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Numbers 9:15-23 – *Following God Together*

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[Where Israel is at in the journey]

[Describe tabernacle set up]

### Numbers 9:15-23

<sup>15</sup> On the day the tabernacle, the tent of the covenant law, was set up, the cloud covered it. From evening till morning the cloud above the tabernacle looked like fire. <sup>16</sup> That is how it continued to be; the cloud covered it, and at night it looked like fire. <sup>17</sup> Whenever the cloud lifted from above the tent, the Israelites set out; wherever the cloud settled, the Israelites encamped. <sup>18</sup> At the LORD's command the Israelites set out, and at his command they encamped. As long as the cloud stayed over the tabernacle, they remained in camp. <sup>19</sup> When the cloud remained over the tabernacle a long time, the Israelites obeyed the LORD's order and did not set out. <sup>20</sup> Sometimes the cloud was over the tabernacle only a few days; at the LORD's command they would encamp, and then at his command they would set out. <sup>21</sup> Sometimes the cloud stayed only from evening till morning, and when it lifted in the morning, they set out. Whether by day or by night, whenever the cloud lifted, they set out. <sup>22</sup> Whether the cloud stayed over the tabernacle for two days or a month or a year, the Israelites would remain in camp and not set out; but when it lifted, they would set out. <sup>23</sup> At the LORD's command they encamped, and at the LORD's command they set out. They obeyed the LORD's order, in accordance with his command through Moses.

The Word of the Lord. (**Thanks be to God**)

The official name of the Book of Numbers in Hebrew is בְּמִדְבָּר ...

“In the wilderness.”

It's the story of God's people...

In the wilderness.

What do you think life is like in the wilderness?

Do you think there are water fountains and wells for water?

Do you think there are Tim Horton's and Boston Pizzas for food?

Do you think there are Holiday Inns with comfy beds?

Can they pull up Google Maps to see where they are?

Probably not.

In the wilderness, resources are scarce.

There are wild animals and the threat of raiding tribes.

If they had maps...

They probably weren't too extensive.

Life in the wilderness was hard...

And this is just the *physical* environment.

Wonder with me about the emotional and spiritual condition of the people:

The Israelites are freed from slavery only a year ago.

For over 400 years they lived in Egypt as slaves to Pharaoh.

Here's what we know about their time in slavery:

The Hebrew people in Egypt multiply quickly...

So quickly that Pharaoh fears that they will take over...

So, the Egyptians subject them to forced labor.

When they continue to multiply...

The oppression gets worse:

Longer hours, less resources, meaner slave masters.

Then Pharaoh says kill all of the male babies born to Hebrew women.

That's a lot to absorb emotionally and spiritually...

And the Hebrews are only a year removed from this kind of life.

I'm sure the memories and the trauma from slavery didn't disappear when they left Egypt...

I'm sure they carried it with them—

In their bodies and in their stories—

Individually and collectively.

In the wilderness they probably have some pretty deep questions:

“Who are we?”

We were nothing but slaves in Egypt...

Now this god named Yahweh says we're his people.

Who are we in this new-found freedom?

“Where are we going?”

We used to have houses in Egypt...

We used to know exactly what was expected of us every day...

We didn't have to worry about where we were going...

Our life was decided for us.

How do we even begin to think about a future?

“Who is going to keep us safe?”

Life in Egypt wasn't great...

But at least we knew we were protected from outside threats.

Out in the wilderness we're exposed!

The Israelites are set free from Egypt—

And on their way to the land promised to them by God...

Where God will live with his people in a land of milk and honey—

But the wilderness stands in between.

And wilderness life isn't easy.

May I suggest that we're all living in a kind of wilderness...

We're all living in the time of in-between.

We have Tim Hortons, bottled water, and all of the comforts that the Israelites didn't have...

But we all have our hurts and issues.

We still wrestle with similar questions:

“Who am I?”

“Where am I going?”

“Am I safe?”

If we allow ourselves a little vulnerability...

