

“Nevertheless”

Numbers 14:10-25

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HOW WE GOT HERE

If you open your Bible to Numbers 14:10 to begin reading, you'll notice almost immediately that this is not the beginning of the story. "But the whole assembly talked about stoning them." (Numbers 14:10) We know something bad is going on, but it's not at all clear who the characters are or what they are so worked up about. There is a sense in which this story began in Numbers 13. There is another sense in which the story began in the early chapters of Exodus. Or, one could argue, this is the story that God has been writing since the beginning of the creation of the world. In any case, this isn't the beginning. So let's rewind and recap so we're all on the same page.

Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt, where they were enslaved. God promises them that he will give them their own land, a land "flowing with milk and honey." (Exodus 3:8) It's not a promise that got fulfilled immediately. Israel has been in the wilderness for a while now, and it hasn't been smooth sailing. They've been complaining since the moment their feet hit the far side of the Red Sea. Slavery is barely behind them when they start asking, "Why didn't God just kill us in Egypt?" (Exodus 16:3) They've tried to make their own gods. They've whined about the food. They've driven Moses to the point of saying, "God, why don't you just kill me rather than making me lead these people?" (Numbers 11:15)

But eventually, we get to Numbers 13, and God says to Moses, "It's time. Go check out the land of Canaan, the land that I am giving to you." (Numbers 13:1) To keep things fair and balanced, Moses takes one person from each of Israel's twelve tribes and sends them on a scouting mission. For forty days the spies check out the land that God has promised to them. For forty days, the rest of the Israelites wait. And then one day the spies return.

First, they show off the fruit of the promised land. It's amazing. And the spies report that the land is just what God had promised -- it flows with milk and honey! But just as quickly as their excitement came, the whole thing fell apart. "But," the spies say, "the people who live there are strong and the towns are huge and well-defended." (Numbers 13:27ff)

One spy, Caleb, speaks up -- "Let's go! We've got this!"

The other spies revise their story. "No way! We can't take those people. They're not just strong -- they're huge! We're like grasshoppers compared to those men. And that land, it may be rich with milk and honey, but it also devours its inhabitants." (Numbers 13:31ff)

At this point, the Israelites fall apart again. They're weeping and crying out "Why didn't we just die in Egypt? God, kill us in the wilderness! It would be better than dying in battle!" Then they have a new idea, "Let's pick a new leader and head back to Egypt." (Numbers 14:1ff)

Caleb, this time joined by Joshua, makes one last appeal. "The land we passed through and explored is exceedingly good. If the Lord is pleased with us, he will lead us into that land, a land flowing with milk and honey, and will give it to us. Only do not rebel against the Lord. And do not be afraid of the people of the land, because *we will devour them*. Their protection is gone, but the Lord is with us. Do not be afraid of them." (Numbers 14:7-9)

And at last, that brings us to Numbers 14:10 - "But the whole assembly talked about stoning them..."

INTERCEDING BEFORE GOD

At this point, Moses begins a somewhat strange dialogue with God. God is angry. Most of the spies have given a report that contradicts his promise. He told the Israelites that this was their land; the spies have brought back a message of fear and weakness.

It seems that God's first choice is to threaten to destroy the Israelites and start over, making a great nation out of Moses. Moses reminds God of God's character. And ultimately, God backs off of the destruction idea. This is perhaps the most important place where we need to not get lost in the weeds. Perhaps you read that passage and think that God was using hyperbole and never truly intended to destroy the people. You see Moses as a foil more than a true negotiator. Or maybe you read the passage and see that Moses has interceded and changed God's mind. There are intriguing implications of both those views. And although I do encourage you to think through and perhaps even talk through those questions, they aren't central to what we're up to today.

