**SERMON 2-16-2020**

**NUMBERS (EXCERPTS FROM CHAPTERS 13 & 14)**

Stephen grew up in upstate New York.

During the summer he and his friends frequently went swimming

          in an icy glacial lake called "Green Lake."

It was deep – almost 200 feet deep – and crystal clear.

They say one could drop a quarter in it and tell if were heads or tails

          when it hit the bottom.

And it was cold – really cold!

There were two diving boards, a regular one, and a high dive – 12 feet high.

Stephen loved to dive off the regular diving board.

He would try to get as much spring as possible, and fly as high as he could,

          and then splash into that icy-cold water.

Yet, the high dive spoke to him, it called to him to try it out.

One day, when he was 12 years old,

          he finally responded to that high dive's siren song.

He told his brother and some friends that this was the day. He was going to do it!

He was going to climb that high dive and take the big plunge,

          something his brother and his friends had never done.

From the ground looking up, that high dive didn't look all that intimidating.

But when he reached the top, and walked out to the he end of that diving board,

          and looked down, – WOW!

It looked as if he were standing a mile above the water.

It felt like he was standing in the clouds looking down.

And the water was a long, long, l-o-o-o-o-n-g ways down.

His loving, supportive, encouraging, brother began yelling: "Hurry up! Jump!"

Stephen's friends chimed in: "Jump! Jump! Jump!"

He believed even the lifeguard, and all the people on the beach were chanting:

"Jump!"

Stephen stood very still.

His toes were tightly curled over the edge of the all-too-springy diving board.

His brother and friends were watching and waiting.

The whole world was shouting "Jump! Jump!

Stephen stood, staring down at that clear glacial water a thousand feet below.

He wanted to jump.       But.

Such a small word. Just three letters: b-u-t.

A small word which we use a hundred times or more a day.

"But".                   It is a word which can have dire consequences.

Imagine getting hard labor for 40 years because of one word: "but;”

And not just for you, but for your whole family also.

Like Stephen on the high dive that day, they were right there

          – right on the very edge – looking across the Jordan River,

          ready to plunge into the Promised Land,

                    – But –.

Everyone was excited until they threw in a "BUT".

Then a joyous adventure came to a tragic end.

The Israelites were gearing up for a great adventure.

Free at last from the chains of slavery, they were headed for the promised land.

A march through the desert should have taken about 2 weeks.

Instead it took almost forty years.

The Israelites lost faith not only in themselves, but in their God.

While the people wandered in the desert,

          they rebelled against God and against the leadership of Moses.

Each rebellion was followed by severe punishment.

But God repeatedly demonstrated mercy by giving the people another chance.

Yet, this time they had to wait a long time for another opportunity.

At the very border of the promised land, theirs for the taking,

          they lost faith and turned away.

When we doubt instead of trusting, we suffer the consequences for it.

We wander around in the desert,

          wondering what it could have been like to listen to God,

to trust him and obey him.

Perhaps we have gotten lazy, wanting everything,

          without having to walk in faith.

Have we sometimes forgotten about all God has done for us?

God has not given us a spirit of fear, doubt, and laziness.

He has given us a spirit of power, love, trust.

When we trust him, we can walk by faith, not by sight.

God Calls us to look up at the peak more than we look at the trail.

The more we focus up there, the more inspired we are down here.

Some years ago, a sociologist accompanied a group of mountain climbers

          on an expedition.

He observed a distinct correlation between cloud cover and contentment.

When there was no cloud cover, and the peak was in view,

          the climbers were energetic and cooperative, and made good progress.

When the gray clouds eclipsed the view of the mountaintop,

          the climbers were grumpy and selfish, the climb became difficult.

The same thing happens to us.

As long as our eyes are on God's power and majesty, there is a bounce in our step.

But let our eyes focus on the dirt beneath us,

          and we will grumble about every rock and crevice we have to cross.

Paul understood this. He urged the people: "Don't shuffle along,

          eyes to the ground, absorbed with the things right in front of you.

Look up, be alert to the things going on around God – that's where the action is.

See things from his perspective, and it will make all the difference.”

Our complaining and grumbling spirit

          keeps us from experiencing all the good things God has for us.

How quickly the Israelites forgot all that God had given them.

He sent Moses to lead them out of slavery in Egypt.

He sent the plagues so Pharaoh would finally let them go

He provided pillars of cloud and fire to show them where to go.

He parted the Red Sea so they could reach safety.

He killed the Egyptians when water flowed back in place.

He provided manna for food, and water from the rocks.

And He told them to go and take over the land filled with milk and honey.

But, they complained, they grumbled, they murmured, they whined.

God promised the people of Israel this land would be their home.

But they still did not trust him.

So God said, "OK. If you do not want to enter the promised land I've given you,

          if you cannot trust me to give what I have promised,

          then you will not receive it."

God did not force them to take the city.

He allowed them to make their own decision.

And they walked away from the Promised Land, and returned to the wilderness;

          for almost 40 years.

Our faith will lead us to our Promised Land, filled with peace and joy,

          or it will cause us to walk in our wilderness.

We remain lost and wandering in our own wilderness,

          until we begin again to believe and trust in God.

The problem was not that the Israelites lacked faith in themselves,

          but that they simply did not have faith in God,

One day Martin Luther was feeling rather down.

The Pope was after him.

His colleagues were bickering among themselves.

He felt the heavy pressure that came with being a professor, pastor, and father.

And he was in excruciating pain from kidney stones.

As he moped around the house muttering underneath his breath,

          his wife Katherine announced in a solemn voice, "God is dead."

Luther stopped in his tracks, looked at his wife with puzzlement,

          and cried out: "God is not dead!"

Katherine looked at her husband, and said:

“It certainly seems like God is dead by the way you are acting.”

Luther was silent for several long moments.

Then he gratefully thanked his wife.

He took a sharp knife and etched a Latin word on his desk: Vivit.

Vivit means, "He lives."

From that time on, whenever things were not going well,

          and Luther was tempted to complain about them,

          he would look at that one simple word,

          and was invigorated and strengthened once again.

God lives. He loves and guides us.

He is always with us, giving us strength and peace.

God lives. When we remember these two little words, our faith is strengthened.

And we are able to follow him and do what he asks of us in this world.

AMEN