We all go through times of questioning:

Who am I?

What makes me, me? What do I value? What do I stand for? What am I willing to lay down my life for? What do I believe?

Where am I going?

Where do I want to end up? What am I working toward? What is driving me to do what I do? Am I on the right path? Am I in the right job? Am I with the right person? Am I in the right city? Am I moving to the right place?

And, am I safe?

What are the threats around me? Do I have enough—money, food, education, energy? Are there people in my life that will be there for me? Will I be able to provide for my family? Will I be cared for?

The time in-between—

Our time here on earth—

Can feel like a barren wilderness.

Especially in life transitions—

Going off to college;

Kids moving out;

Getting married;

Getting a new job;

Moving;

Having a baby;

Losing someone close to us;

Spending time in the hospital;

Or making major decisions—

In times of transition, these big questions are unavoidably before us.

And at times we feel like we're lost in the wilderness...

Unsure of where we're going and what we're doing.

This is where the Israelites are at—

A major point of transition—

But God doesn't leave them alone...

Left to wander the wilderness alone.

**God guides his people by his presence.**

For the Israelites he does it in a cloud:

The cloud covers the tabernacle during the day;

And at night it looks like fire so the people can see it.

When the cloud is settled over the tabernacle...

The people stay put.

Whenever the cloud lifts up and moves...

The people follow.

Whenever the cloud settles...

The people stop and set up camp.

We know from Exodus that this cloud represents the Lord's presence.

This God who is high and mighty...

This God who came to them in a dark cloud of thunder and lightning at Mt. Sinai...

This God whose holiness the people cannot stand in the presence of...

Comes to them in a cloud that settles over the tabernacle as they camp.

God is so concerned with his people—

He is so concerned with their well-being and the direction they're going...

He knows how fragile they are—

That God guides them by a visible sign of his presence.

And it's not just one person that sees the cloud—

It's not just Moses and Aaron...

It's not just the priests who see the cloud—

It is every single one of the people.

God instructs them to set up their camp in a certain way:

“Put the tabernacle in the center of the camp...”

“And everyone else set up around the tabernacle...”

“Everyone, get in a position where you can see the place of my dwelling.”

“I want everyone to know my presence is near...”

“And I want them to know when we’re going and when we’re staying.”

These are not a group of random individuals to God...

Who just so happen to be going in the same direction. (Richard Foster)

These are a people...

Who have been called out by God...

Who now live *together* under his direction.

And God is guiding his people by his very own presence.

Hopefully you’re seeing the link for us today.

As we journey through the wilderness...

We do not journey alone.

God is still actively guiding us by his presence...

And that presence is his Spirit...

The Holy Spirit.

Each and every one of us who profess Christ as Lord and master of our lives...

Each and every one of us who depend on Christ to forgive our sins...

The Holy Spirit takes up residence in you.

The God of the universe—

The God who keeps the world spinning...

And brings up the sun day in and day out—

Sends his Spirit to live in you.

And this morning, we're going to steer this in a specific direction:

Just as the Israelites were guided out of slavery *together*;

Just as they came to worship God at Mt. Sinai *together*;

Just as they experience God's guiding presence *together*...

We too, follow God *together*.

Not as a collection of individuals...

But as a group.

The tendency is to say:

"The Spirit of God lives in *me*..."

"So, I can make decisions based on what I feel the Spirit telling me."

While it's true that God's Spirit does live in us—

And does give us guidance—

It's also true that that inner voice of the Spirit can be mixed with other voices and motivations...

Where that Spirit is drowned out...

And we're left wandering.

So, God gives us each other.

God's intention is that we would follow him together.

And he uses his Spirit that dwells in our midst—

In our communal gathering—

To lead us together while we're in the wilderness.

One of the benefits of intentionally connecting with each other is discernment...

The practice of knowing God's leading in our lives...

Not by ourselves, but together.

So, how do we go about this practice of communal discernment...

Following God together?

