

"Moving Forward as God's People"

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[0 : 00] When Sam Gamgee was packing his bag to prepare to leave Rivendell, he wanted a piece of rope.

! He didn't have one, and he regretted it later. But as he was preparing for a journey, he did what we all do. He thinks, what do I need for this journey ahead? What is the most important thing for me to take?

It might be a packing list that we go through. It might be having a map and a plan. It might be stealing up our hearts for an adventuring spirit, determined optimism or perseverance.

It might be developing skills like how to use crampons or how to row a canoe. Whatever it is, when we go on a journey, we are always thinking about what is it that we need to take with us?

What is most important? As today is send-off Sunday, and some of you are going off into new unknowns, new journeys ahead with challenges and possibilities before you, you are going on a journey.

[1 : 24] For those of us who are not graduating or moving, we are still on a journey, even when we are not in transition. This journey of life that we are on, whether we like it or not, requires continual preparation.

What is the most important thing for us to take on this journey? Well, the Bible will say that it is not something but someone.

In fact, it is God Himself that we most need to take on our journey. And this brings us, maybe surprisingly, to the book of Numbers.

If you have come to Trinity, you know we tend to preach through books of the Bible. We just finished Galatians last week, and we are starting a series on the book of Numbers. And the reason why we are is because the book of Numbers is about God going with His people on a journey through the wilderness.

Now, if you have forgotten your Old Testament history, you will remember that the people of God, the descendants of Abraham, were in Egypt, enslaved by the power of Egypt.

[2 : 34] But God came in and miraculously and powerfully rescued them, brought them out of Egypt through the Red Sea to the mountain of Sinai, where at that place then He revealed Himself to the people in a new way by giving the law to Moses to instruct them on how they could live as God's people.

And that has all happened, and it brings us in the narrative to the beginning of the book of Numbers, where they're about to set out from Sinai through the wilderness of the Arabian Peninsula on their way to the brink of the promised land.

God is going with them on a journey. Now, typically at Trinity, we will preach on one passage.

Today we're going to preach on nine chapters.

Are you ready? Buckle your seatbelts. We're not going to read at all, I promise you. What I want to say is take these thoughts home, go home and read Numbers yourself, and it will help you to think about how do you read these Old Testament narratives.

Because what we're going to see today, most importantly, is four things about God, about the God who goes with us. We're going to see that our God is our faithful God, our God is our holy God, our God is our forgiving God, and our God is our ever-present God.

[4 : 02] So that's what we're going to look at briefly this morning to hopefully bless you. So first, we're going to look at our faithful God. The book of Numbers in chapter 1 begins with a census.

They count people, right? And they count all the people. So in Numbers 1, verses 44 and 45, it says this, So all those listed of the people of Israel by their father's houses from 20 years old and upward, every man able to go to war in Israel, all those listed were 603,550.

So they took this census to find out what does our army look like, and by extension, what does the people look like? It was probably upward of close to two million people who were traveling in the wilderness, including women and children.

Why does God count them? Well, because in Genesis 12, back at the beginning, verses 1 through 3, God gave a promise to the original father of the Hebrew people, Abram.

It says this, Did you hear in that promise?

[5 : 42] I will make from you a great nation. That requires a lot of people. As the story goes on, it's going to be as many people as the stars in the heaven, as the grains of sand on the seashore.

Can you imagine Moses at Sinai looking out over the people in camp? God has done it. God has been faithful to His promise. And it didn't always look like it was going to happen that way.

Abraham and Sarah were like a hundred years old before they had their first child. That's not normal. How was God going to make Abram the father of a great nation with no children?

How was God going to make a great nation out of 70 refugees who had to flee to Egypt because of a famine? How was God going to make them a great nation when they were enslaved to Egypt?

God, through all of these challenges and all of these difficulties, showed His faithfulness. As some of you transition and look ahead, facing uncertain things, certainly you will face obstacles and trials in times when you think, where is God, where is God, where is He faithful to me?

[6 : 59] Remember this. Remember the faithfulness of God. That's why God counted the people at the beginning of the book of Numbers. Numbers. And friends, for us as the church, we know that there's a greater fulfillment to this counting.

Because we know that the church is actually the greatest fulfillment of the promise to Abraham.

That the people of Israel were a point along the way in fulfilling this promise.

And so we read, back to Galatians, for those of you who are here for the spring, Galatians 3, 26-29, For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God through faith.

For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ, there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male or female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus.

And if you are Christ, then you are Abraham's offsprings according to the promise. Do you see that, friends? The book of Numbers reminds us of God's faithfulness.

[8 : 07] But the cross of Christ and the work of Christ and the people of Christ is the ultimate fulfillment. That what God has done through Christ has made a people from every tribe and tongue and nation that will number innumerably for all eternity.

God is faithful to His promise. Cling to Him. Believe in Him and trust in Him as you do this. So that's the first point.

Second point, God then goes on to teach us more about God. In chapters 2-8, God sets out the camp and gives some laws, right?

And as He sets out the camp, what we see in this is that God is a holy God who calls us to center our lives on Him. Okay?