Moses' job in verses 13-19 is to review the history of God and the Israelites. God promised to give the people a good land. If he now kills them all in the wilderness, it will look like the Israelites were off on a fool's errand. They were following a God who couldn't deliver on his promises, and so the very one who promised them deliverance

also turned on them. And more than that, Moses says, “Now may the Lord’s strength be displayed, just as you have declared: ‘The Lord is slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.’ In accordance with your great love, forgive the sin of these people, just as you have pardoned them from the time they left Egypt until now.”

Here is the second place where I want to caution us not to get stuck. The idea of punishing the children for the sins of the parents is hard for some of us to wrap our heads around. It sounds unfair; but who ever told you life was fair? You don’t have to look any farther than children of divorce to see that the parents’ decisions have consequences for their children and their children’s children. Likewise, whenever we volunteer with One Day at God camps, we see imprisoned parents whose sins have tremendous consequences on their children. Is it fair? I don’t think so. But it is reality.

In any case, Moses is setting God up to display God’s power and righteousness and love. “I have forgiven them,” are God’s next words. It’s a moment of relief. The people again have just narrowly escaped being the source of their own destruction. But God isn’t done speaking. “Nevertheless...” God adds.

That “nevertheless” is the most interesting part of this dialogue, in my opinion. An awful lot hangs on that “nevertheless...”

YES, AND...

There’s a well-known tool in improv comedy called “Yes, And...” The idea is that the character accepts what has previously said (yes), while expanding on that train of thought (and...). It’s a collaborative continuation. This is a tool that has also gained a lot of traction in business and the academy. In those contexts “Yes, and...” is designed to be a more productive replacement for “Yes, but...” responses. I read this “nevertheless” as God’s “Yes, and...”

Yes... I have forgiven them. And... there are going to be some consequences.

This may be an uncomfortable concept for some of us. It’s tempting to look for a framework where God is forgiving, and forgiveness means that the slate is wiped clean and we all get to go back to our normal lives. Very often, whether we’ve said it this way or not, we want a forgiveness that is more a “rewind and erase” rather than a “let’s repair what you’ve broken.” In reality, we know that forgiveness isn’t the same as clicking “undo.”

Forgiveness is the process of fixing a relationship. Consequences exist with or without forgiveness, and have to do with results of our actions.

I mentioned a moment ago our partnership with Forgiven Prison Ministry. There are many inmates who regret their crimes and are working hard to regain their family's trust and affection. In some beautiful moments, those inmates get to hear the words "I forgive you." What they don't hear is, "I forgive you, so now you don't have to serve your sentence."

God promised Israel a beautiful land. God led them to the land. Seeing that they could not take the land in their own strength, they gave up. Israel failed to trust God. They decided to be defined by their own weakness rather than by God's strength. This created a rupture in their relationship with God. God was mad about this, but God forgave them. Yes... they are still his beloved chosen people. And... there are consequences.

BACK TO EGYPT

There's a certain degree of poetic justice in the consequences that God outlines. The Israelites have had a consistent theme to their complaining ever since they left Egypt -- "why can't we go back to Egypt? We should have just died in Egypt!" Throughout the course of this sermon series, we've looked at why that might be their complaint. They were slaves in Egypt, but they were well-fed slaves. Their lives were filled with hard labor and cruel slave masters, but they had had centuries to get used to that life. The Israelites would much rather go back to the familiar world of slavery than to live in the uncertainty of the desert.

Every step through the wilderness required faith. Faith that God's promises were true. Faith that God was strong enough to deliver on those promises. Faith that God was good enough to do that. Faith takes work. But over and over again, the Israelites looked for the shortcuts instead of relying on their faith.

In this case, they hear two reports. One says the land is terrifying and the people are too strong. The assumption underlying this report is that the Israelites cannot conquer them in battle. The "minority report" is that the land is great, and they should go receive it. The assumption underlying this report is that the Israelites need faith, not strength. Interestingly, both reports know that Israel can't conquer this land alone. Nobody is suggesting that Israel is strong enough to beat them. The question that gets overlooked by the majority of the group is whether or not God will deliver on his promises.

