

COVENANT COMMUNITY

Meta-stories in the Pentateuch



LESSON SEVEN: GROWING THE FAMILY TREE

Opening prayer

God of every wilderness, guide our paths even when we lose our way. Remember your promises when we forget ours. Send angels, either visible or invisible, when we are tempted to stray from our baptismal vows. Amen.

Navigating this lesson

Numbers presents many problems for modern readers. It is a gory tale where nobody, including *YHWH*, comes off favorably. We shall attempt to apply Pastor Andrew's suggested mode of Bible study to this difficult document.

Read *Numbers*, if you can stomach it.

Focus texts: Numbers 3:40-51; Numbers 17:1-12; Numbers 27:1-11;
Romans 12:1-21

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Never place a period where God has placed a comma. - Gracie Allen

The fourth document in the Pentateuch is *Numbers*. In Jewish Bibles it is titled "*In the Wilderness.*" **Read *Numbers* at your own risk!**

Numbers is a hodge-podge of events, names, wars, penalties, offerings and laws. *YHWH* is portrayed as vengeful, petty, angry, inconsistent, insatiable and blood-thirsty (both for the blood of offerings and the blood of enemies).

This is a good time to review Pastor Andrew's proposed mode of Bible study. Bible study is done not by individuals but by the Church (in community). The risen Christ is the "eternal Word" and has been in existence for all time. Therefore, we search ancient Scriptures (like *Numbers*) for signs of the risen Christ. A vengeful blood-thirsty *YHWH* is not consistent with the Christ we have come to know in Jesus. Therefore: the vengeful blood-thirsty *YHWH* of *Numbers*

is a projection of our own all too human demons. The God of *Numbers* – violent and vengeful – is us, at our worst, writ large.

Let's plunge in and give this method a try, using *Numbers* as our laboratory.

It is impossible to summarize *Numbers*. What follows is simply a list of things *Numbers* covers.

Chapter 1: the first census of Israel (they are still lost in the wilderness);

Chapter 2: organizing all the tribes into an army encampment;

Chapter 3: separating the tribe of Levi as a tribe of priests to care for the tabernacle; the redemption of the firstborn;

Then the Lord said to Moses: Enroll all the firstborn males of the Israelites, from a month old and upward, and count their names. But you shall accept the Levites for me – I am the Lord – as substitutes for all the firstborn among the Israelites, and the livestock of the Levites as substitutes for all the firstborn among the livestock of the Israelites. { *Numbers 3:40-41* }

Chapter 4: care of the tabernacle is entrusted to clans of the Levites;

Chapter 5: lepers and others with a “discharge” are segregated from the community; determining if a woman has committed adultery by using grain offerings, curses and drinking the “water of bitterness”;

Chapter 6: the Nazarites take special vows; the priestly benediction:

The Lord bless you and keep you;
The Lord make his face to shine upon you,
and be gracious to you; The Lord lift up his
countenance upon you, and give you peace.
{*Numbers 6:24-26* }

Chapter 7: an invoice of all the offerings brought by various tribes (this is like a public announcement of what your family puts in the offering plate);

Chapter 8: the seven lamps; consecration and service of the Levites;

Chapter 9: keeping the Passover at Sinai; if cloud and fire cover the tabernacle the Israelites stay in camp, when the cloud lifts they set out again;

Chapter 10: the silver trumpets for announcing feasts, festivals and going to war; the people set out from Sinai;

Chapter 11: complain, complain, complain!

Now when the people complained in the hearing of the Lord about their misfortunes, the Lord heard it and his anger was kindled. Then the fire of the Lord burned against them, and consumed some outlying parts of the camp. But the people cried out to Moses; and Moses prayed to the Lord, and the fire abated.... The rabble among them had a strong craving; and the Israelites also wept again, and said, "If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at."

