

“Wilderness Stories: Pressure Cooker”

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Numbers 16:1-19

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We continue today in our Lenten series “Wilderness Stories,” exploring some episodes out of the Book of Numbers, or the book otherwise titled in Hebrew “In the Wilderness.” Last week we looked at the incident that led to Israel wandering in the wilderness for forty years, and it’s those forty years that, in part, serve as the inspiration behind the season of Lent in the first place: forty days of Lent corresponding to forty years of wandering. As such, this season is a part of the church in which we particularly consider how prone we are to turn from the Lord, to wander from his way, and in turn how very greatly in need we are of his guidance to draw us back to him.

And on the off chance last week you left thinking, well I bet Israel shaped up after that hard verdict, guess again. What we see this week is the fallout from it: an entire people thrust into a highly anxious time, and it doesn’t take long before the barbs start coming out. Let’s go to God’s Word together, Numbers 16:1-19:

Now Korah son of Izhar son of Kohath son of Levi, along with Dathan and Abiram sons of Eliab, and On son of Peleth son of Reuben, took two hundred fifty Israelite men, leaders of the congregation, chosen from the assembly, well-known men, and they confronted Moses. They assembled against Moses and against Aaron and said to them, “You have gone too far! All the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the Lord is among them. So why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the Lord?” When Moses heard it, he fell on his face. Then he spoke to Korah and all his congregation, saying, “In the morning the Lord will make known who is his and who is holy and who will be allowed to approach him; the one whom he will choose he will allow to approach him. Do this: take censers, Korah and all your congregation, and tomorrow put fire in them, and lay incense on them before the Lord, and the man whom the Lord chooses shall be the holy one. You Levites have gone too far!” Then Moses said to Korah, “Hear now, you Levites! Is it too little for you that the God of Israel has separated you from the congregation of Israel to allow you to approach him in order to perform the duties of the Lord’s tabernacle and to stand before the congregation and serve them? He has allowed you to approach him, and all your brother Levites with you, yet you seek the priesthood as well! Therefore you and all your congregation have gathered together against the Lord. What is Aaron that you rail against him?”

Moses sent for Dathan and Abiram sons of Eliab, but they said, “We will not come! Is it too little that you have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey to kill us in the wilderness, that you must also lord it over us? It is clear you have not brought us into a land flowing with milk and honey or given us an inheritance of fields and vineyards. Would you put out the eyes of these men? We will not come!”

Moses was very angry and said to the Lord, “Pay no attention to their offering. I have not taken one donkey from them, and I have not harmed any one of them.” And Moses said to Korah, “As for you and all your congregation, be present tomorrow before the Lord, you and they and Aaron, and let each one of you take his censer and put incense on it and each one of you present his censer before the Lord, two hundred fifty censers, you also, and Aaron, each his censer.” So each man took his censer, and they put fire in the censers and laid incense on them, and they stood at the entrance of the tent of meeting with Moses and Aaron. Then Korah assembled the whole congregation against them at the entrance of the tent of meeting. And the glory of the Lord appeared to the whole congregation.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Merciful God, we praise you for your patience, for despite our enduring capacity to turn from you, you are steadfast in calling us to turn back. Be with us we pray, especially when our own jealousies and anxieties hold us from a life spent in the life-giving communion of your Spirit. We pray for your Spirit’s guidance through your Word, and for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

I suspect that for some of us, this story of Korah and his rebellion against Moses and Aaron may not be so familiar. It’s not a story from the Bible that’s told all that often. And just from the first listen to it—or just from this listen to it if you have heard it before—he probably doesn’t come off all that well. Challenging Moses out of contempt for the role Moses plays compared to his own, he doesn’t exactly have traits we would immediately admire.

But I have to be honest. I kind of sympathize with Korah. I don’t think his grievances are totally unreasonable. He and a few others gathering unto themselves leaders from among Israel, 250 of them. They confront Moses and Aaron, saying “You have gone too far!”