First, it's good to ask the question of ourselves:

Am I in view of the cloud?

For Israel, it was important that every tribe was in view of the tabernacle...

Every tribe had a line of sight to God's presence.

It would have been a little strange to see one tribe facing away from the center...

Or camped off in a different area altogether.

How would they know God's leading if they couldn't see the cloud?

So, are you in view of the cloud?

Are you, personally, connecting with God on a regular basis?

Are you daily spending time in communion with God...

Seeking out his guidance for your life?

We're not asking this for our own benefit...

We're asking because it matters to our brothers and sisters.

If someone in the body of Christ seeks you out for guidance—

Or seeks out comfort in the wilderness—

Do you know where to point them?

Where is your "wisdom" coming from?

Is it coming from the deep well of hours spent in God's presence?

Or is it coming from what you're hearing in pop-culture...

What you're seeing on TV or reading on the news?

If you're not in view of God's presence...

How are you going to help them discern God's way?

How will you help usher them into the arms of our loving God?

If we're going to follow God's will *together*...

We make sure that our sightline to his presence is clear.

Second, we practice patience.

I don't know if you caught it in the reading...

But the timing of the cloud's movement isn't always consistent or convenient:

Sometimes the cloud settles for a few days;

And sometimes it settles for a month or even a year.

I'm sure at times the people were tired of moving from place to place...

And wanted to stay camped for a while longer.

And I'm sure there were times when they were sick of being in the same place...

And they couldn't wait for God to move them along.

It's the same with our lives:

Sometimes life is great and we just want to stay camped out...

We don't want to sense God's moving us on into a different season.

And then sometimes life is hard...

And we'll take anything that happens as a sign for us to move on.

As we discern God's leading together...

We exercise patience.

We wait patiently on the Lord.

Be still before the Lord, and wait patiently for him. (Ps 37:7)

We remind each other that God's timing isn't always convenient or comfortable...

But it is always perfect.

So, we sit with others as they painfully wait to receive marching orders from God...

Helping them to pump the brakes when they want to move along before God's presence leads...

Helping them to slow down when all they want to do is move on.

Or we encourage movement when they want to remain camped...

Comfortable with life...

And perhaps unwilling to accept that God wants to do something...

And it requires them to move or take action.

And when they think that God's presence has left...

We become that presence for them...

Representing him as his Spirit dwells in us...

Reminding them that God indeed is near.

Together we wait for the Lord to make his guidance clear.

Finally, discerning God's will in the wilderness...

Requires us to listen.

It of course requires us to listen to God—

Through prayer, through his word, and through the Spirit that he puts inside of us—

But it also requires us to listen to each other.

The Lord guides the Israelites by a cloud and fire...

But there is more to it than that.

The Lord also gives his commands through Moses...

God's spokesperson to the people.

There is also a whole tribe of people—

The Levites—

Who are tasked with helping the people worship God properly.

The Israelites are asked to listen to *each other* in the wilderness.

They follow the cloud...

But they also listen to the Lord's leading through one another.

So, how are we doing at listening to each other?

Are we better at talking or listening?

Do we listen half-heartedly...

Assuming we know what the person is going to say? (Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

Do we listen half-heartedly...

Waiting for them to stop talking so we can give them advice?

Or do we stand in awe of this person—

Giving them our full attention—

Recognizing that God is doing a work in and through them...

Recognizing that God has fully put his Spirit on this Christian brother or sister...

And that God himself may be speaking to us through them.

Discerning God's will together—

Being God's presence to each other in the wilderness—

Means that we carefully listen to each other.

Our main aim as we walk through this wilderness together...

Is to faithfully follow where the Lord is leading.

The wilderness is a tough place—

And it's full of a lot pressing questions and decisions—

But the Lord doesn't leave us alone.

God guides us by his presence...

And he gives us the gift of each other.

So, by his grace—

And by the Spirit he puts into each and every one of us—

We seek him out together...

Patiently walking the long road...together...

All for God's glory.

Amen.