

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Wilderness Stories: Not Our Finest Hour”

Dr. Jay Howell

Numbers 20:1-13

March 17, 2024

We’re in our second to last week in this Lenten series “Wilderness Stories,” a look at some episodes in the Book of Numbers. We’ll wrap up next week on Palm Sunday as we also commemorate Christ’s entry into Jerusalem and find some powerful connections between Israel’s journey in the wilderness and Christ’s final week.

Today we come to what appears to be a pivot point for Israel. Something that’s a bit unclear as the people of Israel wandered in the wilderness is just where they were and how much time they spent at each place. There’s breakdown a bit later in the book, chapter 33, with a place-by-place summary, but it doesn’t say, they spent x years at this place, then at that place, etc.

So when it comes to where this next story falls on the timeline, opinions differ. The marker that gives some indication notes that Moses’ brother Aaron dies forty years after their departure from Egypt. His death is later in this chapter—so Aaron’s still with us in this story—and his death appears to be a part of the same sequence of events that starts here, with Israel breaking camp from a place called Kadesh, finally heading toward the Promised Land again. But granted, it simply doesn’t specify where those forty years of wandering were spent or where during that forty-year span some of the stories we’ve read fall.

A plausible reading, however, places the stories of Korah’s rebellion and Aaron’s budding staff, what we looked at the past two weeks, as having taken place on the front end of that forty-year stretch, with this story taking place near the end of it. As such, what we find here is a weary Moses, tired of tending to this grumbling people, and now contending with something that made everything that much more unbearable: grief. Let’s go to God’s Word together. Numbers 20:1-13:

The Israelites, the whole congregation, came into the wilderness of Zin in the first month, and the people stayed in Kadesh. Miriam died there and was buried there.

Now there was no water for the congregation, so they gathered together against Moses and against Aaron. The people quarreled with Moses and said, “Would that we had died when our kindred died before the Lord! Why have you brought the assembly of the Lord into this wilderness for us and our livestock to die here? Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to bring us to this wretched place? It is no place for grain

or figs or vines or pomegranates, and there is no water to drink.” Then Moses and Aaron went away from the assembly to the entrance of the tent of meeting; they fell on their faces, and the glory of the Lord appeared to them. The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, “Take the staff, and assemble the congregation, you and your brother Aaron, and command the rock before their eyes to yield its water. Thus you shall bring water out of the rock for them; thus you shall provide drink for the congregation and their livestock.”

So Moses took the staff from before the Lord, as he had commanded him. Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock, and he said to them, “Listen, you rebels; shall we bring water for you out of this rock?” Then Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock twice with his staff; water came out abundantly, and the congregation and their livestock drank. But the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, “Because you did not trust in me, to show my holiness before the eyes of the Israelites, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them.” These are the waters of Meribah, where the Israelites quarreled with the Lord and through which he showed himself to be holy.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, we pray for your Spirit’s patience with us, to guide us in hearing your Word and in applying your Word within our lives, for truly too often we get in the way. Fill us by your grace, that we might live in the image of your Son, who though having every reason to be frustrated and impatient with us, intercedes for us and gives himself for us. And for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

I messed up, brother. I got angry, and I did something I shouldn’t have. And it seems as a result I’m going to miss out on something that I have waited for for a long time. I mean I know you only get one shot at some things, but I thought I had at least deserved a little bit more patience, a little bit more understanding, a little bit more grace.

I mean you saw the whole thing, brother. I’m not telling you anything you don’t know. I’m just venting right now, and honestly there aren’t many people I can talk to.

It was the thing with the water, the water and the rock. Why, with the water and the rocks? You remember the last time this happened? Not so much? Well, I do. Almost forty years ago. Before the mountain, before the calf, before the covenant, before the spies, before Korah, before your staff, before these forty years, wasted years, just sitting out here in the desert.

Before all of that, the people were complaining. Yeah, I know, imagine that. People complaining about something. “Why did you bring us out here to die? We should’ve just stayed in Egypt.” I mean, I get it. We didn’t have water. Who’s going to be in their best mood when you don’t have water? But what exactly do you expect? Look around for goodness’ sake.

But at that point almost forty years ago, the Lord told me to go to the rock and to strike the rock and that from the rock water would flow out for the people to drink. And that's exactly what I did. It worked. And the people were satisfied, at least they were that day.

That was forty years ago, almost, and it got old then. Then it happens again, and I don't know, I just lost it. You saw it. History repeating itself, it seems.

The water had run dry, and so again the people were complaining, and again they're saying, "Why have you brought us out here to die?" That whole song and dance again. I mean, I get it. No one is at their finest when they're dehydrated, but you would've thought they could've come up with at least some original material at some point over forty years. "Why'd you bring us here? We're hungry! We're thirsty! I wish we had died forty years ago!" Yeah, that makes two of us.

Oh, okay, yeah, I sold them short. They did come up with some new material. Could you believe it? They said, "This is no place for grain, or figs, or vines, or pomegranates." I mean of all the asinine things to say, "We don't have pomegranates." I'm sorry we didn't stop long enough at the sand store for you to get your pomegranates, but don't worry, I think I see a Smoothie King at the next exit.

And did I mention, I didn't bring you here! You blame me for being here? I didn't want to be here. I wanted to go in! I wanted to go into where the Lord had intended, but *you* said you didn't want to. *You* said you wanted to turn back around and go back out in the desert to die. So here we are. No closer to where we're supposed to be than we were almost forty years ago, and you have the gall to complain to me about pomegranates.

