

Moses and the Journey of Faith

Week Five

Monday, March 14th

Exodus 39: 32-43, 40: 16-38

³²And so at last the Tabernacle was finished. The Israelites had done everything just as the LORD had commanded Moses. ³³And they brought the entire Tabernacle to Moses: the sacred tent with all its furnishings, the clasps, frames, crossbars, posts, and bases; ³⁴the layers of tanned ram skins and fine goatskin leather; the inner curtain that enclosed the Most Holy Place; ³⁵the Ark of the Covenant and its carrying poles; the Ark's cover--the place of atonement; ³⁶the table and all its utensils; the Bread of the Presence; ³⁷the gold lampstand and its accessories; the lamp cups and the oil for lighting; ³⁸the gold altar; the anointing oil; the fragrant incense; the curtain for the entrance of the sacred tent; ³⁹the bronze altar; the bronze grating; its poles and utensils; the large washbasin and its pedestal; ⁴⁰the curtains for the walls of the courtyard and the posts and bases holding them up; the curtain at the courtyard entrance; the cords and tent pegs; all the articles used in the operation of the Tabernacle; ⁴¹the beautifully crafted garments to be worn while ministering in the Holy Place--the holy garments for Aaron the priest and for his sons to wear while on duty.

⁴²So the people of Israel followed all of the LORD's instructions to Moses. ⁴³Moses inspected all their work and blessed them because it had been done as the LORD had commanded him.

¹⁶Moses proceeded to do everything as the LORD had commanded him. ¹⁷So the Tabernacle was set up on the first day of the new year. ¹⁸Moses put it together by setting its frames into their bases and attaching the crossbars and raising the posts. ¹⁹Then he spread the coverings over the Tabernacle framework and put on the roof layers, just as the LORD had commanded him.

²⁰He placed inside the Ark the stone tablets inscribed with the terms of the covenant, and then he attached the Ark's carrying poles. He also set the Ark's cover--the place of atonement--on top of it. ²¹Then he brought the Ark of the Covenant into the Tabernacle and set up the inner curtain to shield it from view, just as the LORD had commanded.

²²Next he placed the table in the Tabernacle, along the north side of the Holy Place, just outside the inner curtain. ²³And he arranged the Bread of the Presence on the table that stands before the LORD, just as the LORD had commanded.

²⁴He set the lampstand in the Tabernacle across from the table on the south side of the Holy Place. ²⁵Then he set up the lamps in the LORD's presence, just as the LORD had commanded. ²⁶He also placed the incense altar in the Tabernacle, in the Holy Place in front of the inner curtain. ²⁷On it he burned the fragrant incense made from sweet spices, just as the LORD had commanded.

²⁸He attached the curtain at the entrance of the Tabernacle, ²⁹and he placed the altar of burnt offering near the Tabernacle entrance. On it he offered a burnt offering and a grain offering, just as the LORD had commanded.

³⁰Next he placed the large washbasin between the Tabernacle and the altar. He filled it with water so the priests could use it to wash themselves. ³¹Moses and Aaron and Aaron's sons washed their hands and feet in the basin. ³²Whenever they walked past the altar to enter the Tabernacle, they were to stop and wash, just as the LORD had commanded Moses.

³³Then he hung the curtains forming the courtyard around the Tabernacle and the altar. And he set up the curtain at the entrance of the courtyard. So at last Moses finished the work.

³⁴Then the cloud covered the Tabernacle, and the glorious presence of the LORD filled it. ³⁵Moses was no longer able to enter the Tabernacle because the cloud had settled down over it, and the Tabernacle was filled with the awesome glory of the LORD.

³⁶Now whenever the cloud lifted from the Tabernacle and moved, the people of Israel would set out on their journey, following it. ³⁷But if the cloud stayed, they would stay until it moved again. ³⁸The cloud of the LORD rested on the Tabernacle during the day, and at night there was fire in the cloud so all the people of Israel could see it. This continued throughout all their journeys.

Points of Interest:

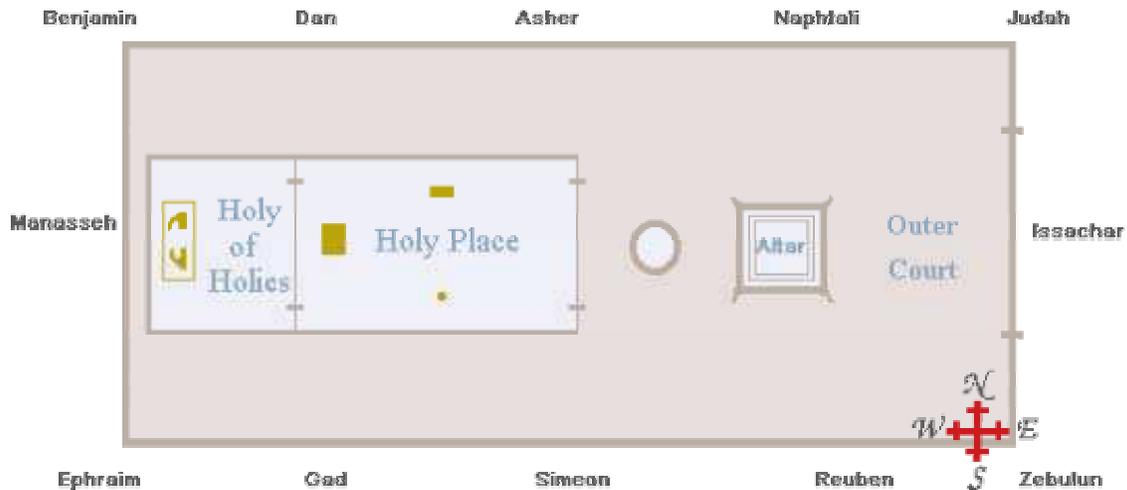
- 'the people of Israel followed all of the LORD's instructions'—earlier, the people follow Aaron's bad advice to gather their earrings to make an idol. Here, they successfully follow God's instructions for building The Tent. This second time through the covenant, so far the Israelites have passed every test.

