

In the Wilderness | The Gospel in the Book of Numbers

“The Successor (One to Take Us Home)”

Numbers 27.12-23; John 1.14-17

12.24.16

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Go up to this mountain of Abarim, and see the land which I have given to the sons of Israel. ¹³ "When you have seen it, you too will be gathered to your people, as Aaron your brother was; ¹⁴ for in the wilderness of Zin, during the strife of the congregation, you rebelled against My command to treat Me as holy before their eyes at the water." (These are the waters of Meribah of Kadesh in the wilderness of Zin.) ¹⁵ Then Moses spoke to the LORD, saying, ¹⁶ "May the LORD, the God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint a man over the congregation, ¹⁷ who will go out and come in before them, and who will lead them out and bring them in, so that the congregation of the LORD will not be like sheep which have no shepherd." ¹⁸ So the LORD said to Moses, "Take Joshua the son of Nun, a man in whom is the Spirit, and lay your hand on him; ¹⁹ and have him stand before Eleazar the priest and before all the congregation, and commission him in their sight. ²⁰ "You shall put some of your authority on him, in order that all the congregation of the sons of Israel may obey him. ²¹ "Moreover, he shall stand before Eleazar the priest, who shall inquire for him by the judgment of the Urim before the LORD. At his command they shall go out and at his command they shall come in, both he and the sons of Israel with him, even all the congregation." ²² Moses did just as the LORD commanded him; and he took Joshua and set him before Eleazar the priest and before all the congregation. ²³ Then he laid his hands on him and commissioned him, just as the LORD had spoken through Moses.

John ¹ And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth. ¹⁵ John testified about Him and cried out, saying, "This was He of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me.'" ¹⁶ For of His fullness we have all received, and grace upon grace. ¹⁷ For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ.

This Fall here at St Andrews we've been reading the history of the Israelites directly after the time of the Exodus...when they were rescued from slavery and God raised up a leader...Moses, to lead them.

They were given the Law and the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai and they were to journey to the Promised Land but they rebelled...and rebelled and all their complaining sprang from a deeper spiritual disease... they would not trust in God (Heb 3.19). And sadly even Moses got swept up in the fatal unbelief of that generation that would not trust God.

So...in what is the ultimate cautionary tale for the ages, the Book of Numbers records the wanderings of that Exodus Generation – a 40-year-long detour... and now Moses prepares to die and he asks God to appoint a successor...Joshua will take them home.

Tonight I want to look at this transfer of power and also the bigger picture to which it points – OUR OWN longing for home and our own awkward feelings about home (I heard someone say, “A friend asked if I was going home for the holidays and I replied, ‘Hey, if I want to feel bad about myself I’d rather do it in the comfort of my own apartment!’”)... So let’s think about HOME and the One who can get us there and make it right - A simple outline: 1) What’s UP? 2) What’s In a NAME? and 3) What NOW?

What’s up...what’s happening here is a new generation is taking over (census CH 26). Aaron the priest has transferred his office to his son Eleazar and then Aaron died. Now, a very similar transfer of power for Moses: he’s given a gracious glimpse into the Promised Land...and then reminded why he can’t enter in...his breach of faith...his public display of unbelief and ANTI-GRACE (Num. 20)

And of course we feel for Moses – he has not had an easy road...a lot of opposition and people complaining about him... death threats... And, apart from this very deliberate show of unbelief, he was the humble law-giver. He played his part; he delivered the Law – BUT HE WILL NOT TAKE THE ISRAELITES TO THEIR PROMISED HOME.

He cares for the people and doesn't want them to be like “sheep without a shepherd” (17). So the Lord appoints Joshua, the son of Nun. He has been Moses’ assistant and ONLY he, Joshua, along with Caleb believed God when the other scouts refused to trust God and refused to enter the Land (which led to their 40-year-long detour)...a man in whom is the Spirit.

There’s a whole book of the Bible that bears his name and this Joshua WILL BE thĒ one to take them home! Joshua the Shepherd, Joshua the General.

And he...wasn’t ALWAYS known as Joshua...that’s a nickname given by Moses. His given name was “Hoshea son of Nun” – that means salvation or savior or rescuer... But Moses, right before the 12 scouts went to check out the land and brought back that gorgeous strange fruit...right before that surveillance team went in...Moses changed the young man’s name to Joshua meaning, “YHWH Saves” as if to say, “Remember, young man – it’s NOT up to YOU or ME to save us – the LORD saves...let your name always remind you of that – not by OUR strength – by HIS!”

And ya’ know...what’s in a name? Well, names are really important in the Bible and name-changes are very often VERY significant... There’s A LOT in a name! And THAT’S WHY it’s sooooo very striking that when God came into the world...when God incarnated, i.e. when God became “carne” – flesh, when the infinite, eternal unchangeable Spirit became somehow limited to space and time and subject to change – when God became Man, He came with the announcement,

“She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name JOSHUA (Matthew 1.21)” – i.e. Yeshua...Joshua, the name of the General who took God’s people into their promised HOME.

