

Numbers 20: 1-13 “The Place of Quarrels” Rev. Janet Chapman 9/18/22

Back when the thought of sleeping in the woods under the stars used to excite me, when I was proficient at setting up a tent, building a campfire, and hiking for miles, my then husband and I went camping in Glacier National Park on the Canadian border. It was gorgeous and the occasional encounters with moose, deer and fox made it even more special. I learned that moose are not to be argued with; if they are in the middle of the road, you wait – getting out of your car and yelling at them only gets a disinterested stare at best and at worst, a test to see how fast you can get back in the car before they run you over. One of the days, we decided to take a nice, leisurely hike to see some of the scenery. About 2 hours into the hike, we realized that the clearly marked trail had been washed away midway through. As we looked around, the scenery all looked the same – tall trees and earth covered with pine needles, moss, and leaves. To top it all off, we had run out of water and even though it was Canada, it was still in the mid-summer and we were sweating! Without water, our chances were slim.

For the people of Israel, they have been wandering in the wilderness for 38 years now, and have found themselves, for the second time in their trip, without water. This time they are in Kadesh, only a short jaunt to the border of the Promised Land, where they had once been told 38 years ago that, although they were geographically close to the border, crossing it would not be easy. So it is safe to assume these weary and sweaty sojourners are not too enthused about returning to this place. It’s been 38 years of waiting, 38 years of hiking, 38 years of experiencing wilderness life. And how do they respond? Like children mirroring the behavior of their parents, the people of Israel take out their frustration and fears on their leaders, Moses and Aaron. But it is more than that this time – the people of Israel are having a hard time leaving behind the oppression they have internalized. They have grown so accustomed to slavery, so reliant on their captors, that they can’t adjust to their new

freedom. We see it in those who have experienced lengthy incarcerations and can't find their way outside of prison. A new generation of Israelites is now experiencing this renewed thirst for trust in the wilderness because it is hard to hold onto much of anything when you find yourself in such circumstances. Thomas Merton describes wilderness thru his prayer: "My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going... I do not see the road ahead of me..."

In the wilderness, we are faced with the unknown. It is the land of questions where our insecurities surface and we experience the unpredictable. Anybody know what I'm talking about? Have you been to the wilderness? Katie Mussat notes that it is there that a tension exists between calm and chaos, between disorientation and a search for reorientation. But of all the emotions and mental challenges present in the wilderness, one of the most devastating blows to our ego is when we come face to face with the reality that there is little in our control. It is here where writer Anne Lamott says we must "admit the three most terrible truths of our existence: that we are so ruined, and so loved, and in charge of so little." It's the moment when we realize the rug is pulled out from under our power. And it is in this moment that we find ourselves with a crucial decision: Will we trust even when we cannot see, even when we cannot understand? Or will we grumble and quarrel and try to seize control?

In 2005, Pavel Mircea, a Romanian convict serving time for murder, tried to sue God for breach of contract. Pavel argued, "He was supposed to protect me from all evils and instead he gave me to Satan who encouraged me to kill." In 2007, Nebraska State Senator Ernie Chambers filed his own lawsuit against God, accusing the Almighty (in a fit of alliteration) of "fearsome floods, egregious earthquakes, horrendous hurricanes, terrifying tornadoes, pestilential plagues," and we might add ferocious fires. Predictably, both lawsuits were dismissed. Since God doesn't have a legal address, the presiding judges argued, God can't be summoned to appear in court.

Neither plaintiff got the control they were seeking. But that doesn't stop the rest of us from trying. In Numbers 20, we find God on trial, along with Moses and Aaron to boot. When I was lost in Glacier Park, my prayer as I stood looking at identical trees was, "Ok God, get us out of here or I'm done, you can find somebody else to do your ministry." My ex and I argued for an hour about which way to go and who was to blame for the current situation. It wasn't until another hiker happened to stroll by and intervened saying, "Stop you two, just stop and take a breath. You are both wrong – let me point you in the way to go." If she hadn't, who knows what would have occurred? In Kadesh, 38 years later, Moses and Aaron find themselves in a quarrel with this new, yet just as ungrateful generation. They are still grumbling, with a resentment that has grown hardened by 38 years of wilderness life.

This time, however, Moses has experience with such things and knows better how to handle the situation. He and Aaron go to the tent of gathering, their worship space, and fall face-down on the ground before the Lord and they listen. They don't complain, they don't give ultimatums, they don't blame God as in the past... this time, they just listen.... and wait. God speaks saying that with God's staff, Moses can strike the rock and it shall yield water before the eyes of the assembly and Moses can tell them that this is all because of God. Moses takes the staff but instead of doing what God commands, Moses stomps back to the people and says, "Listen, you rebellious migrants, shall we bring water for you out of this rock?" What does that sound like to you? Do you hear the tones of a spoiled child who wants control, wants the glory without the hard work? It's like saying, "Look at me, I have all this power over you – I alone decide whether you get water or not, I alone decide whether you have a place to live or not, I alone decide your fate once you cross that border before you." It's ironic how human history repeats itself. Moses slams his fellow travelers with everything he's got and maybe that is what sends him over the edge. Because when it comes time for the miracle, instead of giving the speech God intended, Moses just

grips the staff and strikes the rock. Water pours forth at Kadesh, a name which means holy. This was a place where holiness was to be revealed, where the people would finally submit themselves to God's parenthood, to fall on their faces in humility to God's providing and protecting power. Instead, it becomes a place of arguments and therefore is called "Meribah" which means "Quarrel;" it is the place of Quarrels. And probably one of the more significant reasons we have this story comes in vs. 12 where Moses is told that because he didn't trust in God and didn't remind the people from whom the water flowed, Moses will not cross that beloved border up ahead.

What do we learn here to help us in our own experiences? Maybe it is that when those nice, leisurely hikes in our lifetimes go from holiness to quarreling, we need to stop and take a breath and listen rather than control. In the hell of addiction, the generations of emotional baggage and dysfunctional families, in the broken pieces of a relationship, in the waiting for employment, in the loneliness and depression, in the uncertainty of our health, in the struggles to pay the bills, Numbers 20 stands in the midst of it all, whispering wisdom in our wilderness. Stop grumbling, stop blaming, stop wishing you were elsewhere, stop idealizing the past, stop grabbing for control or power, stop fighting to fix the problem... just stop, wait and listen for the holiness which is present. Fall at God's feet and admit there is so little in our control. Don't let places of holiness be renamed places of quarreling. Instead wrap your weary mind, body and soul around our God who will not desert us, but will always meet our thirst with life-giving and miraculous presence.