forty days of Lent, tracing back to forty years in the wilderness. But the golden calf was never the reason for it. This was. The plan initially was never for Israel to wander around in the desert. They were at Sinai for a good minute. They were given the ten commandments, the covenant, the law. They constructed the tabernacle. But once all that was done, they left, and they headed for the Promised Land, for Canaan. It was a hike, of course, 120 miles give or take, and with a bunch of people and stuff, you don't move quickly, but it doesn't take no forty years to do it. They made it in a few months.

And there on the edge of the Promised Land, in this Wilderness of Paran, they sent spies into Canaan. The spies scope out the scene for forty days (there's forty again), and then they come back and give their report. Part of their report is glowing. "Land of milk and honey" they said. They even brought back some of the produce the land was producing. "Look at this fruit!" But that's not all they said. They said it was a land "that devours its inhabitants," an inference maybe that the people were cannibals, and that they were giants. The people hear this report, and they're terrified. They cry all night, it says. And then they go to Moses and Aaron, saying, "Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness!" Even going further and saying, "Let us choose a captain, and go back to Egypt." Two of the spies, Caleb and Joshua, try to soothe their fear, encouraging them to keep the faith, that God would deliver them into this land. But for even suggesting that, they threaten to kill them.

This is not good. We have a people who had been miraculously delivered, by no strength of their own, out of the grasp of the most powerful empire the world had known to date. They had been guided through the wilderness and now brought to cusp of the promised place that God had intended for them. And now despite everything, they want to turn back. They want to die in the wilderness, rather than step forward in faith to the place God had in store for them.

That is the lead up to the passage we read, and it's important to know it, because upon reading just this part, it comes out of the gates sounding like God's saying, "I condemn you to death in the wilderness. Your dead bodies shall fall in the desert," and of course that is kind of what God's saying, but really it's the people doing what they wanted to do, what they said they would rather do: "Would that we had died in this wilderness," rather than go into the Promised Land and face these ferocious cannibals and giants the spies had told them about, and God says, "Okay. You get what you wanted. Go." Another way of hearing that might be, "You aren't ready, and you will wander, until another generation grows up that doesn't feel the tug back into bondage, but rather yearns for the promises of God, because all they would know is the wilderness." That's where the forty years come from: forty years for the forty days the spies had spent in Canaan, only to come back and sow fear and anxiety among the people.

If you were with us last week with Steve Cuss was with us, especially at the keynotes last Sunday and Monday evenings, you may remember that one aspect of anxiety, of chronic anxiety that we can often feel trapped in, is that it can be contagious. It can spread within a group, within a family, and not even be limited just to right now, but of one generation influencing another with it. And not always at the fault of the person feeling it, either. He spelled out the inevitability of anxiety, or anxieties rather, within a person's life. And you might remember this part—I sure heard this part—those of us who think ourselves the strong and stable ones, who think we don't have anxieties within our lives—well, what likely is happening is other folks are absorbing it for us.

Makes it all the more important to notice it, to name it, and to take steps to diffuse it, and for more along those lines I would refer you to last week's message and the keynotes from Rev. Cuss, but insofar as it connects here, could there be a clearer example of how fear, how anxiety spreads within a group, impacting not just those there and then, but entire generations of a people in the wilderness.

As if we needed anything further, just look at what's going on now in this same place, in a lot of ways the same conflict of peoples, and see the fruit, the generational fruit of what happens when fear leads one people to distort and dehumanize the other, cannibals and giants as it were, and inflict cruelty and vengeance upon another, and then the cycle of retribution and escalation it breeds.

This is a tough section of the Bible, because it's not like things are all roses from here on out. This is a hard word from the Lord, giving the Israelites up, not to an enemy but rather precisely to what they wanted for themselves. It meant a hard life for the generation to come, until they as a people were ready. But something I love especially about the Old Testament is the fruit, the generational fruit of faithfulness as well. You see it in a way that you don't see quite as often in the New Testament just because the timeline is more condensed in the New. What would be the fruit of Moses' faithfulness in interceding before God on Israel's behalf? What would be the fruit of Caleb and Joshua's pleading with Israel not to lose faith? What would be the fruit of the stories of God's deliverance of this people as they are taught by one generation to the next? Alongside the fear, alongside the anxieties, we see faith too.

