

Series – Surviving the Wilderness

VBC

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Numbers 9:15-23

October 9-10, 2004

“The Necessity of Following Hard After God”

The first thing you notice in this passage is the tedious repetition

- It's almost insulting to our brains
- Larry Crabb, in his book *Inside Out*, wonders “Did the author of Numbers need a better editor?”
- The point of the narrative is not hard to get

When the cloud moved - they moved

When it stopped - they stopped

The Reader's Digest Version of the Bible (RDV) reduces this passage to one sentence – and it would seem, appropriately so

- Do we really need nine verses to tell us what can be said in one?

Our high view of Scripture searches for an answer

- Perhaps it is Hebrew poetry at work
- For here one finds a metrical structure when looking at the Hebrew text
- The cadence and repetition rising in intensity echoes ancient epic poetry

But maybe - as we read, and reread, and reflect

- Maybe God is telling us something only repetition can communicate

1) THERE IS RHYTHM TO GOD'S MOVEMENTS

- Read and reread
- Stop and go, settle/move out
- After nine verses, we begin to sense that God is teaching us this: That there is a cadence to life with Him in the wilderness

A. Sometimes the journey involves stopping, WAITING

- Staying in one place until God says “Let's go”
- Accepting our situation - putting down stakes if this is where God says “Stay here, wait here!”
- And few things can fray our nerves like waiting
- The waiting of a single person for marriage, a couple for a child, the chronically ill for health or death

- As parents - sometimes merely waiting at the dinner table while one of our kids is in the bathroom, or somewhere else, taking their sweet time - distracted, preoccupied - wrapped in their own affairs
 - Can cause us to lose our minds
- It can feel this way with God - the cloud is not moving - LIFE SEEMS STUCK - what is He doing? What is He preoccupied with?
 - Doesn't He know we're waiting to get on with things?
- But then, it happens - things unfold, and we realize
 - It wasn't us waiting for God - it never is
 - It's God waiting for us - to learn what we so desperately need to learn if the cloud is going to move forward
 - God is marking time - waiting until we become the people He is willing us to become
- In this rhythm
- B. Sometimes the journey has its other unnerving part
 - The cloud moves and we are called to STEP OUT
 - Leave the comforts and securities of the known, the things that give us our identity, our ease
 - God splashes cold water on the faces of our complacency
 - Calls us to enter unknown terrain
 - Sometimes it may even mean traveling in the night, when about all we can hang on to is a sense of His presence
 - God seems to say, don't become too deeply rooted that you cannot move

Illustration - Meeting ex-pats in Holland

- For one family, it was their 47th move
- They had learned to travel light
- To hold a certain indifference to place
- Seize the moments that they have

So it must be with us

The repetition of these verses communicates something else

2) THERE IS UNPREDICTABILITY IN GOD'S MOVEMENTS

- Note the randomness in the language
 - vs. 17 "whenever the cloud lifted"
 - vs. 19 "remained a long time"
 - vs. 20 "the cloud was over only a few days"
 - vs. 21 "the cloud stayed from evening till morning"
 - vs. 21 "whether by day OR by night"
 - vs. 22 "whether two days, a month, a year"
- God's movements do not work like a Tri-met bus schedule
 - Cannot be anticipated like the tide
- There is an arbitrariness, randomness, mystery to His ways
 - The bus doesn't come on schedule
 - The tide comes in when it wasn't supposed to
- Yancey: "I have learned one absolute principle in calculating God's presence or absence, and that is - that I can't."
- He does whatever He pleases - sets the terms of the journey – the length, the times, the movement
 - Giving enough light only for the next step

- But then, we are in the desert
 - A place of uncertainty, vagueness
 - Where things are formless and void
 - It is the in between of what we have left and where we are going
 - Wherein lies chaos, discomfort, difficulty, pain, doubt, confusion
 - Things out of control—at least OUR control
 - So we try to get control
 - Divine the future
 - Predict the movements of the cloud
 - Reduce the mystery
 - We're not very good at this, have you noticed?
 - The latest Time magazine's cover article "Visions of Tomorrow: what's next in health, business, sports, technology", nonetheless acknowledges in the opening words
 - "There's nothing like the passage of time to make the smartest people look like complete idiots"
 - Futurologists can only guess

- Illustration: Peter Schwartz, August 1, 1990 with CEO's
 - To the concern of Iraqi troops amassed near the Kuwaiti border
 - Responded - "Don't think twice"
 - The next day - they invaded

- We go to endless seminars on God's will, hoping to "crack the code," predict His movements - His personal will for us
 - WHERE HE IS TAKING US

 - We work through the checklist hoping to get God's movements into manageable terms
 - Here is mine:
 - a) What does the Word say - He guides through His Word
 - Psalm 119:105
 - b) What are my counselors saying - He guides through people
 - Proverbs 11:14
 - c) What is life telling me - He guides through circumstances
 - Acts 16:7
 - d) What is my gut telling me - He guides through personal peace
 - 2 Corinthians 2:12-23
 - e) What is wisdom telling me - He guides through the wisdom of integrity
 - Proverbs 11:3

 - It's a good list
 - I try to submit every decision to it
 - But even these cannot create a AAA map - with God's will clearly spelled out, all road hazards clearly lighted
 - God is not necessarily contained in these - sometimes the darkness only deepens
 - His ways become more mysterious
 - The cloud doesn't stay or move according to our calculations
 - Confusion only increases
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- So what is God taking 9 verses to tell us?
 - There is rhythm, there is unpredictableness
 - But above all

3) THERE IS PURPOSE IN GOD'S MOVEMENTS

- It's not there on the surface, but listen again, with care
- God says "LET'S GO" - and so they pull up stakes, pack everything, head out, but before they begin to get their stride
- God says "STOP - we'll stay here"

- And so things are unpacked, the TENT IS SET UP, people start surveying the setting, “maybe this would be a nice place to settle,” “there is a nice view of the mountains in the distance”
 - “There’s water coming up of nearby rocks”
 - “We like our neighbors”
 - But before we even get to know them God says “MOVE OUT”
 - And while the terrain looks good - God keeps going
 - And we want to scream - this really looks good
 - But we keep going - and now it is not so good
 - And God says “WE’LL STOP HERE”
 - And we hate it - but then learn to love it
 - And God says “LET’S Go”

- So what is this all about?
- What purpose can any of this serve?
- Could it not be, that it is ultimately what life is all about
 - TRUSTING GOD
 - One day, one movement at a time?
 - Will we stay close to Him?

- I was taking Spencer for a walk
 - It’s herk and jerk - no direction
 - So, I do a lot of stopping and going, turning to the left, to the right
 - I step on his feet, I walk into his side
 - I pull him when He is least expecting, stopping when he has no idea I am going to stop
 - Waiting, though he expects me to go
 - With Garth, Rochester, Barnabas, they got it within a week
- Spencer is a long term project
 - I am training him to learn to watch me
 - To understand that this walk is NOT about where he intends to go, but where I want to take him

- Could this not be what God wanted to teach Israel, and wants to teach us?
 - There is something bigger than us and our ways
 - Something bigger than where I want to go, when I will get there
 - It’s not about the destination, it’s about the relationship
 - Explain what you can, relax, trust in Him where you can’t