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Pieced Together in the Wilderness Pentecost 26

David Schnasa Jacobsen¹

Texts: Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-32

David Buttrick tells a story from his childhood when visitors would come to his family's vacation house on the lake. David and his brother would take an old mystery novel, rip a chapter out toward the end, and place the mystery novel on the nightstand in the guest room. Nine times out of ten the guest would come down to breakfast the next morning, visibly frazzled and agitated. They wanted to know about that mystery novel; they needed to make sense of the story. It could not be pieced together.

Today, people of God, we find ourselves at the mercy of our own narrated mystery: a story from the book of Numbers. The mystery begins with the name of the book itself. Numbers gets its name from the fact that the story begins and ends with census counts of the people: the first at Sinai, the latter on the threshold of the promised land. In Hebrew the book has another, more descriptive name for the story: Bemidbar "in the wilderness." This is a pieced together story about God's people in the time of the wilderness, the long desert narrative in between the giving of the law and the giving of the land.

More precisely, our story today takes place at a crucial hinge in the book of Numbers itself. In the first several chapters, God's people had been counted in a census, organized into groups, and set in relation to the Holy God who stood at their center, represented by the tent of meeting. The first part of Numbers shows early on a world in order and set right, with laws given to maintain purity and connection to the God who brought them out of Egypt and promised to give them land.

Past the hinge, after Numbers 11, the people of God begin setting out from Sinai and quickly discover during their wilderness travels that life and their relationship with God is complicated. The people begin to experience hardship. The people begin to rebel. The people begin to complain...bitterly.

That's where our mystery story comes in – in the wilderness, Bemidbar, in the desert. God's people, now dis-encamped, have grown dissatisfied with daily manna on the way. They are described as a rabble. They want meat. They crave meat. They were weeping.

Sometimes the desire for what you don't have gets worse, when you remember what you once had. The rabble in the desert has Egypt on the mind. They have a memory. It wasn't that long ago, before wilderness, before Sinai, before the Red Sea, before all those plagues, they had more to eat: for nothing, they had fish, cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, garlic. The manna was not enough for life Bemidbar, in the wilderness.

Moses hears the people's cries and takes it personally – as an attack on his leadership. He gets angry. So Moses takes it to the Lord to have it out with God. How could God have mistreated him so? God gave birth to this people in the desert, and God wants Moses now to take care of them all when they cry out for meat? Moses feels God has done him wrong by

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making Moses himself the nurturer of God's desert children. Moses cries out to God that the burden of these weeping people is too great for him to bear.

God hears and responds. The Lord gathers seventy elders to help Moses with his work. The tent of meeting at the center of the camp becomes a place of spirited prophecy where God shares Moses' spirit with others. The sharing even overflows into another part of the camp where Eldad and Medad, outside of the tent of meeting, begin prophesying too. But Moses still wants more: Would that, he says, "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets!" That would be even better.

How about us? Well, I think that story Bemidbar, in the wilderness, is downright strange. The text begins with a rabble craving meat; it ends with Moses longing for more prophets. This may be a story, but I find it a mysterious one. It doesn't so much move predictably like most stories from A to B as from Y to X. What is going on here? What is holding this strange story in the wilderness together?

Today's scholars are frankly divided. Numbers has a reputation for being a little opaque. People don't usually name their stories "numbers". Frankly, a story whose plot wanders around the desert and is bookended by census rolls is just not going to be that easy to grasp. Some scholars actually argue that what we have in Numbers 11 are two stories just barely glued together: a story about the people's dissatisfaction with manna and desire for meat and another story about Moses' struggle with leadership. To these scholars the two stories are just barely cobbled together here in Numbers 11. They struggle to work as a single, unified story. They don't really make a lot of sense.

Still other scholars point out that the story of Numbers is retold at a certain time in the life of God's people. This narrative, they say, was likely written when Israel was in crisis during the exile centuries later in Babylon. It was the crisis of later history, the Babylonian exile centuries later, that caused this particular story Bemidbar, in the wilderness, to be remembered.