Saying that alone feels understandable. A question: did anybody after hearing last week’s story feel that the punishment didn’t exactly fit the offense. Spies come back from the Promised Land with discouraging reports of the ferocity of the inhabitants they were supposed to drive out, and the people despair. Halfway understandable. They weren’t faithful, despite all they had seen from the Lord, but it’s understandable. And for that response, they were sent away to wander in the wilderness until all of that generation, everyone over the age of twenty, died in the desert—forty years. Did anyone feel like that was a bit harsh?

Korah must have been feeling that. Because just those words, “You have gone too far!” though they were directed at Moses and Aaron, might as well have been directed at God too. Korah’s angry. He’s afraid. He’s anxious. Who wouldn’t be? He and the rest of them have just been told that the rest of their lives would be spent wandering in the desert, and that’s it. That’s their life.

But that wasn’t all of what Korah and his company were mad about. They said to Moses and Aaron, “You have gone too far! All the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the Lord is among them. So why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the Lord?”

So what’s going on there? What’s all this “everyone is holy” talk? Why is this what he’s coming after Moses and Aaron for?

What Korah takes issue with is that Moses and Aaron have this privileged place as priests in terms of access and proximity to the Lord. Moses is the one who gets to go up on the mountain with the Lord. Moses is the one with whom the Lord speaks directly. Moses is the one who gets to deliver the words to the Israelites. It’s like golden-child Marsha and the Brady Bunch. Moses, Moses, Moses.

So Korah raises the grievance: Who are you to put yourself in such a place? To that Moses has got to be thinking, “Hey, it ain’t no picnic.” But Moses responds to Korah, “In the morning the Lord will make known who is his, and who is holy, and who will be allowed to approach him,” and describes a sign using a bunch of censers (or ceremonial carriers for incense). That’s what a lot of the rest of the passage is about.

But Moses gets a bit defensive, I think, too. He fires back, “You Levites have gone too far!” [*I’ve gone too far? You’ve gone too far!*] And then he accuses them of being malcontents, with the special task God had given them apparently not being enough: “He has allowed you to approach him, and all your brother Levites with you; yet you seek the priesthood as well!”

Now it’s getting to the meat of it. Korah is a Levite, the tribe entrusted with a degree of sacred, ceremonial duties, but Korah is not a priest.

Here’s the distinction. All priests were Levites, but not all Levites were priests. Levites were tasked with the assembly, disassembly, maintenance, and relocation of the tabernacle, the tent that was the dwelling place of the Lord in their midst. This tent would move with the Israelites as they went from place to place. The priests, however, were the ones who would actually go inside the tent, leading various offerings and ceremonies.

See, when you think the tabernacle, think part tent, part nuclear reactor. The glory of the Lord was present, in their midst, in the tabernacle, but it was not safe. Contact between holy and unholy, clean and unclean, did not turn out well. It’s not safe. From that stems a lot of Jewish law:

maintaining boundaries between holy and unholy. And priests were the ones, the nuclear technicians, entrusted to go in on behalf of the congregation, and then to go out representing the Lord to the congregation.

So from Korah's point of view, every time Israel moves around, which they'll do a whole lot for the next forty years, he and his fellow Levites are the ones who are taking the tabernacle, loading it up, lugging it down the road, setting it back up, putting everything out where it should be, handling everything, but once it's all up and assembled, for some reason it's just Moses and Aaron who are allowed to go inside? What makes them so special? "All the congregation is holy."

And that resonates with me. If you're at all familiar with some of tenets of the Protestant Reformation, a big one is the so-called "priesthood of all believers." We believe by the grace of God and by the work of Christ, we do not need an intermediary, a priest, some kind of clergy, to mediate our access or communication with God. There aren't varying degrees of holiness among the saints just by virtue of some kind of office. I know, I know that many of you may be dismayed to know that I don't just put my halo down before coming out here. The point is, there are different responsibilities, even different accountability for various offices in the church, but not higher or lower degrees of holiness.

So when Korah confronts Moses and Aaron saying, "You've gone too far!" I kind of sympathize with him. What gives them the nerve?