I (will be) was blessed both pastorally and personally to have seen it just a few minutes ago. It's a powerful thing—to my view as both pastor and dad, the most meaningful part of a baptism—to see an entire church stand, promising to help a parent endeavor to instill faith in his child's life, saying, "Yeah, it's daunting, it's overwhelming. There are cannibals and giants out there. But we promise to be by your side along the way."

It was almost a year ago that our church hosted a trip to the Holy Land, and on that trip I roomed with Walt Barron. Many of you know Walt already, but he is the son of Bill and Eleanor Barron, Bill of course formerly

being pastor of our church for 27 years. So of course, on the trip Walt and I got to know each other well, and I remember one conversation we had on the first night of the trip, incidentally in a city very close to where all of this went down. I asked him what it was like for him growing up at the church, being a pastor's kid and all. Not sure if y'all were aware, but that's a loaded thing, being a pastor's kid. It can mean a lot of attention, even unwanted attention. Whether you're in Sunday School or a children's choir or just playing on the playground, it can feel like you have a spotlight on you. Folks respond to that in different ways. For many, it's a positive thing, an inseparable part of identity in faith and life in the church. But unfortunately there's also a long line of sad stories about pastor's kids and the resentment one can feel toward a parent who was/is a pastor, toward a church, even toward God.

As a result it's a complicated topic even bringing up pastor's kids, like in sermons. You talk to ten pastors, they'll give you eleven opinions about whether and how to talk about your family from the pulpit. On one hand, it's sharing from your life; it's a point of connection, authenticity, even vulnerability. So some preachers do. On the other, especially as one's kids get older, even if the stories are cute and funny and innocuous, it can make that child feel like everything they do or say is potentially something Mom or Dad will talk about in front of the church. And that can mess with you. Questions of privacy and confidence. So some pastors don't do it at all. (Obviously I've done so and expect I'll continue to do so, but you may hear less and less about Jack and Harry as they get older. Not to worry, you've got a few years of Lilly stories left.)

But it means that when I get to know someone like Walt, who grew up, son of a preacher man, I am keenly interested as a father as to his impressions. And I remember that conversation almost a year ago, there in this city on the edge of the wilderness, and how he shared his gratitude for the love and idyllic setting of growing up in faith as part of this church. He felt the spotlight sometimes—how could you not?—but he was overwhelmingly grateful for the gift of love and the gift of faith imparted to him as he was surrounded by this church.

Talk about a generational impact. Talk about a generational commitment. Because we all need it. Parent. Child. Teacher. Youth leader. Service partner. We all need that community that says, though it may look like cannibals and giants out there, we will be with you. Even if it feels like you're in the wilderness, we will be with you. We need it because it is remarkably hard to get unlost by yourself.

The Israelites tried it. Did you catch that part of the story right at the end? After they're told they would wander in the wilderness for forty years, a lot of them thought, "Uh, on second thought, we'll go on in after all. We'll do it on our own." So they actually attempt to go into the Promised Land, but it doesn't go well. Why? Because they were trying to get unlost on their own.

I visited with Walt a few weeks ago when he was in town. So of course we caught up about our families. Then at one point he asked, hey so what's new going on at the church? And I shared about this building project that we've been developing (and we'll be talking much more about that later this Spring). And he said, "Oh wow, yeah, well it needs it. But I guess it'll get rid of all my old hiding places in the church." And I've thought, what a beautiful picture. Hiding in the church, getting lost in the church, even. Not that it's a practice we're promoting. Parents, don't hear me wrong. Safe supervision and leadership of our children and youth. But say another preacher's kid, or just another kid, one day finds himself or herself hiding or lost, what comfort, what impact may it be to know deep down that even as they may feel like they're in the wilderness for a time, they're surrounded by a church that loves them.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.