I didn't want this, brother. Sometimes I wonder what would've happened if I hadn't been found by Pharaoh's daughter, "mom" I guess. I don't know, I just don't know if I can call her mom. I mean, she saved me and all, drew me up out of the water, out of the river. But it was her dad after all who was the reason mom, our mom, real mom, put me in the river out of desperation anyway, ordering all male babies killed. Yeah I still don't know how you didn't end up in a basket.

Then again, she might not have kept me if it weren't for Miriam. Our sister, my big sister, watched over me, a baby in a basket, floating in the reeds on the banks of the Nile. And when she saw Pharaoh's daughter find me, she heard her say, "Oh this must be one of the Hebrew's babies." She knew what I was. Who knows what she would've done? Throw me back? But then Miriam, just a slave girl—heh, this is totally her—goes up to the daughter of the king, doesn't even ask if she wanted to keep me, just assumes that she would, and asks if she should get a nurse from among the Hebrew women, and then turns around and gets mom to nurse me and raise me anyway until I was old enough to go back to Pharaoh's house. Miriam saved me.

I'd be lying if I said that losing her hasn't affected me lately. I mean, I'm not walking around draped in sackcloth and ash or anything, but I haven't been entirely myself either since Miriam died. I've been more short-tempered. Less inclined to be with the Lord. But that doesn't excuse what I did.

It's just the constant bickering, the lack of appreciation, the lack of taking some responsibility for the situation we're in. I mean, why did they want to turn back? Did they not see the Lord's glory cover the mountain? Did they not see the plagues that decimated Egypt? Did not see the waters part so that we could walk across and escape? Don't they remember any of that?

I mean, I wrote a song, for goodness' sake, to help us remember. After the water fell back over Pharaoh and his horses and chariots, there we were on the banks, realizing we're out, we're free. We were all kind of spellbound, but I thought, we have to remember this. People who aren't even here need to remember this. So I came up with that song that we all sang together. Don't they remember that?

Hey, you remember what Miriam did that day? I had just gone to all this trouble writing a song and teaching it to everyone and all of us singing it together. Then after we were done, she gets up and does a song of her own. Just like her not to let me have the last word. Just a little two-line ditty, with her dancing around with her tambourine, and darn it if folks don't remember her song more than mine.

I know that wasn't the perfect relationship. I mean, I still kind of flinch whenever I think of that relationship the two of you didn't approve of and when you let me know about it. We had our differences. It's just strange to think that she's gone. She was there at the beginning, and now she's not anymore.

It's been a cloud hanging over me, brother. I know you've felt it too. Not the good kind of cloud, not the cloud the Lord leads us with. No, it's just, everything's fuzzy, hazy. And just all that on top of forty years of this mess...

So when the Lord tells me to give the people water, he tells me to speak to the rock. Not strike the rock like he told me last time, but speak to it. And I mean, I heard what he said, I knew what he wanted me to do. To be honest, I was already on such a short fuse I think I was only half-listening and only half-caring.

So yelled at everyone, "Listen, you rebels, shall we bring water for you out of this rock?" I could've thought of worse things to call them. And then I took the staff and struck the rock twice. I knew what I was doing. Seemed a good idea at the time, and it given that it worked last time, seemed like as good a moment as any to whack something.

And then God told us and because of what I did, because I didn't follow what the Lord had told me to do, because I presumed to provide for the people on my terms and not on his terms, I will not be the one to bring the people into the Promised Land after all. He said it was "to show [his] holiness before the eyes of the Israelites."

I mean, I get it. You can't have the people being led by someone who's going to be prone to think himself God or act on his own yet still claiming God's leadership. I mean, with all the mess we went through with Korah and that rebellion and who gets to go in to be with God, I get it. The people cannot be led into this new place, this new identity, by someone who's going to play fast and loose with what God actually wants for the people and says to the people. He has to show his holiness.

I just wish there could've been a bit more patience. I wish the people had been more patient, not complaining so much all the time. I wish God could have been more patient with me. I mean, haven't I earned at least that much? Not to be judged by my worst moment. I mean who among us is at our finest hour these days?

But really, I wish I could've been more patient. I miss our sister. I think she'd know the right way to sing a song, set me straight.

You know, something that's been puzzling me, something I can't shake loose of. That day at the rock, when I didn't do what I supposed to do, when I struck the rock, rather than speak to it. The water still came out. I mean, easiest way, it seems, for God to show I wasn't doing right, would just be not to send the water until I had done it the way he told me to do it. But the water still came out. The people still were provided for. No matter how imperfect and broken a vessel I was to bring it to them, the Lord still provided, even in spite of me.

Maybe that's what he meant by showing them his holiness. Not just the justice, the accountability with me, but also the mercy, the water coming despite my mistakes. We talk so much, I've been given so much to put down in writing about holiness, about boundaries, about law, about clean and unclean, about following the right process. But maybe the Lord's holiness isn't just about rules and following them. Maybe it's both, a bit of justice *and* mercy.

I just wish I could've shown them that better, brother. Not just with the rock, but this whole time. But obviously it doesn't stop with me. Obviously, someone else is going to come along to bring the people in to this new land.

I just hope that at some point, someone can stand in a place like I've stood, between the people and the Lord, and show the people in a way that I couldn't. Someone they can look upon and see the holiness of the Lord, his mercy, and his justice, all perfectly, all at the same time. Someone who when they see him, they see the face of God.

I pray God sends someone like that one day, and that the people will look upon him and believe, that they would be healed and know peace, and that they would be brought out of whatever wilderness they're still in.

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