

“Census Sensibility”  
[Numbers 1:1-4, 17-19, 45-54; 9:15-23](#)  
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What Jay just read for us is a combination of a few passages from the book of Numbers. For the next two months, we will be studying the book of Numbers, which is often overlooked aside one or two familiar passages that we will see in the coming weeks.

In fact, I think that Numbers has been overlooked for quite some time. Even the Israelites who wrote it couldn't come up with a good name for it. They already had Genesis, which was about the beginning, and then Exodus, which was about leaving slavery in Egypt, and the Leviticus, which was about the laws that would be maintained by the tribe of Levi. So then they wrote a fourth book about what happened next, but since “What Happened Next” didn't seem like a good name for a book, they called it “Numbers” because it has a lot of numbers in it.

Specifically, it starts out with a census, and chapters 1-4 relate to that census. Jay read a few passages from chapter one so that we could get a general understanding of God's intentions. I had him skip some of the details, which simply give the actual numbers of able-bodied men in each tribe and how those tribes were organized. The first section of the book is actually chapters 1-9, and Jay also read the end of chapter 9.

So, we are only doing one Sunday on the first section of the book of Numbers. I assumed that y'all wouldn't mind if I skipped the stuff about the Israelites taking vows and washing themselves in specific ways. Anyway, this whole first section is about God counting and organizing the people for a purpose...

...and that purpose was to go and conquer the Promised Land. Did you catch that? God was taking a census of the able-bodied males in each tribe, so it wasn't just a census; it was a draft. The Israelites had been enslaved in Egypt, and they had been wandering in the desert for a little over a year now. God had given them a handful of laws and instructions and had been patient with them as they tried to adjust to what He wanted them to do.

Now, it was time to get on with it, and what we learn here is that God wasn't just organizing the people to send them into battle; He was organizing them so that He could go with them. In fact, He assigned an entire tribe to the upkeep of what they called the tabernacle, which was really just a big tent that He had instructed them to build for Him.

Before this tent, whenever the leaders of the Israelites wanted to speak with God, Moses had gone up to a mountain away from them. But, once God gave them instructions for

building a tent for Him, He was now going among them. Instead of simply going ahead of the people or leading them from a distance, God was leading them from among them.

But in order to do so, God had to appoint an entire tribe of the Israelites to maintain that tent and all of the things related to it, so that it would remain a suitable place for God to dwell. Additionally, that tribe was responsible for keeping all of the other tribes on task. Amidst the census, they were in charge of sensibility. They were the keepers of the tent and the keepers of the law.

So...why would God do this? Why would God put these kinds of restrictions around who could take care of the tent? Why couldn't just anyone come and go in the tent and help to carry it?

Well, there are a lot of possible answers for this. Since we are in a Presbyterian church, I'll go with the very Presbyterian answer first: God needed a tent committee. It was a big job, so to make it easier on the Israelites as a whole, God simply assigned one tribe to be the tent committee. They weren't necessarily any more special or gifted than people in other tribes—or any more holy for that matter—but someone had to be in charge of the tent.

Another reason is that God was training the Israelites to have the proper reverence for Him. It has only been a year here since God led them out of Egypt, and they were slaves in Egypt for a few hundred years. There's a popular saying that I'll come back to again over the coming weeks and that is this: it's a lot easier to get the Israelites out of Egypt than to get Egypt out of the Israelites.

This entire period when God led the Israelites from Egypt to the Promised Land wasn't simply for the sake of getting them from point A to point B. God had them go through the wilderness so that He could form them and discipline them. He didn't just want to get His people where He wanted them to be; He wanted to get His people to become who He wanted them to be, and that was a lot more difficult.

But in order to help them grow, God had to organize them in such a way that they would have the proper reverence for Him. Think about this when you think about times of transition in your lives, and even in times when you might feel like you're going through the wilderness. God is always taking us on a journey. Sometimes it's geographic, sometimes it is relational, and sometimes it is vocational...but it is always Spiritual.

If the journeys in our lives are not also accompanied by reverence for God, then we might be at risk of not putting God where He needs to be: at the center. Quite often in our lives, we set out from point A, and we think that God will be waiting for us at point B, whenever we get there—that He has simply gone before us, or is leading us from afar—when in reality, He wants to be right in the midst of it with us.

In a sense, it was the Levites' job to be sure that the people were aware of this. God was organizing them for a long campaign that would include a lot of battles and a lot of hardship, so they would need constant reminders, both verbally and visually, that He was right there with them. The law and the tabernacle were those reminders.

So whenever we look back at these books of the Bible and we see law after law after law, and we think, "well, that's silly," we need to remember that the law wasn't simply a code of ethics and wasn't simply set up to create the optimal society; rather, the God's law was his gift of discipline and order. Different parts of the law had their functional purpose, but the greater purpose was devotion to God, regardless of the people's opinions of what made sense. Abandoning the law meant abandoning discipline, but discipline involves maintaining certain practices regardless of their particular benefits to us personally. After all, we aren't doing things for ourselves or one another; we're doing them for God.