{ *Numbers 11:1-6* }

Moses heard the people weeping throughout their families, all at the entrances to their tents. Then the Lord became very angry, and Moses was displeased. So Moses said to the Lord, "Why have you treated your servant so badly? Why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? Did I conceive all this people?... Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they come weeping to me... { *Numbers 11:10-13* }

So God adds quail to the diet of coriander seeds (*manna*); but their ill manners sets *YHWH*'s teeth on edge and he sends a plague on those who had a craving;

Chapter 12: Aaron and Miriam are jealous because Moses gets all the glory;

Chapter 13: spies are sent into Canaan; they report that it is filled with milk and honey and giants;

Chapter 14: the people rebel; they say they would rather be dead; Moses intercedes on their behalf; Moses reminds *YHWH* that *YHWH* once said:

The Lord is slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression, but by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children.

{ *Numbers 14:18* }

YHWH forgives them (sort of); the invasion of Canaan is bungled;

Chapter 15: various and sundry offerings (wine, lambs, flour, oxen, oil, etc.); an Israelite who is caught picking up sticks on the Sabbath is put to death; people are instructed to put fringes on their garments;

Chapter 16: Korah, Dathan and Abiram revolt; the earth splits and they are swallowed up; the people blame Moses;

Chapter 17: Aaron's staff blossoms and produces almonds ending an internal leadership crisis;

Chapter 18: responsibilities of the priests and Levites; paying the priests;

Chapter 19: the ceremony of the red heifer; penalties for handling a corpse;

Chapter 20: Moses strikes the rock of Meribah and water gushes out; passage through Edom is denied; Aaron dies;

Chapter 21: the people get fed up with wandering about,



...the people became impatient on the way. The people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?” For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.” Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people... { *Numbers 21:4-6* }

Moses erects a bronze serpent and puts it on a pole; those who are bitten by snakes can look at the bronze serpent and live; they journey on to Moab; they defeat King Shiloh and they defeat King Og;

Chapter 22: the elders of Moab and Midian conspire to defeat the Israelites; they try to enlist Balaam; Balaam cannot make his donkey pass the two invisible angels barring the road (Balaam can't see the angels but the donkey can);

Balaam admits his donkey is smarter than he is and *YHWH* gives Balaam a message for Israel's enemies;

Chapter 23: Balaam's first and second oracles extol *YHWH*;

Chapter 24: Balaam's third and fourth oracles extol *YHWH*;

Chapter 25: Israelite men have sex with Moabite women and worship Ba'al (a Moabite god); God forgives the Israelites but orders them to kill the Midianites;

Chapter 26: a census (numbers) of the new generation of Israelites;

Chapter 27: the feminist cause of the daughters of Zelophehad;

Then the daughters of Zelophehad came forward... They stood before Moses, Eleazar the priest, the leaders, and all the congregation, at the entrance of the tent of meeting, and they said, "Our father died in the wilderness... Why should the name of our father be taken away from his clan because he had no son? Give to us a possession among our father's brothers."

Moses brought their case before the Lord. And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: "The daughters of Zelophehad are right in what they are saying; you shall indeed let them possess an inheritance... You shall also say to the Israelites, 'If a man dies, and has no son, then you shall pass his inheritance on to his daughter.'" { *Numbers 27:1-8* }

Joshua is appointed as Moses' successor;

Chapter 28: daily offerings, Sabbath offerings, monthly offerings, offerings at Passover, offerings at the Festival of Weeks;

Chapter 29: offerings at the Festival of Trumpets, offerings on the Day of Atonement, offerings at the Festival of Booths;

Chapter 30: sundry laws limiting the roles of women, especially married women;

Chapter 31: (*this is a horrible horrible passage*) the Israelites go to war with the Midianites; Moses is angry that the Israelite army failed to kill all the Midianite babies and all the Midianite women who slept with Israelite men; the Israelites divide up the booty taken from Midianite villages;

Chapter 32: the Israelites conquer and divide up the Transjordan;
Chapter 33: a list of the oases where the Israelites camped; instructions to drive out all the inhabitants of Canaan and to destroy all Canaanite idols;
Chapter 34: setting the boundaries of the promised land; appointment of tribal leaders (who will form a sort of legislature/judiciary);
Chapter 35: cities and lands for the Levites; cities of refuge for those who are being pursued by avengers;
Chapter 36: worry that if females inherit property they might marry outside their tribe and their tribe would then lose the property.