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- 'Moses put it together'—I don't know about you, but for me it's hard to keep track of what this tabernacle actually looked like as I read this description. For your convenience, here's a little diagram (© Graves, www.abu.nb.ca/ecm/photo/tabern.htm):

The Tabernacle



The names of the twelve tribes are around the outside because each tribe was responsible for constructing the curtains for a certain portion of God's tent. Not only did that distribute the work evenly among the tribes, but it created the symbolism that all twelve tribes (as represented by their curtains) are in constant attendance at the place of worship. The little icon in the Holy of Holies (which is called 'the inner curtain' in our text) is the ark. The little box in the Holy Place near the entrance to the Holy of Holies is the incense altar. The rectangle on the north side is the table of bread. The dot on the south side is the lamp stand. The circle in the outer court is the washbasin in which the priest washed themselves before entering.

- 'Moses proceeded to do everything as the LORD had commanded him'—everyone does their part. The people faithfully construct the different components of God's Tent, and Moses then assembles it.
- 'placed inside the Ark'—although it isn't mentioned here, besides the stone tablets of the law, a jar of manna was placed in the Ark, so that future generations would have a memorial to God's provision in the desert.
- 'in the LORD's presence'—the area behind the inner curtain, also known as the Most Holy Place or the Holy of Holies, was meant to represent the throne room of the LORD. The Ark symbolized the throne of God, and the Israelites pictured God sitting on the Ark, attended by an angelic court represented by the two angels on the Ark's lid. Here's a drawing of how the ark might have looked (© Graves, www.abu.nb.ca/ecm/photo/larkc.gif):



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Over the course of history, many sects of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity have been suspicious of art—and particularly of representational art. They've taken God's commandment against making idols as an indictment of art altogether. Thus, in most mosques and many synagogues, while there is frequently quite intricate abstract, geometric art, there are no portrayals of animals, humans, or angels. On a recent trip to Tyre, in Lebanon, I took a tour of the Byzantine-era ruins and saw how, when the Muslims conquered Tyre, they struck out the faces of angels on the Christian tombs, in order to comply with God's commandment against the making of idols. Our own New England Puritans took things a step farther, prohibiting the visual arts from their churches altogether—some sects of Baptists don't allow music either.

Such asceticism doesn't seem to be at all what God has in mind in the design of his tent. Although he clearly prohibits the people of Israel from making any physical representations of him, he encourages them—in fact, commands them—to make representations of his throne and of his angels. The Israelites are intended to use all of their artistic talents to build the tabernacle, and to enjoy all of their senses in worship at the tabernacle: the curtains are made of several different colors of rich material woven into tapestry and embroidered with portrayals of angels; gold, silver, bronze, and many different kinds of gems ornament the tent's furnishings; different sorts of wood are used for the different wooden element; and the whole experience is infused with the sweet smell of incense. God expects worship of him to fully engage the senses and the imaginations of his people.

- 'the Bread of the Presence on the table'—there are twelve loaves of bread on this table, one for each of the tribes. *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary* postulates that they are meant to be continual reminders that God is the source of all provision (1447). I wonder if they are meant to be a memorial and a continuation of the meal that the elders shared with God at the dedication of the covenant. If that's the case, this table is a constant invitation to friendship and companionship with God.
- 'he burned the fragrant incense made from sweet spices'—the incense may have been meant to lend the Holy Place an air of smoky mystery, or it may symbolize the prayers of the people (*Bible Background Commentary* 115). Revelation, chapters 5 and 8, would lend weight to the theory that it represents the prayers of the people.
- 'the glorious presence of the LORD filled it'—since the golden calf incident, Moses has had to meet with God in his own tent of meeting, far outside of the camp. Now, the LORD's presence has fallen in the midst of the people, on a tent made by the people.
- 'Moses was no longer able to enter the Tabernacle'—the presence of God so intensely rests on God's Tent that even Moses, the man who met with God on the mountain, saw his glory, and has daily face-glowing encounters with him, can't stand to enter.
- 'if the cloud stayed, they would stay until it moved again'—Moses' big request—almost a demand, even—of the LORD is that God himself accompany them and lead them on their journey. Here we see that prayer answered. By his mercy, on this journey God dwells in a tent made by the same people who had rejected him for the golden calf. The rebellious people who nearly ruined Moses' chance of taking on this adventure with God end up providing the vehicle for his hopes to be answered.

Taking it home:

- *For you:* Following God for the Israelites sometimes meant moving and sometimes meant staying right where they were. They knew which one to do by taking their cues from God: when they noticed him moving, they moved; when he stayed, they stayed. Ask God to give you the eyes to see what he is doing, so that you can follow in his wake.
- *For your six:* In this passage, after some distance between them, God again draws close to the people. Ask God to draw near to your six, and pray for them that they would be able to feel his presence with them and enjoy it.
- *For our church:* We are about to move from a setting in the Morse School gym and auditorium which, let's be honest, is not exactly beautiful into a much more intentionally artistic building and sanctuary. Pray that by this change we would be drawn into a deeper, multi-sensory experience of worship. Ask God to give a special grace to those among us who have some suspicion of such an embellished worship space, are afraid of being distracted by it, or are just plain unfamiliar with the setting.

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Tuesday, March 15th

Numbers 11: 4-23, 31-34

⁴Then the foreign rabble who were traveling with the Israelites began to crave the good things of Egypt, and the people of Israel also began to complain. "Oh, for some meat!" they exclaimed. ⁵"We remember all the fish we used to eat for free in Egypt. And we had all the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic that we wanted. ⁶But now our appetites are gone, and day after day we have nothing to eat but this manna!"

