

WHAT THE BIBLE IS ALL ABOUT - WHERE AM I IN GOD'S BIG STORY?

Wandering

Numbers 13:25-31; 14:26-30

Dr. Doyle Sager, First Baptist Church, Jefferson City, Missouri

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There was a man had driven a city bus for 40 years. At his retirement celebration, he mused that he had driven 100,000 miles and never left the city limits. Just went in circles. Speaking of going in circles, I want to show you a map. This is the famed Sinai Peninsula, which is still in the news, thousands of years after the event we're discussing today. The Israelites ended up going in circles in this land for 40 years. Here's what happened.

You remember from previous weeks: Abraham, the father of Isaac, the father of Jacob. Jacob had twelve sons, one of them named Joseph, who went down to Egypt. During a famine, his family joined him. Eventually, all the Israelites were enslaved by the Egyptians. But then the people of God were liberated from Egyptian slavery. Now they were journeying to a place God had prepared for them. This Sinai area is like a giant check mark. And their goal was Canaan, the long handle on the right of that big check mark. While they were in this Sinai area, they sent spies to check out the new land. Twelve spies, one for each of the tribes of Israel. Ten spies brought back a gloom and doom, negative report. Giants in the land. We can't do it! Two spies--Caleb and Joshua--brought back a favorable report. We can do this! Here's a summary of the two reports. In the majority report, the obstacles were bigger than God. In the minority report, God was bigger than the obstacles.

Now, in Numbers 14, we get an insight into what we forfeit when we fail to trust God. Only Caleb and Joshua from their generation would live to see the new land. The nation was doomed to wander for 40 years...in this Sinai area. By the way, the Hebrew Bible calls this book of the Bible, not "Numbers," but "In The Wilderness."

We scoff at these Bible characters. They had just seen the hand of God delivering them from bondage and now they doubt? Yes! Look in the mirror. We should stop and ask this morning. What does it mean to refuse God's blessings? What does it mean to forfeit an inheritance that is ours for the asking? One of the lines of poetry Mom taught me as a child was the snippet from John Greenleaf Whittier: "Of all sad words of tongue or pen the saddest are these, it might have been." Have you noticed? Sometimes God's judgment on us is that we get what we want--life without God's leadership and guidance. When they balked and said no to God, the freshness and power and joy went out of their faith. Has that ever happened to you?

So all of this begs the question. What's the difference between journeying and wandering? Journeying has a purpose, a destination. Wandering is just, well, wandering! So from this text, let's think together about how to know we are wandering spiritually. 1) We keep circling back to the same old landmarks. We keep bumping the same problems. "Arrested Development" is

not just a TV series; it's our spiritual story, isn't it? Learning and growing are absent. In their place is avoidance, hiding and blaming. Someone has written that we know we're going in circles spiritually when we start defending what we know vs. being open to something more [*The God of Intimacy and Action*, Tony Campolo and Mary Albert Darling, p. 60].

2) We succumb to group-think. That's what happened to the Israelites. First the ten announced that they could not take the land. Right after that, Numbers 14:1 says, "Then all the congregation raised a loud cry..." They chimed in with "Me, too." Group think. We are not supposed to always follow the crowd. It leads to dangerous wandering. Yes, sometimes it is confusing, following Christ. And sometimes we are in the minority. But God will show us the way and give us courage.

3) We look backward instead of forward. In Numbers 14:2-3, the people cried out, "Why didn't you just leave us back in Egypt?" A backward look. J. Sidlow Baxter once wrote that it took only 40 hours to get Israel out of Egypt but it took 40 years to get Egypt out of Israel [*Explore the Book*, p. 179]. Here's a pop quiz for you. Why is the front windshield of your vehicle larger than your rearview mirror? Because where you're going is more important than where you've been!

4) Our focus is negative and fear-based. Why is the God of the universe limited to what we define as "possible?" In one of his books, Eugene Peterson tells about actually walking the Negev, the barren desert regions in the upper right hand corner of our map [*The Pastor*, p. 312]. No mountains, rivers or trees. It's not a popular tourist destination. But it's the biblical world. He walked the Negev--for five days. A guide told him, "You don't get this by taking pictures. You have to make the trip. You do it with your feet."

We have made much about how knowing Jesus brings peace, forgiveness, new life and hope. But we've left off an important piece. Knowing Jesus offers us courage to walk. To step out. To stop wandering. In the name of Jesus, get going.