

Summary for Session 8: Desert Wanderings

Prep work: Read Numbers 1-24

DVD: Jeff's talk opens by noting that the Ark was the literal center of the Israelite's community at Sinai. For Catholics today, the Tabernacle is the center of our church community and the Church's actions all stem from and revolve around the Eucharist—Jesus fully present in the consecrated Host. Returning to the Israelites, Jeff notes that there are 40 stages in their journey to the Promised Land (the number 40, we recall, is symbolic of a period of testing). Also, the Book of Numbers opens with a census taken of all the adult males in the Israelite nation. This “nation of priests” has, by their choices, become a community of laicized priests, but the ministerial priests among the Israelites are from the line of Aaron. The parallel in the Catholic church are the ordained priests, who offer the sacrifice (of the Mass) for the “priesthood of believers,” all members of the Church, who by virtue of Baptism live “a life according to the Spirit” (CCC 1547). From the priests of Israel come the Aaronic blessing (Num 6:22-26). Jeff notes that this transfer of ministerial priesthood from all Israelites to the line of Aaron is made apparent by the offerings presented to the Levites by the princes from each tribe. In presenting the Levites with the offerings the princes themselves would formally have presented to the Lord, they are divesting themselves of that duty and placing it on the Levites as an appointed responsibility. The Book of Numbers next notes the feast of Passover has come again, and Jeff remarks that to celebrate Passover meant one was part of the Covenant community; one couldn't celebrate if one wasn't in the community. It was paramount to make sure one could partake in the feast and so be counted as “in”. The Israelites prepare to move onward toward the Promised Land, having received at Sinai the Law, the Tabernacle (Ark), and the priesthood.

As they go forward, the Israelites begin to complain again, first about food, then about authority. Jeff notes two things about these complaints; first, children complain about food and authority—the Israelites are still acting like children spiritually. Second, the Israelites thought they knew what they needed, and refused to trust that God knew better than they. The gift becomes the punishment, and God sends quail in such abundance that the Israelites grow sick of it. In fact, Jeff points out, Wisdom 11: 15-16 comments on this occasion, that “man is punished by the very things through which he sins” (Jeff adds that the whole Book of Wisdom is a commentary on the Exodus.) As pertains the complaints of Miriam and Aaron against Moses' authority, Jeff explains that we should remember that God chooses His leaders; it is an appointment by Him, not a reflection of whether God “speaks” to one or another. Jeff reflects that this problem arises in the Church today; people question authority because they claim God speaks to them, too—why can't they lead? It is not about whether God speaks to you, it is about whether God has called you, has **chosen** you, to be in a position of leadership. As an example, Jeff points out that he is the father of his children; he has that authority over them. It is not that there aren't people better qualified to raise his children, but God gave that job to **him**.

At this point, the Israelites reach what is called the *Kadesh Barnea*, a point of crisis where they must decide whether they are going onward into the Promised Land or back

to their former lives in the desert and Egypt. Moses sends out spies from each of the 12 tribes to scout out Canaan and report back. He tells them especially to look out for the first fruits, grapes, and to bring back samplings. The spies return, afraid to tell the truth of what they've found because they still do not trust that God will give them the Promised Land. They spread lies about the land and its inhabitants throughout camp, inspiring a rebellion to appoint a new leader and return to Egypt. For their sin, God will keep them from the Promised Land for 40 years, until all present have passed away and the generation of the Exodus has reached maturity. Jeff notes that in the sacrificial atonement, wine (of those same first fruits?) is to be offered. In a tangent from the storyline, God also declares that the Israelites must set themselves apart from their neighbors, even dressing differently (the *tzitziot*, or tassels on their garments), in order to keep them always mindful of the Law they have received. Jeff notes that these same tassels will come up later in history, first with David cutting Saul's tassels to show that he was near enough to kill him, then when the bleeding woman touches Jesus' tassels and becomes healed instantly.

With knowledge of their punishment to wander for 40 more years, the nation of Israel now experiences more revolts. Korah, Dathan, Abiram, and their followers are all punished for their actions (some are swallowed by the earth!) and God once more shows to whom He has given authority by the flowering of Aaron's rod. Jeff remarks that these rebellions show us that God counts obedience as better than sacrifice.

As they move on, the Israelites once again complain at God and Moses. It is again about water, and whereas before, Moses obeyed God's command to the letter, it seems he strikes the rock this time in anger, and does not speak to the rock as God told him to. For this, God declares that Moses, too, will not step foot in the Promised Land, indicating that disrespecting God in front of all the Israelites is inexcusable in leadership. As an aside, Jeff notes that Hebrew tradition has it that the rock of the flowing water "followed" the Israelites around in their Exodus. Paul writes later that the rock could be seen as Christ, struck down so that living water might flow out from Him and save the people. Doubters might point out that Moses had hit upon a hidden cistern that had crusted over, but Jeff finds that miracle of "flowing" water rather than the trickle that would have come from hitting a cistern all the more amazing.

Coming up to the Promised Land once more after 40 years of nomadic life, the Israelites find themselves in battle with the kings of the area and defeating them. At Moab, the pagan king, Balak, calls on the prophet Balaam to curse the Israelites in hopes of defeating them. Balaam answers that he can only speak the words God gives him, and instead blesses the Israelites. Four times, the king is told that God is with the Israelites. In these oracles, Balaam also hints at future events, saying "a shout of a king is heard among them" and "a scepter shall rise out of Israel" (pointing to the kings of Israel and later, Jesus as King of Kings). Jeff connects these oracles to King Herod's attack on the male babes of the Israelites when Jesus was born, as Herod was afraid of the prophecy coming true in his time (he was half-Edomite and the oracle also warned about a judgement against Edom).

It should be noted that Israel next fell into sin by worshiping pagan gods in cult

prostitution. A plague befalls the community and it is only by Phineas' zeal in fighting against the cult worship that the plague ends and Phineas is given a special priesthood. Jeff would have us watch the line of Phineas in our readings and observe how they are blessed. Jeff also remarks that while the Israelites were not defeated in battle, sins of idolatry will quickly bring them down.

As the Israelites prepare to move into the Promised Land, Joshua is revealed to be the next leader in Moses' place. The 12 tribes are assigned their portions of the Promised Land, and Jeff notes that Joseph gets his "double-portion" as each of his sons' lines are allotted their own land. The tribes of Reuben and Gad ask to stay on the east side of the Jordan, and the Levites are given cities instead of territory at large. Moses' offers a farewell speech to his people (the end of Numbers and also the Book of Deuteronomy), giving them advice and urging them to be faithful to God and mindful of all He has done for them. These speeches constitute almost a "second Law" and many of the rules of Mosaic Law are pulled from here. Moses proscribes the people laws because of the hardness of their hearts (i.e. divorce—which helped protect wives from being killed off because of their husbands' whims). Jesus will later render such laws obsolete. Moses also makes provision for a temple and a king, though he prohibits multiplying the king's chariots, wives, and gold, effectively limiting the king's ability to make alliances with foreign (pagan) nations. Jeff notes the two keys to survival in Canaan and in remaining the Chosen People are the Shema (remembering there is only one God, and He rules all) and in teaching their children their beliefs (they are entering a pagan land of child-sacrifice—they must make children part of the community by passing on their faith and traditions). We might remember these keys for ourselves today, Jeff implies, as we find ourselves believers in a culture that worships many things and kills its children through abortion.