⁷The manna looked like small coriander seeds, pale yellow in color. ⁸The people gathered it from the ground and made flour by grinding it with hand mills or pounding it in mortars. Then they boiled it in a pot and made it into flat cakes. These cakes tasted like they had been cooked in olive oil. ⁹The manna came down on the camp with the dew during the night.

¹⁰Moses heard all the families standing in front of their tents weeping, and the LORD became extremely angry. Moses was also very aggravated. ¹¹And Moses said to the LORD, "Why are you treating me, your servant, so miserably? What did I do to deserve the burden of a people like this? ¹²Are they my children? Am I their father? Is that why you have told me to carry them in my arms--like a nurse carries a baby--to the land you swore to give their ancestors? ¹³Where am I supposed to get meat for all these people? They keep complaining and saying, 'Give us meat!' ¹⁴I can't carry all these people by myself! The load is far too heavy! ¹⁵I'd rather you killed me than treat me like this. Please spare me this misery!"

¹⁶Then the LORD said to Moses, "Summon before me seventy of the leaders of Israel. Bring them to the Tabernacle to stand there with you. ¹⁷I will come down and talk to you there. I will take some of the Spirit that is upon you, and I will put the Spirit upon them also. They will bear the burden of the people along with you, so you will not have to carry it alone.

¹⁸"And tell the people to purify themselves, for tomorrow they will have meat to eat. Tell them, 'The LORD has heard your whining and complaints: "If only we had meat to eat! Surely we were better off in Egypt!" Now the LORD will give you meat, and you will have to eat it. ¹⁹And it won't be for just a day or two, or for five or ten or even twenty. ²⁰You will eat it for a whole month until you gag and are sick of it. For you have rejected the LORD, who is here among you, and you have complained to him, "Why did we ever leave Egypt?" ' "

²¹But Moses said, "There are 600,000 foot soldiers here with me, and yet you promise them meat for a whole month! ²²Even if we butchered all our flocks and herds, would that satisfy them? Even if we caught all the fish in the sea, would that be enough?"

²³Then the LORD said to Moses, "Is there any limit to my power? Now you will see whether or not my word comes true!"

³¹Now the LORD sent a wind that brought quail from the sea and let them fall into the camp and all around it! For many miles in every direction from the camp there were quail flying about three feet above the ground. ³²So the people went out and caught quail all that day and throughout the night and all the next day, too. No one gathered less than fifty bushels! They spread the quail out all over the camp. ³³But while they were still eating the meat, the anger of the LORD blazed against the people, and he caused a severe plague to break out among them. ³⁴So that place was called Kibroth-hattaavah-- "the graves of craving" -- because they buried the people there who had craved meat from Egypt.

Points of Interest:

- 'the foreign rabble who were traveling with the Israelites'—as we noticed previously, many non-Israelites joined them when they left Egypt. These foreigners were invited to become fully-participating members of the community, and many non-Israelite families were adopted into one or another of the twelve tribes. Apparently, some of the foreigners decided not to join the Israelites or take part in the covenant, but they nonetheless continued to travel with the Israelites. 'Rabble' might not be the kindest way to describe this group, but I think what the story is trying to get across here is that they're kind of like the proverbial fifth wheel: they don't really belong, but they're there. Their decision to follow the Israelites but not to join them seems a bit odd. On the one hand, given their alien status, it seems reasonable that they might be more prone to notice the discomfort of the journey; on the other hand, it

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seems that they could easily part ways with the Israelites whenever they wanted. It makes me wonder what motivated them to stick around.

In any case, the main point here is that the people of God quickly jump on the complaint bandwagon with these foreign hangers-on. The honeymoon after the completion of God's Tent doesn't last long.

- 'day after day we have nothing to eat but this manna!'—if you remember, manna—or, in English, what-is-it—is the miraculous bread with which God has fed the Israelites since about a month after they left Egypt. This wonderful miracle of God has eventually become a mundane part of life, or even somewhat despicable. Since it's been several months (perhaps as much as two years), it's understandable that they've gotten tired of a heavily manna-based diet. Nonetheless, it's sad to see how disdainful they've become of God's miraculous provision. It's easy to see why God would be insulted by their ingratitude. It also seems highly possible that if they had asked rather than complaining, God might have been glad to meet their desires. Last time the subject came up, God fed them quails—even this time he does the same, though not entirely happily.
- 'Moses was also very aggravated'—everyone seems to be in a bit of a bad mood: the people are upset with Moses and God; the LORD is angry with the people; and Moses is aggravated at God. Moses portrays himself as a parent who's been left alone with the kids all day by his spouse—he even goes so far as to say that they're not his kids at all. Moses is feeling overwhelmed, too small for the job, and alone. It honestly is far too big a job for one person to be the parent of hundreds of thousands. Moses essentially asks to be relieved of his position. God doesn't grant his request, but he does provide him with help. Notably, when the Israelites complain about God, he gets angry; when Moses complains to God, the LORD answers his concern.
- 'until you gag and are sick of it'—God wants to make sure that they are never again able to complain that he hasn't given them enough meat.
- 'all our flocks and herds'—the fact that they have flocks and herds speaks to the possibility that their diet is not so completely dismal as they have led us to believe.
- 'Is there any limit to my power?'—in this whole passage, Moses has been worried that he doesn't have what's needed to lead and care for the people. God reminds him here that it's never been about what Moses can muster up himself. It's about what God is able to give him.
- 'the anger of the LORD blazed against the people'—perhaps God is angry because the people are so busy shoving quail into their mouths that they don't stop to say, 'Thank you,' or to admit that perhaps their complaints against God were unjust.