Because the Israelites ignore Caleb's "minority report" and choose instead to live in fear, there will be consequences. Now, these people who were asking why God hadn't

left them in Egypt find out that, functionally, that's their punishment. I'm guessing most of you have some point have said "Be careful what you wish for, you just might get it." From the moment they left Egypt, the people were wishing to go back - to not continue on to the promised land. And in the end, that's basically what they got. God told them that they would get their wish, and die in the wilderness.

THROUGH-LINES OF THE COVENANT

Before you get to thinking that's a harsh punishment (which at first glance, it is!) let's look a little deeper. There's actually something utterly beautiful about these consequences. If God had gone with the first idea we hear from him in this passage -- to destroy the people and start over, making Moses into a great nation -- how many Israelites get to inherit the Promised Land? None! If God punishes them immediately, everyone is gone, and nobody gets the land.

If the consequence is that everyone over the age of 20 (except Caleb and Joshua) dies in the wilderness, thousands upon thousands of Israelites live to see the fulfillment of God's promise. In giving these consequences, God has made a way for his people. The covenant is not canceled; it's merely shifted to the next generation. Sometimes the consequences ripple down to multiple generations, and sometimes the blessings get delayed for multiple generations.

Delayed punishment -- natural deaths in the wilderness instead of instant obliteration -- is still painful. It's still disappointing. But it also means that covenant continues. The promises God made aren't canceled. They're just delayed.

And as uncomfortable and unfair as that might be, I see an amazing amount of hope in it. Because, friends, we too have gotten things wrong. We have failed to listen to the "minority report" and have opted instead to turn back toward Egypt. We have made choices based on our inabilities rather than God's abilities. This is true of us individually, as a church, as a nation, as humanity. We don't even have to reach too far back into history for some deeply unsettling examples.

In 1857, the majority opinion of the Supreme Court of the United States was that black people could not be citizens and had no rights to appeal for their freedom.

In 1900, the majority view in the United States was that women should not be permitted to vote. Even ministers spoke out, warning that the moral health of the nation was in danger if women should be granted the privilege of voting.

In 1933, most churches in Germany welcomed the rise of Nazism and publicly supported Adolf Hitler's regime and his anti-Semitic rhetoric.

Our history is complicated. In every one of those cases, *some* Christians were on the side that we all now agree is the right side -- that people of color deserve all the same rights as white people, that women deserve the same rights as men, and that the Holocaust was an indefensible horror. But in all those cases and many others, the view we now hold as obvious and right was the “minority report.” Much like it was in Caleb’s time, the “popular opinion” was dead wrong.

And in every case, instead of destroying the church for listening to the wrong voices, God has shown himself to be slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. In every generation, when we realize the ways we have sinned, God stands ready to forgive us. Nevertheless, there are consequences to our sins. We live with generational consequences that run deep through our society. But the promise remains.

We are a resurrection people. We worship a crucified and risen Savior. We have before us constantly the reminder that life comes from death, joy comes from sorrow, and victory comes from defeat.

As we come to sacrament of communion today, it is right for us to come with a spirit of reflection and repentance.

We, like the Israelites, have gotten things wrong. We have seen obstacles where God is placing opportunities. We have forgotten God’s promises and his character, and have chosen to shrink back in fear. We have forgotten God’s power and might, and have focused instead on the limitations of our own strength. We have gone along with the crowd, and missed the “minority report” that would have revealed God’s true character and plan. We have made choices that have consequences for ourselves, our children, and our whole community.

It is also equally right that we come before the communion table with joy and hope. This bread and cup is our proof that God still says, “I have forgiven you.” These gifts are our signs that in spite of our most spectacular failures and most determined rebellion, God has claimed us and loves us. Whatever the consequences of our sins, we celebrate this sacrament secure in the knowledge that God hears our cries, accepts our repentance, forgives our sins, and will preserve his people and deliver on every one of his promises.