Years ago, Frances and I took a trip before Jack was born—call it a babymoon, I guess. It was with some of my family, and we're fortunate on both sides of our family to be able to do things like trips or longer stays without things getting too testy. You know what I mean. So the group of us years ago went to Paris. And of course beautiful city and the culture, all of that.

But my sister and brother-in-law had invited a friend of theirs to come join our trip. We'll just call him Johnny. And Johnny was insufferable. He was a friend of theirs from college, but he lived in Europe then, and he made sure we knew that. At every turn in the trip, every place we ate, every tour we took, every site we saw, Johnny had some kind of comment as to how much better it was to appreciate it now that he was so cultured, or why this or that was better if you could only understand it from a continental point of view, or why we should do this and not do that because anyone who knew what the real things to see would know. And I'm like, dude you're from Alabama. We're all hicks here.

The whole time with Johnny, I'm thinking, "Who made you the tour guide, O enlightened one? We're going to all the same places. We're seeing all the same things." And I would get real worked up about it.

It's a reasonable response, I thought. Just like I think it could be a halfway reasonable response for Korah to be frustrated.

Except, it wasn't some point of theological conviction, of a "priesthood of all believers," that was driving Korah to confront Moses and Aaron. It was jealousy. It was anger. It was anxiety.

We've been talking a good bit the past couple of weeks about how destructive anxiety, fear, anger can all be when left unnoticed, unnamed. It can impact an individual, certainly. But the way it can fester within a group is especially powerful. It can happen in families, in workplaces, in schools, definitely in churches too. When it feels like everything has been placed in a pressure cooker and it's all just stewing. It can make even the slightest thing feel like an attack upon one's identity and worth.

Has that ever happened with you? When the smallest exchange brings about a disproportionately emotional response? You may not have called up a rebellion, but maybe you lashed out more harshly than you realized, or maybe you turn inward, thoughts racing, feelings stewing, bottling it up, and it consumes you for days, until at the end of it you stop to realize maybe there was something else going on.

Now what's going on with Korah isn't a slight thing. He may have some understandable reasons to be frustrated, but the root of it wasn't some spiritual conviction. It was because he was envious of the status Moses and Aaron had, and it was because he was afraid of what his own life would mean in comparison to it.

How different would it have looked if instead of attacking Moses, he had first asked, "Why am I getting so frustrated about Moses and Aaron and their role within the congregation?" Maybe because I, along with everybody else, have been thrust into a harsh new reality of wandering in the wilderness. Or maybe because I'm not finding contentment in the task the Lord has set before me. How different would it have looked with Johnny in Paris if instead of getting worked up about his presumption, I instead focused on how my interactions with him might reflect the calling on my own life?

It's a beautiful thing about the calling of the church of Christ: that over and over Scripture speaks to great differences in gifts but equality of their worth, and all of them united in this singular mission of bearing witness to the good news that Christ is risen and of sharing in the work of the church in the world. And the more focused one is on how faithfully we serve in that mission, the less important all those differences ultimately seem.

This applies not just in the church but in the daily life of every Christian. The more focused we are on the grace which God bless us every day, the more mindful we are of how our lives reflect that grace in our relationships at home, in the workplace, in school, and yes in church, the

less significant a perceived difference can seem. It's harder to get worked up over the color of the carpet when the focus is on Christ's mission. When we see the purpose of our relationships, be they with our spouses, our children, our co-workers, our friends, not for the sake of our own fulfilment, but rather ways in which we might reflect how God has shown grace to us, how much less important do perceived slights and anxieties. Doesn't meant they're not real or valid, but when Christ is our focus, things we used to think were huge deals don't loom quite so large.

Do they loom large for you? Jealousy, anger, anxiety are what happen when we are consumed with whether we're getting the right recognition, the right access, whether we're in control, whether people think positively about us. It can keep us in the wilderness. But grace, peace, wholeness come when we instead seek after God's will rather than our own.

So come out of the wilderness, friends. Fix your eyes upon who God has called you to be.

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