So holiness is one of those words that we use a lot. It's a very churchy word. We usually think of holy in the phrase like holier than thou. Super special people who are more pure and excellent in their religiosity.

[9 : 14] And but that's not actually what the word means, right? Holiness actually means set apart, means distinct or otherwise, right?

And so this clearly does include God's moral purity, that He is perfectly righteous and good, and in His character and in His works displays a perfection of goodness that we can only imagine, right? God does that, and so that is true of it, but it is also about His otherness, that He is distinct and different from this fallen world that we live in.

And He is like no other. And as a holy God, He calls us to be other like He is, right?

What does this look like? Well, one, in chapters two through four, Moses lays out a map of the camp. When they're traveling, it looks like this. And when they're settled, it looks like this. And do you know what's in the center?

[10 : 17] The tabernacle. Do you know why? Because the tabernacle is where the presence of God dwelt among His people. And so God wants to say, I am a holy God.

I want you to arrange your life around me. I want you to make me the center of your worship, the center of your identity as God's people.

We are to be the chip off the old block, like the old timer who looks at his grandson and says, yeah, he's a chip off the old block because he plays shortstop, just the way his dad did and just the way his grandfather did.

Well, we're supposed to be that, but not with baseball, but with our spiritual lives and with our lives to display God and to make Him the center of all that we are and all that we do.

The tabernacle is the place where God allowed Moses to meet with Him face to face. And then if you look carefully, what you see is around the tabernacle, before you get to the tribes of Israel, there are the Levites and the priests, right?

[11:22] And why was this? Because God is a holy God. Listen to Numbers 4 verse 19, chapter 4 verse 19. This is instructions to the Kohathites, one of the Levite tribes, and it says this, but deal thus with them, that is, He gave them instructions on how to conduct themselves, that they may live and not die when they come near to the most holy things.

You see, here's the thing. God wants to dwell in the midst of His people, but God is like a white hot fire of perfect righteousness and purity. And that fire burns up any impurity that comes near it. No one can stand before a holy God and live without some kind of mediation because of our sinful hearts. And the sin of the people of Israel made them liable for destruction at any moment. And they were full of it.

They grumbled. They complained. They disobeyed. They rebelled. They did all of it. And God is fearsome and awesome. And so, He put this cordon of people who were set apart to mediate between them by offering sacrifices, by doing special rituals of purity to display and to help mediate between this holy God and a people who were not holy, who were around them. And we see in verses 5 through 8 then a series of instructions, laws about purification, about vows, about being a Nazarite, all sorts of different things to help the people of God see that if you're going to be identified with a holy God, you're going to need to be different than the people around you. And you're going to have to listen to and let God instruct you on how to live so that you might be set apart in your character, set apart in your morality, set apart in your lifestyle, set apart in your worship, that God would be the center of your lives so that you might be His people in the world. And friends, again, we know from the New Testament how much more this is true of us, the church. So 1 Peter chapter 2 reminds us of what God says about His church. He says, for you, but you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for His own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.

[14:07] Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people. Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. And so, because God is a holy God, as you go out into the world, remember whose you are, that you are God's people. Tell yourself, I am set apart for God alone.

My life is a calling to display Him in everything I do in public and in private, in my relationships, in my work, in my investments, everywhere I go, that we might be a people set apart.

Now, if God's holiness and trying to be holy like He is holy seems overwhelming, isn't it good news? Because Moses goes on and God instructs the people at the beginning of chapter 9 that we are going to be a person who is a forgiving God who saves us from our sin.

How do we know this? Well, in chapter 19, verse 1 through 14, as the people are ready to set out, they are kind of packing their bags and then God says, wait, wait, wait, we got to do one more thing. We have to observe the Passover. Why? Well, because the Passover was a picture of God's work to provide forgiveness for the sins of His people.

[15:45] Why is this? Well, you go back to Exodus. Do you remember? They're in slavery. God brings all these judgments, these plagues, right? The tenth plague, right, was a judgment that was going to come upon all households in Egypt.

The death of the firstborn. But He provided a way where they would not have to face the judgment. He said, if you take a lamb and you sacrifice that lamb and you take some of the blood from that sacrifice and you put it on the doorframe of your household, your home is covered.

And when the spirit of judgment sweeps through Egypt on that night, when it comes to the door, when it sees the blood that was shed for you, then it will pass over and not bring judgment to your household.

This is the idea of the Passover. So, in Exodus 12 verses 23 and 24, we see, for the Lord will pass through to strike the Egyptians, and when He sees the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts, the Lord will pass over the door and will not allow the destroyer to enter your houses to strike you.

You shall observe this right as a statute for you and for your sons forever. You see, God knew that in His judgment, we all sit before Him guilty, and we have no hope of being righteous in our own enough to be able to avoid His judgment on sin.

[17 : 22] But God has made a way. Just as God made a way in the Passover with the Lamb, just as God made a way through the temple where all of these pictures pointed to the ultimate, the ultimate work of redemption.

How could a holy God forgive the sins of people like you and me? Well, God so loved the world that He sent His only Son that whoever believes in Him would not perish but have eternal life.