This brings us to a third reason that God would set aside the Levites for this task, rather than have them counted amongst the soldiers who would carry out His military mission:

Maintaining what is holy *is* part of the mission. God didn't just want to give the Israelites a place to live, a place to worship Him, and give them experience in battle. No, He had a purpose for them. Sure, God was taking them somewhere, but His real work happened on the way. The Israelites wanted to get to their destination, but God wanted to take them on a journey.

Many of you might remember the journalist Charles Kuralt, who did a segment on the CBS evening news for almost 30 years called "On the Road." Kuralt and his crew would travel the country in an RV, and they would only take the back roads. Kuralt was famous for saying, "The Interstate system allows you to drive from one coast to the other and see absolutely nothing," and he spent his career turning people's attention to the spaces and the people between the big cities. You could also say he spent his career trying to keep Americans grounded during crazy times.

When we are in crazy times, it is very tempting to stay focused on one thing that has to get done and neglect other things. It's easy to get so focused on Point B that we don't listen for the ways that God might be speaking to us. When we turn out the rest of the world, we might be tuning out the voice of God, as well.

When God was preparing the Israelites for battle, it would be understandable if they became completely battle-focused, so God appointed one tribe to be sure that instead of being fixated on the Promised Land or fixated on battle, they were still oriented around their center, where God was dwelling. In fact, we are told in the next chapter, that when they set out, "the tent of meeting will set out in the middle of the camps."

Instead of simply leading them from ahead, or going somewhere and calling them to come to Him, God was leading them from the center of their camp. Instead of simply speaking to them from a mountain, He was dwelling among them. This is how God wants to work. It's how he wanted to work for the Israelites, and it's how He wants to work for us...

We shouldn't think of God as being way off somewhere with puppet strings, telling us what to do, and we shouldn't think of God as way on ahead of us, waiting for us to get somewhere and just cheering us on. God is in the midst of us...

...but...

...if we don't recognize that, then we cannot get where God wants us to be. We cannot lose our center in life.

But that's just what the Israelites did. Jackson mentioned an example last week, and over the next few weeks you'll hear about how the people became hesitant to follow God, but that pattern went on for more than a thousand years. God would send messengers to them, and sometimes they got their act together, but eventually God decided that if He was really going to dwell among the people, then He needed to literally dwell among the people.

So instead of that tent of meeting, God came to dwell with us in Jesus. But, by the time Jesus came, most of the Levites didn't realize who he was. In the first chapter of the Gospel of John, we are told, "He came to his own, but his own did not recognize him." The keepers of the tabernacle and the laws didn't realize that the one who dwelt in the tabernacle and who authored the law was now residing among them.

But not only did they not recognize Jesus; they didn't recognize where he was leading them. Even those who were looking for the coming of God's chosen one were mostly looking for someone to restore their nation so that they could be prosperous and powerful again. They thought that their Point B was becoming a powerful nation again, but God's Point B was something else. God's point B went way beyond what they could see, and way beyond life itself. Like Jackson mentioned last week, they had their sights set on the horizon, but God was looking to lead them way beyond the horizon.

In fact, God was looking to lead them not just in life, but through death. God was calling them back to Him, and in Jesus's death and resurrection, God opened the doors of His tent so that all could enter— so that they could be made clean not just by their own washing and sacrifices, but by Jesus.

And it is Jesus who wants to dwell at the center of our lives, not just somewhere above or somewhere afar. If we think about the purposes that God has set before us today, we are

indeed on a mission, and God has organized us for that mission, just as He did the Israelites so long ago. That mission is to know him and make him known, but just because God has revealed Himself in a new way doesn't mean that we don't have to have the same devotion to Him that He desired of the Israelites.

No, in fact, our responsibility is even greater now because we have seen God more clearly revealed. He is not just a cloud and a pillar of fire, but He is Jesus...and if we do not have Jesus at our center, then we are not going to get very far along God's path. Without Jesus at the center, we cannot become the people whom God wants us to be. Our purpose is no longer the maintenance of a tent or the upkeep of traditions, but rather the following of Jesus— Jesus, who is present with us and is always leading us.

When we might not know where God is leading us, our best plan is to be centered in Christ. When things in life might seem cloudy, we know that through the mist we can see Jesus. When things in life might seem fiery, we know that in that fire Jesus is at work. When we are in the midst of a journey, Jesus speaks to us and forms us with his Holy Spirit.

We must hold fast to our center, who is Christ, and let him lead us on our journey.

But, as followers of Jesus, we must also remember that we are not simply the strict keepers of a secret, but those who spread his news to the world, telling them that in dark times, in cloudy times, in fiery times, and in times when we don't know where we are going, the temple of Jesus's body is open to us so that we may be led by him.

We have reflected on the book of Numbers, but in closing, let us turn to one of the Bible's letters, the book of Hebrews, chapter 10, in which the author is encouraging his listeners to maintain their faith in tough times:

19 Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, 20 by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, 21 and since we have a great priest over the house of God, 22 let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. 23 Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. 24 And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, 25 not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Christ has been among us, and he has opened for us the way ahead. Let us go forward in confidence that he will lead.