There is a movie called "Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close." It's a film about a precocious little boy, Oskar Schell, who tries in vain to make sense of his father's death in the World Trade Towers in 2001. Oskar used to love to play problem solving games with his father. When Oskar discovers a key in his father's blue vase at home, he figures that the key will somehow help him to solve the meaning of this father's death. He hopes that the key will unlock something – anything – that will help Oskar make sense of the tragic story of his father's death. The problem, of course, is actually finding the lock it fits in metropolitan New York. Although Oskar has a name associated with the key, there are far too many people with that name in the metropolis, and far too many locks to try for him to solve the mystery of his father's key. After trying every urban lock he can over a series of weeks and months, the young boy finally falls apart. He rages at his now widowed mother and collapses in a heap on their apartment floor. For all Oskar's precocious intellectual gifts, he cannot solve this most personal of problems. He cannot unlock the mystery of the story of his father's death.

Sometimes a broken story, a broken narrative, just comes because of its connection to broken times. A story that fails to make sense can nonetheless reveal a lot about the crisis that birthed it. In moments like that, we are not left with a consistent narrative, but only fragments of a story that barely connect. This can happen in personal life, when the stories that we narrate for ourselves bump up against crises that call us into question. We imagine ourselves moving through a career into retirement; and our job ends with nowhere to go. We narrate our lives toward some happy ending together with children and grandchildren,

and an unexpected death wipes it all away. We envision a path for ourselves from school to university, and the letter of admission never comes. Our lives are stories, but they are often stories interrupted and broken in the middle.

We face this very mystery right now in public life in North America. Our neighbors in the US just spent a week arguing about fragmentary memories and the possible appointment of a supreme court justice. The public grasped for coherence, but come up short. It's not just that an ambitious judge risks losing the story of his life's dream appointment, but also that an insightful academic struggles to live her life forward when her memory both fails her and yet defines her from 15 years onward: "Indelible," she said, "indelible in the hippocampus is their laughter at my expense." Just how do people keep living in shadows like that? Whether as Americans or Canadians with our own unique, difficult pasts, we struggle through the bits we do know just to narrate our lives, even though our memories both define us and fail. Whichever side we are on, our disputes and arguments are themselves a struggle over memory and loss: for the way things were and for the way things should be, for a recognizable, meaningful life and a desire to be respected, seen, and heard.

So, stuck in this mysterious story called Numbers, Bemidbar, in the wilderness, let us try to piece together memory. Because even this story hinges on what was remembered in Egypt. You recall that their longing for meat was triggered, too – by a memory of how good things had been: fish and leeks and garlic and cucumbers and onions and melons for nothing. The crowd wept that they had all of these in Egypt for nothing. But was it? Was it really for nothing? We might quibble with a desert rabble wanting meat, knowing that they would have gladly settled for Egyptian fish. But was it really for nothing? Not really. They had been slaves in Egypt. Whatever they had to eat was never for nothing; it cost them . . . and their parents . . . and their parents' parents. It wasn't for nothing. They had forgotten more than individual memories, but their pain of being slaves.

In crisis, when we're overwhelmed, we struggle to make sense of our stories, to stitch our memories together into a meaningful life. For this, God gives us Holy Spirit. The Spirit in the end keeps stitching the whole story together. The Spirit disperses to seventy elders so Moses can share the burden of leadership. It is the Spirit, the Hebrew word *ruah* means wind, that drives the quail into the camp for the people to feast. In the midst of shattered memories and crisis, the Spirit reminds us not just of our individual memories, but more: the specific memory of promise. It is the memory of promise that helps us live with stories toward a table where one day all will feast. It is the memory of promise that helps us strive toward justice when others would just rather forget or ignore the pain. It is here, in the desert, Bemidbar, where the Spirit resets this strange broken story between slavery and a land flowing with milk and honey, the very land of promise.

Perhaps the spirit can do the same with us, even today. We live our lives among shards of broken glass. Memories we struggle with and fight over, too. But every memory can still be held up to the light. And the spirit of promise can still gather them and bind them together so we can, in all the brokenness, see through broken panes the new thing God is up to Bemidbar, in the wilderness.