

A Words About Today's Word: *Numbers*

Genesis is an origin story. *Exodus* is a story of liberation. *Leviticus* introduces the law. *Numbers* is the story of Israel's adolescence.

Numbers begins thirteen months removed from the Exodus event. The Israelites have escaped Pharaoh. They've camped at Sinai for more than a year. They've received the law. The Tabernacle has been completed. God's presence dwells as cloud by day and fire by night.

Here's where the "numbers" part comes in. The first ten chapters are a census of every eligible Israelite over twenty years of age (fighting age), followed by a listing of the Priestly order, and details of their encampment. Hey world, "this is us!" the writers proclaim. With everyone accounted for, the people begin the long journey from Sinai in the southwest to Canaan in the northeast. Little does the reader know that this journey will last for forty years!

One might assume that the journey lasts forty years for a very simple reason: if it takes the Priestly writers ten chapters and several thousand words just to herd all of these cats and point them in one direction, it must take 100 chapters to march a single mile! Fear not, the Priestly writers become less wordy after chapter 10. But remember what we talked about last week in *Leviticus*: the Priestly writers are fascinated with an ordered world. Something in their thinking, strange as it is to our modern sensibilities, and at times even offensive, something in their thinking, equated the divine with order. It's also important to remember that after the exile in Babylon, everyone comes back to Israel. There's a vacuum of power. And the Priestly order uses genealogies, connections to ancient rituals and stories, and other

techniques to cement its authority and validate its status as God's chosen.

I mention all of this, because in the second two thirds of *Numbers*, a significant amount of painful, zeal-filled orthodoxy justifies the marginalization, even extinction, of non-Israelites. In too many instances, the chosen are blessed, and the non-elect are discarded. As modern readers, we balance the tension of setting the author's context and intentions against our present moral, ethical, political, and theological standards. I want to emphasize that understanding and engaging the Priestly writers is not the same thing as endorsing, implementing, or replicating their ways of living.

Here's the synopsis of the rest of book. The Exodus generation refuses to trust YHWH's ability to deliver them into Canaan – all but two of their spies believe the lands are occupied by giants too big and too mighty to overcome. God determines that this grumbling and rebellious generation will not leave the wilderness. Only the faithful of the next generation will experience a land of milk and honey. Thus, forty years of rebellion and realignment; wounding, and healing, and forgiving one another, and repeating the cycle; change and growth occur. Along the way, we find a priestly benediction, talking donkeys, the protests of Miriam and Aaron, wooden staffs whose banging of rocks procure water, golden serpent heads with magical powers, and parents concerned about the influence of foreign women on their sons. The leadership of Moses will give way to Joshua. And when it's all said and done, the people of Israel will stand poised to cross the River Jordan and secure a future full of possibilities.

On Friday, I previewed a small portion of this synopsis to Tillie. She said, "Don't forget to mention that these ancient writers are sometimes

immature in matters of faith expression.” Perhaps *Numbers*, more than any of the works we’ll encounter in the study of our canon, is a commentary on spiritual maturity. We, the children of God, are always engaging in a quest to grasp the full meaning of a vast and expansive mystery. Think about it. Immature writers seek to explain the when, what, why, where, and how of God’s investment in humanity. Theirs, similar to ours, is a response that can be beautiful, imaginative, and inclusive. At other times, it can be clumsy and chaotic, even painful, spiteful, and shortsighted. The human existence is a state of adolescence. But we are held in the loving presence of a mature and parenting God. In every generation, we seek to tell the story of that God in our own lives with the hopes that our iteration might move us one step closer to maturity.

Homily: Another Voice Cries Out

This morning’s lesson makes me think of my late father-in-law, Jeff Allen. He was a remarkable man. I miss SO many things about him, especially the ease and gentle presence he offered to his friends and family. He was also an engineer. I miss hearing about the things he used to tinker with, not to mention the grace he afforded me for my lack of knowledge about tools, especially identifying Allen wrenches! But the best thing he ever did for me, call it luck, call it advice, call it good genes, was to show me how to be the daddy of three strong daughters just like him. Nothing beats membership in such a club.

I don’t know if Jeff ever read about the five Daughters of Zelophehad, but I like to imagine what he might say to me if I told him about the text I was preparing. “He had how many daughters? Five? Five? Buddy, grab a seat, get a cold one, rest for a while, you are gonna need it! Call me before you take your next road trip – I can give you some advice on

logistics! And man am I jealous! Five sets of little baby toes, and wow, those girls are gonna change the world, just you watch!”

Do you want to hear the rest of the story?

Sure.

So...old Zelophehad dies, and since he has no male heirs, the law says his land will pass to the most distant kin.

Heaven help the estate executor who tries to tell his daughters that!

That’s just the thing. The five daughters, Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirza are quite assertive and quite litigious. Their father was a good man, and they are furious that his lands would leave the family, and that his name would be lost, not to mention the law’s lack of recognition for their own rights.

Let me get my popcorn, because those ladies aren’t gonna give an inch. I know the power of determined daughters.

Exactly, there’s no surprising you, Jeff. The daughters go before Moses, the high priest, all the elders, and all the leaders of Israel and say as much. They are poised. They are brave. They are assertive. They are eloquent. Most importantly they are just and righteous.

Moses brings their claim before the LORD, who is also just and righteous, and agrees with the sisters. They will inherit their family lands. God also instructs Moses to make provisions for landowners without children – their lands may pass to nephews, nieces, cousins, and other kin.

For many people, today's text may seem like a footnote, some obscure detail in an ancient text. It's not.

There are three important takeaways.

First, women are equitable partners in God's story. The ancient writers and redactors have worked hard to paint a contradictory picture. But the paint of patriarchy still fades, and the agency, determination, and creativity of remarkable women beckons through the ages. The five sisters stand in front of an intimidating council of old men, and demand unprecedented action. They will have what's righted to them. And so will all their descendants who are fighting the same stubborn structures thousands of years later.

Second, God is reasonable, discerning, and humble. Imagine that! An entire covenant or constitution is created on the fly. In this instance, God appears open to changes and revisions that promote God's intended equity and possibilities. God intends (see Leviticus!) for people and land to be connected and for lands to be equitably distributed. God does what it needed to assure such a purpose.

Third, I think today's passage offers us a chance to evaluate our own participation in equitable systems. Do we fight for the rights of ourselves and others to be participants in a just world? Are we open to acknowledging AND rectifying those things we do, consciously or subconsciously to inhibit equity? In other words, do we participate in the give and take of a relational world?

Numbers is a book of adolescence, the wonderings and wanderings of an ancient yet still-forming people. To be sure, there are plenty of head-scratching elements in this book – perhaps they are the raging

hormones of a people growing up out loud. But one day, in the middle of the wilderness, against the pull of stubborn traditions and systems, five strong women – sisters, daughters, sojourners, proclaimers – found their voice.

Old Isaiah once wrote about a voice:

“A voice cries,” out he says. “And here’s what that voice says:”

‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.
Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.’

Maybe the prophet was looking in two directions. An eye toward the future, as well as an eye toward the past. And maybe we should, too. Would that the voice of five strong sisters be a voice that undergirds our own voices in the work of helping to make God’s future a reality today. Amen.