

“Into the Wilderness”

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God knows everything about every thing and everyone, even in the wilderness.

Numbers 1:1-4, 44-54

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Numbers is important

Last week we finished studies in 1 and 2 Peter, toward the end of the Bible. This week we flip backwards a lot of pages into the fourth book of the Bible. As Pastor Paul said last night, it's not a book where you commonly turn for your Quiet Time. Get used to it, because we're going to camp out here until Thanksgiving.

What numbers do you like? Do you like any of these? 27, 124, 14.7 million, 100,000. What if I add some context? 27 is the number of options the ice cream cart lady will have available for next Saturday's Confirmation service. 125 is the number of days until Christmas. 14.7 million is the number of people worldwide who have recovered from the coronavirus. 100,000 is the number of hairs on your head – unless you're blond, then it's 150,000. Or unless you're me. I'm down to about 20,000.

All that to make this point: Numbers is important! Now I've upset the English department, until I remind you that I'm talking about a book of the Bible. This book is called "Numbers" because it has a lot of numbers in it. The book of Numbers is important because the numbers in it are important.

They're not random numbers. Nobody cares about the number 4 or 12 or 603,550 without context. This is the fourth book of the Bible. There are twelve tribes in Israel. 603,550 is the total number listed in chapter 1 when God commands a census of the men twenty years or older who are able to serve in the army.

Numbers are important all over the Bible, but only in context. These numbers are so important they get a book of the Bible named for them. These numbers are important because these numbers teach us about God.

Every book of the Bible is about God. Don't ever forget that. That includes the one book of the Bible (Esther) that never mentions the name of God. Every book of the Bible is about who God is and how God connects to and relates to the world he has made and the humans he created in his image.

Genesis starts, "In the beginning God..." because God is the origin of the world and of the nation of Israel. The books of Old Testament history are about God's work in and through that people. The books of poetry are about God listening to the prayers and struggles and thanks of his people. The books of prophecy are about God's judgments and promises. The Gospels are about God among us in the person of Jesus, making a way by his death and resurrection to give eternal life to all who believe. The rest of the New Testament is about God working through the church, the new Israel. If you read any part of the Bible and you didn't learn more about God, you missed the main point.

God speaks (v. 1)

The first question in opening any book of the Bible is this: "What does this book teach me about God?" The book of Numbers leaves no doubt in the opening sentence. One of the titles for the fourth book of the Bible in Hebrew manuscripts is "And he speaks." That's the English translation of the first word in Hebrew.

The first lesson about God in Numbers is that God speaks. Raymond Brown has counted 150 times and 20 different ways in Numbers where God spoke to Moses and/or to the people of Israel.

There's more in verse 1, of course. We learn where and when God spoke to Moses on this first occasion recorded in Numbers.

Where: He spoke to Moses where he most often spoke to Moses – in "the tent of meeting," which is most often used interchangeably with "the tabernacle," the place literally at the center of the large camp – the place of worship and sacrifice. At this moment the tent and all the people are in "the Desert of Sinai," which is still there and for the most part hasn't changed in 3500 years. It lies between the Gulf of Suez and the Gulf of Aqaba, east of Africa, south of Israel, and west of Saudi Arabia. Mt. Sinai is toward the southern tip.

When: God spoke "on the first day of the second month of the second year after the Israelites came out of Egypt," so it's been thirteen months since the Exodus. You probably know more than you think you know about those thirteen months. They include the parting of the Red Sea, the provision of manna, the giving of the Ten

Commandments and a lot of other laws, the infamous golden calf incident, the construction of the tabernacle, and a whole bunch of laws regarding sacrifices and festivals. Remember, these are ex-slaves, so God has had to tell them how to do everything from religion to government to family to the justice system.

All this God has revealed through Moses in those thirteen months. But he's not done. Throughout Numbers God will continue speaking. The first verse begins "And God spoke," and the last verse ends, "These are the commandments and regulations the LORD gave through Moses." God is a God who speaks to human beings. He's an interactive, personal God who speaks words needed for the moment.