Christ, our Passover Lamb, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, has been sacrificed for us. Because of His death, He has died for us and thus taken the judgment that our sins deserve.

By His sacrifice, we are delivered from slavery. By His love, we are now brought into fellowship with Him as His people. And as we stand before God, the blood of Christ stands over us like it did the Passover doors.

And God looks at us and sees the sacrifice. And He does not judge us, but He welcomes us instead. This, my friends, is the gospel that our God is a forgiving God.

[18 : 45] What a beautiful thing it is. What does this mean then? We are a people who are new in Christ, forgiven and free.

The Apostle Paul paints this beautiful picture in the book of Titus, and I want to read it for you. For we ourselves once were foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another.

But when the goodness and the love and kindness of God our Savior appeared, He saved us not because of our works done by us in righteousness, but according to His own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by His grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

Friends, as you go out into the world, you will face times when you will fail, and your sin will show itself.

And it's at those times when, as claiming to be the people of God, we are tempted to hide and to run away from God in shame.

[20 : 09] But God is a forgiving God, and He calls us not to run from Him, but to run to Him when we see ourselves at our worst. He calls us to come to Him, and to know that if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us of our sins and cleanse us of all unrighteousness because of what Christ has done.

Friends, God has loved you so much that He sent His Son. And as you go out into the world, know that it is a forgiving God who goes with you.

But not only has God saved us, but finally our fourth point is that it is an ever-present God who goes with us in every circumstance.

And so, in Numbers 9, we're finally going to read a long passage from Numbers. Here we go. Numbers 9, starting in verse 15, it says this, And in the place where the cloud settled down, there the people of Israel camped.

At the command of the Lord, the people of Israel set out, and at the command of the Lord, they camped. As long as the cloud rested over the tabernacle, they remained in camp. Even when the cloud continued over the tabernacle many days, the people of Israel kept the charge of the Lord and did not set out.

[21 : 59] Sometimes the cloud was a few days over the tabernacle, and according to the command of the Lord, they remained in camp. Then, according to the command of the Lord, they set out.

And sometimes the cloud remained from evening until morning, and when the cloud lifted in the morning, they set out. And if it continued for a day and a night, when the cloud lifted, they set out. Whether it was two days or a month or a longer time that the cloud continued over the tabernacle, abiding there, the people of Israel remained in camp and did not set out.

But when it lifted, they set out. At the command of the Lord, they camped, and at the command of the Lord, they set out. They kept the charge of the Lord at the command of the Lord by Moses.

So, this was not a new thing that happened. This is what happened, actually, as God was leading people out from Egypt, right?

[22 : 56] You remember the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night that led light and protection and led the people through out of Egypt to Mount Sinai?

So, in Exodus 13, we see this, where it says, And the Lord went before them by day and a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night a pillar of fire to give them light that they may travel by day and by night.

The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night did not depart from before the people. So, this was not a new thing, but as they're setting out from Mount Sinai, as they're setting out into this wilderness again, God wants to remind His people, I will go with you.

I will go before you. And that cloud was a picture of His presence, of His revelation and His command and His law, of His protection, of His provision.

This is what it means when God goes with us. Sometimes we are tempted to say, I don't actually want God to go with me.

[24 : 15] I'm going to go my way and not follow Him. Sometimes we think, God, I'm following you, but it suddenly got really hard.

Maybe you're not really here at all. Maybe you've forgotten about me. Maybe you've abandoned me. My friends, the book of Numbers wants to remind us that God goes with His people, that He is ever present with us.

And again, just like all of these other promises, how much more do we as His church know this truth than what they did in the Old Testament?

Right? Jesus, after His death and resurrection for our salvation, as He came in His last words recorded in the book of Matthew, He gave us a great promise, did He not? It came along with a call. He said, all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. So that's our calling. That would be another sermon. We're not preaching that one today, but the promise that comes with it, and behold, I am with you always to the end of the age.

Friends, do you walk around in your everyday life thinking, Jesus is with me to the end of the age? In the darkest moments, when the pain is so intense, when the obstacle seems so insurmountable, Christ is with you. In the moments of greatest joy, of provision, of ease and comfort and beauty, Christ is with you. When you're faced with complete unknowns and you don't know where you're going to live or who you're going to be with or what you're going to do or how you're going to provide for yourself, Christ is with you. And friends, He will go with you to the end. He will take you through this life and into glory because this is the great promise for God's people, is that at the end of the journey, we have a certain destination for those who have put their faith in Christ.

[26 : 42] Because we know that one day, the dwelling place of God will be with man in Revelation, and He will be among us, and we will be His people, and He will be our God for all eternity as we enjoy the blessings and the richness and the fullness of all that God has for us.

And so as you send out from here, those of you who are transitioning, remember He goes with you. Lord, I pray that you would be our hope and our comfort, that you would be our strength, that you would be our captain who leads us, that you would be our Savior who delivers us, Lord, we do confess how easily we live our lives without reference to you. And we ask, Lord, that by your Spirit, you would remind us daily of all these things that we have seen in you this morning, that we might be faithful in following you, in walking with you.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.