Taking it home:

- *For you:* As I read about the Israelites complaining about the manna, I'm tempted to think, 'What's the big deal?' or even to think that it's natural and even justified—perhaps it could even be considered emotionally healthy 'venting'—for them to express their feelings about their boring diet. But God seems to consider it a pretty big insult to him. Perhaps God is upset because their complaints get in the way of two other things: gratitude and asking. Complaints make God look bad, and only make the Israelites feel worse. But expressing thankfulness and asking God for what they need could very well lead toward better circumstances, both emotionally and materially. The rest of the day, try to keep track of the times when you complain or are tempted to complain. Do a little one-day experiment: whenever possible, replace that potential complaint with some expression of gratitude or with a prayer to God to provide for your need. At the end of the day, reflect on how it went.
- *For your six:* It's easy to assume that what we've already gotten from God is all he is willing or able to give, but this passage shows that the expectations of both Moses and the Israelites were far below what God would actually give. Pray for your six that they would have the boldness to ask (or continue to ask) God for what they want from him, and ask God to answer their prayers as generously as he did the prayer of Moses.
- *For our church:* Spend a moment praising God for the fact that it is his abilities, not our own, that are the key to our success in pursuing the purposes to which he has called us.

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Wednesday, March 16th

Numbers 11:24-30, ch.12

²⁴So Moses went out and reported the LORD's words to the people. Then he gathered the seventy leaders and stationed them around the Tabernacle. ²⁵And the LORD came down in the cloud and spoke to Moses. He took some of the Spirit that was upon Moses and put it upon the seventy leaders. They prophesied as the Spirit rested upon them, but that was the only time this happened.

²⁶Two men, Eldad and Medad, were still in the camp when the Spirit rested upon them. They were listed among the leaders but had not gone out to the Tabernacle, so they prophesied there in the camp. ²⁷A young man ran and reported to Moses, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp!" ²⁸Joshua son of Nun, who had been Moses' personal assistant since his youth, protested, "Moses, my master, make them stop!"

²⁹But Moses replied, "Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all the LORD's people were prophets, and that the LORD would put his Spirit upon them all!" ³⁰Then Moses returned to the camp with the leaders of Israel.

¹While they were at Hazeroth, Miriam and Aaron criticized Moses because he had married a Cushite woman. ²They said, "Has the LORD spoken only through Moses? Hasn't he spoken through us, too?" But the LORD heard them.

³Now Moses was more humble than any other person on earth. ⁴So immediately the LORD called to Moses, Aaron, and Miriam and said, "Go out to the Tabernacle, all three of you!" And the three of them went out. ⁵Then the LORD descended in the pillar of cloud and stood at the entrance of the Tabernacle. "Aaron and Miriam!" he called, and they stepped forward. ⁶And the LORD said to them, "Now listen to me! Even with prophets, I the LORD communicate by visions and dreams. ⁷But that is not how I communicate with my servant Moses. He is entrusted with my entire house. ⁸I speak to him face to face, directly and not in riddles! He sees the LORD as he is. Should you not be afraid to criticize him?"

⁹The LORD was furious with them, and he departed. ¹⁰As the cloud moved from above the Tabernacle, Miriam suddenly became white as snow with leprosy. When Aaron saw what had happened, ¹¹he cried out to Moses, "Oh, my lord! Please don't punish us for this sin we have so foolishly committed. ¹²Don't let her be like a stillborn baby, already decayed at birth."

¹³So Moses cried out to the LORD, "Heal her, O God, I beg you!"

¹⁴And the LORD said to Moses, "If her father had spit in her face, wouldn't she have been defiled for seven days? Banish her from the camp for seven days, and after that she may return."

¹⁵So Miriam was excluded from the camp for seven days, and the people waited until she was brought back before they traveled again. ¹⁶Then they left Hazeroth and camped in the wilderness of Paran.

Points of Interest:

- 'the LORD's words to the people'—this section is actually in the middle of the last passage, in response to Moses' request for more help in leading the people
- 'I wish that all the LORD's people were prophets'—in response to Moses' need for more help in leading the people, God makes his Holy Spirit fall on 70 elders, giving them the power to do what Moses does: speak the words of the LORD to the people. This spirit of prophecy even falls on the two elders who are running late and haven't made it to the Tabernacle yet. Joshua is a little shocked by this, perhaps out of jealousy for Moses, perhaps out of an idea that it's somehow wrong for anyone but Moses to prophesy. But Moses isn't trying to hoard this experience for himself. His hope would be that the connection he has with God would spread to every Israelite and eventually to every person in the world. That's what the dream of being the priestly nation (which God talked about during the first attempt at making the covenant) was all about.
- 'Hasn't he spoken through us, too?'—while Moses is blessing the fact that 70 other people have been filled with the Holy Spirit, Miriam and Aaron are complaining because they feel like Moses is keeping all of the fame and power to himself. Miriam is Moses' sister. So, here we see Moses' own family turn against him. Aaron more broadly and Miriam in this particular circumstance fill a common role in the life of a hero: the role of 'Shapeshifter.' A shapeshifter is someone who appears to be playing one role in the hero's journey, but is actually playing another; or sometimes the shapeshifter actually moves among more than one role. For example, someone who appears to be a mentor could actually be your enemy,

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luring you in the wrong direction. Aaron has shown himself to be somewhat shifty in Moses' journey. You never quite know what you're going to get from Aaron: will it be faithful companionship under the threat of grave danger, like when they were in the contest with Pharaoh? Extreme negligence and cowardice, like during the golden calf incident? Strength and timely helpfulness, like when he held Moses' arms up during the battle? Or open rebellion, like here? Because Aaron is constantly shifting shape, it's probably difficult for Moses to know how to feel about him or what to think of him. He can't treat him simply as an enemy or as a friend. I imagine that over time it becomes more difficult for Moses to rely on Aaron.