He could have been named after any one of the great figures of the Bible: Why not Noah? Why not David? What about Elijah...or Moses?

But instead...He is NAMED after the successor, after the ONE to take us home! The name of the conqueror who brings us to the place we belong... That second generation had never lived in any home (they didn’t remember Egypt – had never been there!) He would take them into a home where they had never BEEN!

The Messiah is given the name of a General, a name that means “YHWH saves” - “you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.”

Moses couldn’t DO that – Moses is an emblem of Law (Mat 23.2, Mk 9.4). He is virtually synonymous with the Law, “For the Law was given through Moses” but the Law...cannot make us right with God any more than Moses could bring us HOME...

St. Paul wrote, “what the Law could not do – weak as it was through our sinful nature.” (Rom 8.3) See the Law is good – it shows us the problem; it exposes our bent away from God...it reveals our selfishness... Moses had his role to play... the Law diagnoses us.

But to save us... we need something more...something else...NOT a lawgiver but a Rescuer...a Conqueror a Savior. And that is what Joshua means and THAT is what the Messiah IS, a Joshua, Yeshua, “YHWH saves.”

The Messiah was not named David the King, not Aaron after the priest, not given the name Elijah after the prophet (even though the Messiah is all of these Prophet, Priest and King) and He is not named Moses the lawgiver – not David Christ or Aaron Christ or Moses Christ ... but Joshua Christ, Yeshua Christ, Jesus Christ – the One who can take us in, take us home, conqueror, protector, savior and shepherd of the sheep... He’s named after Joshua!

And didn’t Yeshua Christ, Jesus Christ look at the people coming to Him and the Gospel writers quote this very passage “When He saw the crowds, He had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd (Mat 9.36) That’s a direct quote from this passage.

The Gospel writers are recognizing Him as the greater Joshua – the true champion and savior of all God’s people, the shepherd of God’s sheep and didn’t Jesus Christ (the True Joshua) say of Himself, “I am the Good Shepherd...the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep...” (John 10.11)

Not Moses...but Joshua – it took a General and Shepherd to take the homeless people of God into the Land of Promise... INTO A HOME WHERE THEY'D NEVER BEEN... they really had no concept of a home ... they were wanderers...nomads...a home where they'd never been...kind of strange.

And WE too... we're ambivalent about home...aren't we? Some people never feel like they're home...have no real memories of "home". Others associate home with painful memories.

I read a great article in *Aeon Magazine* (quoted it in the bulletin tonight) about momentous changes in the world today and how many of them have to do with a sense of home...a longing for home...a threat to our home. Think of how many people are working from home today (and how that is changing our ideas of home) – home is no longer a refuge from work but a work-space... the dining room table has devices on it.

Think of the 65.3 million refugees in the world – people without homes living in tents/shelters.

Think of Brexit...a sense in Britain that our home is being threatened... Think of our own recent elections (I know: "Do we have to?!") – but think how people are trying to hold onto or get back a feel of the familiar...a sense of home...and urbanization and climate change – that we may be losing our home.

And the writer (Charles Leadbetter) says, "We live in a restless, rootless world that prompts nostalgia, a yearning for an impossible return to an imagined home."

See... we are longing for a home ...but are ambivalent about home... "an impossible return to an imagined home". And, in this, Moses is a tremendous help...He is the X-Ray machine, he is the diagnostician, the appraiser to show us the numbers, that we are all morally bankrupt (even the best of us do what we're NOT supposed to do – don't do what WE ARE supposed to do – do the right things for the wrong reasons...don't know WHY we do WHAT we do and can't stop doing it!) AND MOSES is the necessary needle who bursts the bubble of our inflated illusions of personal goodness.

We need Moses...but he can't take us home. For that, we need Joshua...and what we celebrate tonight is the point in human history when the True Joshua, Yeshua, Jesus Christ came into the world.

He left home...He became homeless so that we could enter in to a home we've never known... He comes as John the Baptist's successor... He comes, the True Successor...He is "the LORD IS our Salvation".

He came to conquer..."Christus Victor" – the general as He appears in the last book of the Bible.

He came to us the first time, weak, homeless, and NOT simply to expose our sin like Moses but to absorb our sin, to vanquish our debt – to silence our accuser. He, “Yeshua ha Meshiach”, Jesus the Christ, our Joshua, the heart of God became flesh:

“For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ”.
(John 1.17)

You need Him ...you need this Joshua (Yeshua)... you need Him to fight for you... Don't rely on Moses: he can't take you home...YOUR OBEDIENCE TO THE LAW, your being a good person, a kind, generous, tolerant, non-judgmental, socially conscious person... Relying on all that is relying on Moses and relying on self – it won't get you home.

What we need is the True Joshua to fight for us – to live the life we all fail to live and die the death we all deserve to die... to save us. Call on Him...really... right now. Don't waste any more of your life.