Thus endeth the book of *Numbers*! Whew! Heave a sigh of relief!
We could focus on the horrors of *YHWH* and the Israelites in the book of *Numbers*. Instead, let's look for evidence (even here) of the risen Christ.
For example: Chapter 3 is boring, but consider it anew. When Moses asks every family to bring their first born males to be enrolled by name, it is again an echo of child sacrifice. Sacrificing the first born male was the most expensive sacrifice a family could make. Imagine the relief and the joy of parents who hear that the Levites (precursors of priests) will be acceptable to *YHWH* as substitutes for the first-born sons. The Levites will make animal sacrifices on their behalf. Not only that, people can keep their flocks intact. The Levites will raise lambs and calves for ritual sacrifice. These will substitute for the firstborn livestock of the people's flocks. This is good news!

This is the beginning of an evolutionary understanding of what God demands, culminating a thousand years later when Saint Paul describes Christ as the Lamb making all blood-sacrifice unnecessary!!! (How many exclamation points should we put after that?)

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. { *Romans 12:1* }

We (the human species) still feel a primordial urge to propitiate an angry God. We have a hard time – even now – accepting the grace of the Christian Gospel. People still attribute natural disasters to God – insurance companies refuse to pay for “acts of God.” Many people blamed the AIDS epidemic on God's displeasure. And thousands of churches still preach a substitutionary theology of

atonement – that Jesus died on the Cross as a **substitute** for the punishment we deserve. Review the preceding lesson in this study for an alternative theology – as the mega-story of salvation continues even today in our times and our lives.

In *Numbers*, chapter 14 (see above), we sense the presence of the risen Christ in a familiar benediction. It is a mixed blessing to be sure, reminding the Israelites of the consequences of their actions which “[visit] the iniquity of the parents upon the children to the third and the fourth generation.” That necessary caveat is preceded by the startling image of Moses reminding *YHWH* of *YHWH*’s true nature: “The Lord is slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression.” ***You said so Yourself***, Moses tells *YHWH*.

One of my favorite stories in all of Scripture comes from Numbers. It’s a confusing tale (*Numbers 22 – 24*). The Israelites are finally on the move. The elders of Moab and Midian fear the Israelites are about to invade their territories. They offer Balaam a bribe to switch sides and sell out the Israelites. Balaam vacillates. He finally sets out to negotiate with the Midianite super-spy agency. But Balaam’s faithful donkey balks when it sees an angel blocking the road! The angel is invisible to Balaam; Balaam can’t understand why the donkey veers off into a field. Balaam beats the donkey until it turns back onto road. Next the angel stands in a narrow path between two vineyards with a wall on either side. Balaam’s feet scrape against the walls and he beats the donkey some more, but the donkey balks again. Finally the angel stands in a “narrow place, where there was no way to turn either to the right or to the left.” When Balaam lifts his switch to beat the donkey yet again – this is my favorite part! –



...the Lord opened the mouth of the donkey, and it said to Balaam, “What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?”
{ *Numbers 22:28* }

Balaam’s ass! A talking donkey! This humble creature deserves our attention. It is so easy to sell out our Covenant of Baptism. It is so easy to dishonor the promises we make to each other, to ourselves, or to

God. At times, we all need some creature to stand in the way of our waywardness.

A donkey refused to carry Balaam to his betrayal. A donkey bore Mary's pregnant body as she accompanied Joseph to Bethlehem. The foal of a donkey bore Jesus on his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. This humble creature symbolizes the invisible power of the risen Christ. Eventually Balaam's eyes are opened. Instead of betraying *YHWH's* people, Balaam extols *YHWH's* faithfulness.

Instead of getting hung up on invisible angels and talking donkeys, we can let the story remind us of all the people who depend on our faithfulness. We can discern and celebrate the presence of the risen Christ on the ancient dusty road and on the paths we travel today.

While setting out the boundaries for the 12 tribes, 48 cities were to be set aside for Levites. Of those, six were to be "cities of refuge," where a "slayer who kills a person without intent may flee." (*Numbers 35:9-35*)

In lesson six we encountered the old code of the desert tribes. It went something like this: If you knock out one of my brother's teeth, I'll get my buddies and we'll come knock out all your teeth plus the teeth of your sons and uncles!