- 'because he had married a Cushite woman'—we discover that racism is at the ugly little core of Aaron and Miriam's complaints. They believe Moses is less worthy than them to be the leader of the people because of his bi-ethnic marriage. In all other mentions of Moses' wife's family, she is described as a Midianite; so it's hard to say where this mention of Cush comes from (Cush is roughly modern-day Sudan, whereas the Midianites lived in what is now Jordan and Arabia). It's possible that 'Cushite' was Egyptian slang for 'foreigner,' or that it's a comment on her skin color. In any case, it's clear that the jealousy of Aaron and Miriam comes out of ugly, petty prejudice.
- 'Moses was more humble than any other person on earth'—it seems to me as if Moses doesn't even answer the spite and jealousy of his siblings himself; so God himself defends Moses from the attacks and accusations of Aaron and Miriam.
- 'Should you not be afraid to criticize him?'—God rationally points out that it is obvious to the entire people that he has a special relationship with Moses. If Moses is such good buddies with God, isn't it a bit foolish to pick a fight with him?
- 'Miriam suddenly became white as snow with leprosy'—interestingly, at the burning bush, the LORD gave Moses the ability to use leprosy as a sign along with turning a staff into a snake and turning water into blood. Of course, Moses ends up using the staff-into-snake and the water-into-blood signs in Egypt, but leprosy is never mentioned. It finally comes in handy here.
- 'he cried out to Moses, "Oh, my lord!"—only Miriam ends up getting leprosy. Maybe she was the instigator, or maybe Aaron repents just in time to avoid getting zapped himself.
- 'the people waited until she was brought back before they traveled again'—this has to be embarrassing. You make a play to oust Moses and become leader of the people yourself. All you end up with is leprosy, AND the whole nation has to sit around for seven days waiting for you to be healed before they can move on. This is a very public failure.

Taking it home

- *For you:* Do you have any shapeshifters in your life—people of whom it's hard to tell if they are friends or enemies, helpers or hindrances in your journey? Ask God to give you wisdom about how to respond to these people.
- *For your six:* Are any of your six facing false accusations? Ask God to defend them in surprising ways, so that they don't have to defend themselves.
- *For our church:* Moses says, 'I wish that all the LORD's people were prophets.' After Jesus' resurrection, we've come one step closer to Moses' wish being true; when Jesus rose from the dead, he poured out the Spirit on all of his followers. Peter, in explaining what had happened, said, 'This is the time when the prophecy is fulfilled that the Spirit will be poured out on all flesh.' But the Holy Spirit has still not yet been given out nearly as widely as God wishes it to be. Pray for more of God's Spirit to be poured out on us and on everyone we know.

Thursday, March 17th

Numbers 13: 1-3, 17-33

¹The LORD now said to Moses, ²"Send men to explore the land of Canaan, the land I am giving to Israel. Send one leader from each of the twelve ancestral tribes." ³So Moses did as the LORD commanded him. He sent out twelve men, all tribal leaders of Israel, from their camp in the wilderness of Paran.

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¹⁷Moses gave the men these instructions as he sent them out to explore the land: "Go northward through the Negev into the hill country. ¹⁸See what the land is like and find out whether the people living there are strong or weak, few or many. ¹⁹What kind of land do they live in? Is it good or bad? Do their towns have walls or are they unprotected? ²⁰How is the soil? Is it fertile or poor? Are there many trees? Enter the land boldly, and bring back samples of the crops you see." (It happened to be the season for harvesting the first ripe grapes.)

²¹So they went up and explored the land from the wilderness of Zin as far as Rehob, near Lebo-hamath. ²²Going northward, they passed first through the Negev and arrived at Hebron, where Ahiman, Sheshai, and Talmai--all descendants of Anak--lived. (The ancient town of Hebron was founded seven years before the Egyptian city of Zoan.) ²³When they came to what is now known as the valley of Eshcol, they cut down a cluster of grapes so large that it took two of them to carry it on a pole between them! They also took samples of the pomegranates and figs. ²⁴At that time the Israelites renamed the valley Eshcol-- "cluster" -- because of the cluster of grapes they had cut there.

²⁵After exploring the land for forty days, the men returned ²⁶to Moses, Aaron, and the people of Israel at Kadesh in the wilderness of Paran. They reported to the whole community what they had seen and showed them the fruit they had taken from the land. ²⁷This was their report to Moses: "We arrived in the land you sent us to see, and it is indeed a magnificent country--a land flowing with milk and honey. Here is some of its fruit as proof. ²⁸But the people living there are powerful, and their cities and towns are fortified and very large. We also saw the descendants of Anak who are living there! ²⁹The Amalekites live in the Negev, and the Hittites, Jebusites, and Amorites live in the hill country. The Canaanites live along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea and along the Jordan Valley."

³⁰But Caleb tried to encourage the people as they stood before Moses. "Let's go at once to take the land," he said. "We can certainly conquer it!"

³¹But the other men who had explored the land with him answered, "We can't go up against them! They are stronger than we are!" ³²So they spread discouraging reports about the land among the Israelites: "The land we explored will swallow up any who go to live there. All the people we saw were huge. ³³We even saw giants there, the descendants of Anak. We felt like grasshoppers next to them, and that's what we looked like to them!"