God still speaks today, but he does so primarily through the Scriptures – inspired by the Holy Spirit and ratified by the Church. God can and does speak in other ways, but his voice is heard most clearly in the Bible, which reveals Jesus Christ. Long before the coming of Christ, the message of Numbers is clear: God speaks.

God counts (vv. 2-46)

The next lesson about God in Numbers begins in verse 2 but continues through most of the first chapter and, at some level, throughout the book. It's the reason the book is called "Numbers." The second lesson about God is that God counts.

This is what God said to Moses: "Take a census of the whole Israelite community by their clans and families, listing every man by name, one by one" (2). You have probably heard of a census, right? We're in a census year. The official purpose of the census in the United States constitution is to make sure that Congress accurately and proportionately represents the people. According to census.gov, that provision marked a turning point in history. Governments had often counted their people for the purpose of taxation or military draft, but the United States was the first government in world history to count them for a democratic purpose.

This count in Numbers 1 is for a military purpose. The people, as far as they know now, have left Egypt and will soon be fighting their way into the Promised Land. Moses and Aaron are "to count according to their divisions all the men in Israel who are twenty years old or more and able to serve in the army" (3). If you know the story of the Bible, you know that none of the men who are counted in this census will actually fight or enter Canaan...except two. They will all die over the next forty years before the conquest, and this will prompt another census later in the book. But the men who are counted don't know that, and at this point neither do Moses and Aaron.

So they count. The numbers they count, one by one, are high. In the view of many, unrealistically high. 603,550 men eligible to fight. If we assume an equal number of women and also add children, this multitude out in the Sinai desert numbers between two and three million. Many people believe that's totally unreasonable. If you're interested in the debate and the explanation, you can easily find it on the

Internet. ([Here](#) is one example.) I personally find that question interesting but distracting to the purpose of the Holy Spirit in giving us the book of Numbers.

The purpose here is to remind us that God counts. When I say that, I hasten to add that I'm speaking in figurative language. God doesn't actually need to count soldiers or hairs on your head or anything else. What I mean is that details matter to God. What I mean is that God knows everything about every thing and every one. What I mean is that individuals matter to God. Names matter to God. Persons matter to God – persons of every age and tribe and race and gender and calling matter to God.

Here in Numbers 1 God tells Moses and Aaron to count "every man by name, one by one." He didn't really have to ask for their help, you know. He could have said, "Moses, I just want you to know that there are 46,500 fighting men in the tribe of Reuben, 59,300 in Simeon..." and so on, 603,550 in total. But he wanted Moses and Aaron to enlist a team to help them account for every single soldier.

You may say, "Well, that doesn't value women and children very much." Again, that's not the point here. There is a specific military purpose for *this* numbering, but the overarching lesson is that God counts, one by one. There's no one that doesn't matter to him. You matter to him. While I was writing this section of the sermon yesterday, a church member texted me to encourage me. He quoted a passage in Hebrews 13 about pastoral leaders, and ended his text with, "God loves Bob."

That's the underlying message from Numbers 1 for you. God knows you. He knows your story. He knows what you've been through, and what you're going to face. He knows whether the plans you think you're making are going to be altered or delayed or scrapped. He knows how many days you have left on the earth. He knows your personal timeline. And whatever those details are, God loves *you*.

God divides to unite (vv. 47-54)

It wasn't just the total number that mattered in Numbers 1. What mattered was the number "by their clans and families." That was not only the way to get an accurate count of the whole. The identity of people then and now is shaped by their particular grouping.

This brings us to the tribe that Moses was explicitly told not to number. "You must not count the tribe of Levi or include them in the census of the other Israelites" (47). What does that teach us about God? That some people don't matter?

No, not at all. It means that God doesn't just see a blob of people or a list of individuals. God places us in families and communities and gives different purposes to each. We're always trying to convince everyone else they should see the world as we see it, prioritize the things we prioritize. I love the fact that among our own church leadership, we have some people tugging at us right now to move faster toward

regathering and others urging us to move more slowly and cautiously. To my way of thinking, either extreme approach is probably not right, but the tug-of-war helps us find the balance. It can be challenging but it's a good thing.