The cities of refuge were a very early effort to establish a justice system that included witnesses, justice (eye for an eye, no more) and the possibility of redemption instead of escalating retribution. A person accused of murder could find sanctuary in one of the cities of refuge until a trial was arranged.

We're still tinkering with that system in the 21st century.

Women's groups often study "women of the Bible." Why do they ignore Mahiah, Noah, Hogueah, Milcah and Tirzah – the daughters of Zelophehad? Land was the source of wealth, power and authority for the Israelites. When a man died, his sons (sometimes the first-born son) inherited his land. Zelophehad had five daughters but no sons. By law, when Zelophehad died his land would revert to his brothers instead of his daughters.

Imagine the courage it took for five young women to stand before "Moses, Eleazar the priest, the leaders, and all the congregation" to present their case. These were proud and courageous feminists! "Moses brought their case before the Lord," (*Numbers 27:5*) and **SURPRISE!** *YHWH* ruled in favor of the women!

Surely this is the pre-existent risen Christ making an appearance in the midst of an ancient people. They didn't have the example of the incarnate Jesus to guide them. When we learn to seek out the risen Christ, even in these ancient

texts, we become like Balaam's donkey. We see things that are invisible to others. We see the risen Christ at work where others fail to recognize him at all.

Sometimes reading *Numbers* is like reading a telephone book. "The descendants of Reuben..., the descendants of Simeon..., the descendants of Gad..., the descendants of Issachar..." etc. etc. And sometimes reading *Numbers* is like reading a horror story. We want to avert our eyes. But for the people who pulled the Pentateuch together, this was their family tree, warts and all.

Numbers reflects the Israelites' struggle to create a workable nation some nine or ten centuries before Christ. It is not a template for American politics in the 21st century.

The book of *Numbers* provides a very unflattering portrait of the Israelites and their leaders and their God. They are petty, jealous, self-centered and cowardly. *YHWH* alternately thunders in wrath and then shows mercy (for some). The people rebel, complain, forget, trip over their own sandals, stand still when they should move ahead, and scatter like frightened sheep when they should be waiting for a word from the Lord. Moses loses his temper. *YHWH* loses His temper. It's the Keystone Kops starring Lucille Ball. It is a completely unsanitized history of how *YHWH* and Moses and the daughters of Zelophehad and Balaam's donkey became a holy people, a "priestly nation."

Moses gets tired of being the "go-between," constantly pleading the Israelites' "case" before a God who is ready to smite them. Sometimes Moses snaps at *YHWH*! Moses is clearly tired of his job. The Israelites are frustrated trying to figure out what *YHWH* wants. And they hate the flavor of *manna*. *YHWH* gets frustrated when the people are concerned with what's for dinner instead of smiting the Midianites.

It was **providence** that Balaam's donkey could see angels and it was **providence** that *manna* was provided (even if it tasted horrible). Zelophehad's brave daughters opened a **providential** future that women today are claiming.

Leviticus shows holiness in the abstract. *Numbers* reveals the nitty-gritty of a **holy community** that was always in danger of losing its way.

If we approach this gory tale with our eyes open for the gracious and redeeming presence of the risen Christ, we realize that God is never absent and never far away.

Not even when our own beloved congregation becomes contentious, short-sighted and unforgiving. God remains full of mercy and grace.

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SOME QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION
AND FOR REFLECTION, PONDERING, CONVERSATION

How should a path to the future be selected? Who's in charge?

Who speaks for God?

Does God guide the future?

Tell the story of Federated Church as a holy people, a witness to the community!

As girls or wives did you have to struggle for autonomy? Have your decisions and choices been respected?

Have you ever had an experience like Balaam's – when "an angel stood in the road" to prevent you from taking the wrong path?

Would the Pentateuch be more convincing if the story were sanitized and the gory details were omitted?

What are the dangers of sanitizing history (of our nation, our church, our family)?

What do you think of Pastor Andrew's suggestion that we study the Hebrew Scriptures in the presence of the risen Christ and search out the risen Christ even there?