Points of Interest:

- 'Send men to explore the land of Canaan'—they're actually getting close to their destination. They have made their covenant with God. They've built the tabernacle for him to travel with them. And now they are on the doorstep of the land God wants to give them. So, God wants them to get a little sneak preview of where they will be going.
- 'all descendants of Anak'—Anak was apparently a famous giant. So, either these people are actually part of the tribe descended from Anak, they are very big (and therefore figuratively descendents of Anak), or they just look really big to the Israelites.
- 'After exploring the land for forty days'—Forty seems to be a number associated with preparation. Moses' two times on the mountain, preparing for the making of the covenant, were both 40 days; and here they explore the land for 40 days before deciding to move in.
- 'it is indeed a magnificent country' and 'the Hittites, Jebusites, and Amorites'—the land turns out to be exactly as God had described: it is an abundant land, and it is the land of the all of these different nations. Even though it's exactly as described, the spies seem a bit surprised by what they've found: 'Sure, it's a land flowing with milk and honey, but did you know that the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Jebusites, and the Amorites are living there?' Of course Moses knew that. It's what he's been telling the people all along. But now that the spies have actually seen these people, they're a little freaked out. Taking this land will be harder than they might have been imagining.
- 'They are stronger than we are!'—it's probably true that the nations inhabiting the land are stronger than they are, but according to the covenant that shouldn't matter: it's God's job to drive out the people, not theirs. That's probably why Caleb is so confident that they should go nonetheless: he sees that the land is as good as God said, and he can't wait to have God give it to him.

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Taking it home:

- *For you:* Pray that God will give you the faith in him to believe he has the power to give you the blessings he has promised.
- *For your six:* The Israelites get here a glimpse of the blessings God has in store for them, and they respond with wonder and with fear. Pray that God would also give your six a glimpse of the blessings he could give them; ask the Holy Spirit to give them the ability to maximize their wonder and minimize their fear as they respond.
- *For our church:* Pray for the remainder of our 40 days of faith. Pray that it would be a fruitful time of preparation for whatever God has in store for us next. Pray especially that he would prepare us for our upcoming move into our new building in North Cambridge.

Friday, March 18th

Numbers 14: 1-25

¹Then all the people began weeping aloud, and they cried all night. ²Their voices rose in a great chorus of complaint against Moses and Aaron. "We wish we had died in Egypt, or even here in the wilderness!" they wailed. ³"Why is the LORD taking us to this country only to have us die in battle? Our wives and little ones will be carried off as slaves! Let's get out of here and return to Egypt!" ⁴Then they plotted among themselves, "Let's choose a leader and go back to Egypt!"

⁵Then Moses and Aaron fell face down on the ground before the people of Israel. ⁶Two of the men who had explored the land, Joshua son of Nun and Caleb son of Jephunneh, tore their clothing. ⁷They said to the community of Israel, "The land we explored is a wonderful land! ⁸And if the LORD is pleased with us, he will bring us safely into that land and give it to us. It is a rich land flowing with milk and honey, and he will give it to us! ⁹Do not rebel against the LORD, and don't be afraid of the people of the land. They are only helpless prey to us! They have no protection, but the LORD is with us! Don't be afraid of them!"

¹⁰But the whole community began to talk about stoning Joshua and Caleb. Then the glorious presence of the LORD appeared to all the Israelites from above the Tabernacle. ¹¹And the LORD said to Moses, "How long will these people reject me? Will they never believe me, even after all the miraculous signs I have done among them? ¹²I will disown them and destroy them with a plague. Then I will make you into a nation far greater and mightier than they are!"

¹³"But what will the Egyptians think when they hear about it?" Moses pleaded with the LORD. "They know full well the power you displayed in rescuing these people from Egypt. ¹⁴They will tell this to the inhabitants of this land, who are well aware that you are with this people. They know, LORD, that you have appeared in full view of your people in the pillar of cloud that hovers over them. They know that you go before them in the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. ¹⁵Now if you slaughter all these people, the nations that have heard of your fame will say, ¹⁶'The LORD was not able to bring them into the land he swore to give them, so he killed them in the wilderness.'

¹⁷"Please, Lord, prove that your power is as great as you have claimed it to be. For you said, ¹⁸'The LORD is slow to anger and rich in unfailing love, forgiving every kind of sin and rebellion. Even so he does not leave sin unpunished, but he punishes the children for the sins of their parents to the third and fourth generations.' ¹⁹Please pardon the sins of this people because of your magnificent, unfailing love, just as you have forgiven them ever since they left Egypt."

²⁰Then the LORD said, "I will pardon them as you have requested. ²¹But as surely as I live, and as surely as the earth is filled with the LORD's glory, ²²not one of these people will ever enter that land. They have seen my glorious presence and the miraculous signs I performed both in Egypt and in the wilderness, but again and again they tested me by refusing to listen. ²³They will never even see the land I swore to give their ancestors. None of those who have treated me with contempt will enter it. ²⁴But my servant Caleb is different from the others. He has remained loyal to me, and I will bring him into the land he explored. His descendants will receive their full share of that land. ²⁵Now turn around and don't go on toward the land where the Amalekites and Canaanites live. Tomorrow you must set out for the wilderness in the direction of the Red Sea."

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Points of Interest:

- 'We wish we had died in Egypt, or even here in the wilderness!'—as we discussed earlier, the hero's journey always involves the hero being called out of her ordinary world into the special world of adventure. Her response is always to refuse that call. That seems to be what's happening here. Caleb and Joshua are serving as heralds, calling the people to join the adventure of taking the promised land. They aggressively refuse, wanting to stay in the wilderness, or even go back to Egypt. Incidentally, the wilderness had at one time been the special world, and they'd resisted the call to go into the wilderness as well. Now, it seems kind of comfortable to them. It seems that no matter how many times we embark on a hero's path, our first instinct when we hear a new call will be to resist.
- 'will be carried off as slaves'—they seem to have forgotten that they were already slaves in Egypt. They're assuming that the worst will happen, but even the worst is only as bad as the life God has already rescued them from.
- 'if the LORD is pleased with us'—Joshua and Caleb have learned by now that without God on their side things could be bad indeed, but with God on their side anything is possible. In their fear of what might happen to them in Canaan, the people are putting themselves in danger of the far worse situation that could happen if they distance themselves from God.
- 'the whole community began to talk about stoning Joshua and Caleb'—the people are so resistant to what Joshua and Caleb have to say that they are willing to kill them to shut them up.
- 'Then I will make you into a nation far greater and mightier than they are!'—this is a repeat of the golden calf. The people's unwillingness to go to the promised land is another breach of their contract with God. This time, interestingly, the people are refusing to accept the gift that God had promised to give them. God is committed to blessing someone and giving them the land. Since the people of Israel don't seem to want it, God asks Moses if he'd like it instead.
- 'They know, LORD, that you have appeared in full view of your people in the pillar of cloud'—Moses points out that God has already been seen in public with the people of Israel. God can't just quietly part ways with them now. It's known that he is their God.
- 'the LORD was not able to bring them into the land'—God has already expressed his intention of bringing the Israelites into the land. If he stops now, people will get the wrong idea about his character and his power—even though he would be perfectly justified in stopping because of Israel's breach of contract.
- 'pardon the sins of this people because of your magnificent, unfailing love'—the biggest barrier to bringing the people into the promised land is not the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Jebusites, and Amalekites. It is their own sin and rebellion. Thankfully, God is willing and able to overcome this barrier as well. Making the people worthy and able to be led into the land will be the most awesome display of God's glory.
- 'not one of these people will ever enter that land'—this is a perfect illustration of the old saying, 'Be careful what you wish for.' The people say, 'We wish we had died in Egypt, or even here in the wilderness!' God is granting their wish: they will indeed all die in the wilderness. This generation has shown that they belong in the wilderness. Now, God is going to take the slow approach of building a relationship from the beginning with a new generation which he will bring into the land as promised.
- 'Tomorrow you must set out for the wilderness'—they're heading backward, not forward. What was meant to be a wilderness journey of a matter of months will end up taking 40 years.

Taking it home:

- *For you:* It's not difficult to understand why the Israelites would refuse the call to move into the land. While there was much promise, there were also many dangers and uncertainties. The wilderness felt safe, and, above all, it was a known quantity. Has God been nudging you to move out of your ordinary life into some sort of new adventure with him? What are the things that hold you back from saying, 'yes'? What are promises ahead? What assurances do you need from God before you can move forward?
- *For your six:* The people of Israel shut their ears to the encouragement of Joshua and Caleb, and it costs them 40 years in the wilderness. Pray that your six would have open ears to people who are encouraging them in the direction of peace, prosperity, healing, and blessing.

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- *For our church:* Pray for God's mercy to be with us. Pray that no matter how many times we fail, we complain, or we try to wriggle our way out of his plans for us that he would remain committed to making us his people and fulfilling his purposes through us.

Saturday, March 19th

Numbers 16: 1-32

¹One day Korah son of Izhar, a descendant of Kohath son of Levi, conspired with Dathan and Abiram, the sons of Eliab, and On son of Peleth, from the tribe of Reuben. ²They incited a rebellion against Moses, involving 250 other prominent leaders, all members of the assembly. ³They went to Moses and Aaron and said, "You have gone too far! Everyone in Israel has been set apart by the LORD, and he is with all of us. What right do you have to act as though you are greater than anyone else among all these people of the LORD?"

⁴When Moses heard what they were saying, he threw himself down with his face to the ground. ⁵Then he said to Korah and his followers, "Tomorrow morning the LORD will show us who belongs to him and who is holy. The LORD will allow those who are chosen to enter his holy presence. ⁶You, Korah, and all your followers must do this: Take incense burners, ⁷and burn incense in them tomorrow before the LORD. Then we will see whom the LORD chooses as his holy one. You Levites are the ones who have gone too far!"

⁸Then Moses spoke again to Korah: "Now listen, you Levites! ⁹Does it seem a small thing to you that the God of Israel has chosen you from among all the people of Israel to be near him as you serve in the LORD's Tabernacle and to stand before the people to minister to them? ¹⁰He has given this special ministry only to you and your fellow Levites, but now you are demanding the priesthood as well! ¹¹The one you are really revolting against is the LORD! And who is Aaron that you are complaining about him?"

¹²Then Moses summoned Dathan and Abiram, the sons of Eliab, but they replied, "We refuse to come! ¹³Isn't it enough that you brought us out of Egypt, a land flowing with milk and honey, to kill us here in this wilderness, and that you now treat us like your subjects? ¹⁴What's more, you haven't brought us into the land flowing with milk and honey or given us an inheritance of fields and vineyards. Are you trying to fool us? We will not come."

¹⁵Then Moses became very angry and said to the LORD, "Do not accept their offerings! I have not taken so much as a donkey from them, and I have never hurt a single one of them." ¹⁶And Moses said to Korah, "Come here tomorrow and present yourself before the LORD with all your followers. Aaron will also be here. ¹⁷Be sure that each of your 250 followers brings an incense burner with incense on it, so you can present them before the LORD. Aaron will also bring his incense burner."

¹⁸So these men came with their incense burners, placed burning coals and incense on them, and stood at the entrance of the Tabernacle with Moses and Aaron. ¹⁹Meanwhile, Korah had stirred up the entire community against Moses and Aaron, and they all assembled at the Tabernacle entrance. Then the glorious presence of the LORD appeared to the whole community, ²⁰and the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, ²¹"Get away from these people so that I may instantly destroy them!"

²²But Moses and Aaron fell face down on the ground. "O God, the God and source of all life," they pleaded. "Must you be angry with all the people when only one man sins?"

²³And the LORD said to Moses, ²⁴"Then tell all the people to get away from the tents of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram."