Here in Numbers 1 we have people who matter not less than but differently than other people. The Levites aren't counted because they're not an *offensive* force. They are a defensive force, specifically defending the holiness of the tabernacle. They are to be "in charge of tabernacle of the covenant law – over all its furnishings and everything belonging to it. They are to carry the tabernacle and all its furnishings; they are to take care of it and encamp around it" (50).

I've been wondering if there were Levite teenagers who said, "Why can't I go and fight? I'll never be able to. I'm too young now but even when I turn 20 I won't matter." There may have been an equal number of non-Levite teenagers who said, "Why will I have to fight if the Levites don't have to?" It's human nature to question at times our lot in life. But there's nothing in the Bible or in experience that says life is fair. Some people get more opportunities than others. People with power and privilege because of their race or nation or location are misunderstanding God's intent if they think, "This makes me better." No, it gives me greater responsibility to give and serve and advocate for justice. But everyone will realize at some point life is never fair.

The point is to ask why God has uniquely put me where I am. Part of the reason is to connect with those he puts in proximity to me. In Numbers 1, God separates the people into clans and families and tribes – even giving one tribe a distinctive purpose – so that in turn the people can be one. All the critical functions of the nation have to be covered – in this case both for military advance and spiritual defense. But people have to be connected in smaller units because that's where community happens.

That's why on this particular weekend we are focused on reconnecting at Corinth. Reconnecting doesn't always mean regathering, especially during a pandemic. If you've become more accustomed to isolation in the last five months, you need to remind yourself it's not normal and it's not healthy. Thus our Adult Ministries Director has spent countless hours (I know this, because I'm married to her) setting up a Sign-up sheet online to help us reconnect in community. Check corinthtoday.org/coronavirus for links to all kinds of groups, and let Linda know if you still can't find a way to connect.

We have to separate into smaller groups so that we can unite in the purposes for which God has called us. You'll also soon be hearing about more opportunities to connect for the purpose of service and mission as well. Why? Because this is who God is and what God does. God separates to unite. That's a lesson from Numbers.

Into the Wilderness

As much as we've talked about numbers today in the book of Numbers, I don't think it's the best title for the book. Lest you think by that statement I am assaulting the

inspiration of the Bible, the titles of the books are not what we're referring to when we speak of the Bible's reliability or authority. The titles were added later.

It was the Greek and later the Latin translators of the Bible who called the fourth book of Moses "Numbers" because of the two censuses (*censi?*) – one at the beginning and one at the end. I mentioned earlier that some Hebrew manuscripts call this book by its first word in Hebrew: "And he spoke." In Hebrew, *vaydebber*. Other manuscripts pick up on a different key word: *bemidbar*, or "in the wilderness." Can you imagine learning the books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Wilderness, Deuteronomy?

The dictionary definition of wilderness is "an uncultivated, uninhabited, and inhospitable place." If you Google images of wilderness, you'll mostly find forests – maybe also some mountains or frozen tundra. Occasionally desert as well.

Numbers is a book of the Bible that will take us into the wilderness, because that's where the Israelites find themselves for forty years as one generation dies and another takes its place. Remember that as the book opens they think they are headed in short order to the land of milk and honey. They are expecting prosperity and provision. Not without a fight, of course, but it's a fight they expect to win, and soon – and then settle into a life that's far better than the one they left in Egypt.

God knows differently. He's going to take them into the wilderness. It's a place of uncertainty and adversity. In other words, a place where things are bad and you don't know how long the bad will last. The uncertainty of duration is usually harder than the adversity itself.

You can see the wilderness one of two ways. You can see wilderness for what isn't there, for what you don't have, even for how God has let you down.

Or you can see the wilderness for Who is there. In the wilderness moments and seasons of life, you're not alone. When you don't know how you're going to survive or even if you're going to live through it, you learn humility and dependence and trust.

You learn to seek and know the God who speaks, the God who counts, and the God who places you into families and communities of people who help you hold on to him. This is the God we will encounter in Numbers. Amen.