²⁵So Moses got up and rushed over to the tents of Dathan and Abiram, followed closely by the Israelite leaders. ²⁶"Quick!" he told the people. "Get away from the tents of these wicked men, and don't touch anything that belongs to them. If you do, you will be destroyed for their sins." ²⁷So all the people stood back from the tents of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. Then Dathan and Abiram came out and stood at the entrances of their tents with their wives and children and little ones.

²⁸And Moses said, "By this you will know that the LORD has sent me to do all these things that I have done--for I have not done them on my own. ²⁹If these men die a natural death, then the LORD has not sent me. ³⁰But if the LORD performs a miracle and the ground opens up and swallows them and all their belongings, and they go down alive into the grave, then you will know that these men have despised the LORD."

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³¹He had hardly finished speaking the words when the ground suddenly split open beneath them. ³²The earth opened up and swallowed the men, along with their households and the followers who were standing with them, and everything they owned.

Points of Interest:

- 'What right do you have to act as though you are greater than anyone else?'—as far as we can see, Moses is not in this because of his own ambition. He is in his position because he said, 'Here I am,' to God's call. Apparently, he's a rather humble man; and he's often wished that he didn't have the role he has. But people are convinced that Moses is on a power trip.
- 'the LORD will show us who belongs to him'—Moses plan seems pretty reasonable: why don't we just let God choose who will serve him and how?
- 'You Levites are the ones who have gone too far'—Moses has never grasped for a role that God did not give him, but the Levites—under the guise of correcting Moses—are doing so now. They've actually been given a pretty special place in God's plan: they are the ones who are given the job of serving in the Tabernacle. But it's not enough for them. So, while appearing to be speaking up for the whole people, they are actually trying to seize more power for themselves. Incidentally, both of the attempts to overthrow Moses have come from those close to him: first it was his own siblings; now it's his own tribe. Aaron, Miriam, and the rest of the Levites have already been given prominent roles in the community, perhaps partially because of their connection to Moses, but they are not grateful. Instead, they compete with Moses.
- 'We refuse to come!'—Dathan and Abiram will talk about Moses behind his back, but they lack the courage to meet him face to face in the presence of God.
- 'Egypt, a land flowing with milk and honey'—Dathan and Abiram are insinuating that they've been hoodwinked. They were persuaded to leave the wonderful land of Egypt (where, it seems they've forgotten, they were slave labor on the verge of genocide) by false promises that they were being led to an even better place. It turns out that there is no great promised land, and they've been tricked into wandering the desert their whole lives—all so that Moses can feed his own ego.
- 'Get away from these people so that I may instantly destroy them!'—the only thing stopping God from destroying the rebels is the fact that he doesn't want to hurt Moses and Aaron in the attempt.
- 'But Moses and Aaron fell face down on the ground'—Moses and Aaron mercifully intervene on behalf of the very people who are trying to overthrow them.
- 'and everything they owned'—it's as if they are completely blotted out of existence. Their entire lives are simply swallowed up by the ground.

Taking it home:

- *For you:* Because God trusts Moses' humility, integrity, obedience, and compassion, he entrusts him with an amazing amount of influence. Pray that God would help you build the sort of character which would allow him to trust you with the purposes that are close to his heart.
- *For your six:* Greed and envy end up swallowing up the lives of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. Pray that God would protect your six from the temptations of greed and envy.
- *For our church:* Moses trusts in his own blamelessness and God's faithfulness to defend him from attacks on his leadership. Pray that God would give us as a church and all the leaders in it the grace to hold any status or position we have lightly, trusting God to defend us if it is ever necessary.

Sunday, March 20th

Numbers 20: 1-13

In early spring the people of Israel arrived in the wilderness of Zin and camped at Kadesh. While they were there, Miriam died and was buried.

² There was no water for the people to drink at that place, so they rebelled against Moses and Aaron. ³ The people blamed Moses and said, "We wish we had died in the LORD's presence with our brothers! ⁴ Did you bring the LORD's people into this wilderness to die, along with all our livestock? ⁵ Why did you make us

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leave Egypt and bring us here to this terrible place? This land has no grain, figs, grapes, or pomegranates. And there is no water to drink!"

⁶ Moses and Aaron turned away from the people and went to the entrance of the Tabernacle, where they fell face down on the ground. Then the glorious presence of the LORD appeared to them, ⁷ and the LORD said to Moses, ⁸ "You and Aaron must take the staff and assemble the entire community. As the people watch, command the rock over there to pour out its water. You will get enough water from the rock to satisfy all the people and their livestock."

⁹ So Moses did as he was told. He took the staff from the place where it was kept before the LORD. ¹⁰ Then he and Aaron summoned the people to come and gather at the rock. "Listen, you rebels!" he shouted. "Must we bring you water from this rock?" ¹¹ Then Moses raised his hand and struck the rock twice with the staff, and water gushed out. So all the people and their livestock drank their fill.

¹² But the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not trust me enough to demonstrate my holiness to the people of Israel, you will not lead them into the land I am giving them!" ¹³ This place was known as the waters of Meribah, because it was where the people of Israel argued with the LORD, and where he demonstrated his holiness among them.

Points of Interest:

- 'We wish we had died in the LORD's presence with our brothers!'—now it's getting downright ridiculous. The people aren't merely wishing they could go back to Egypt, or that they could stay in the wilderness. Now they're wishing that they had rebelled against Moses so that they could have been swallowed up by a supernatural earthquake—and they express this extreme self-pity over a situation from which God has already rescued them in the past. You almost get the sense that they're being intentionally provocative, or that they actually prefer to complain.
- 'This land has no grain, figs, grapes, or pomegranates'—God had wanted to lead them into a land abundant with fruit and grains. Apparently, according to the report of the spies, the promised land had especially good grapes. But the people said that they would rather stay in the wilderness. Either they've forgotten that this is what they asked for, or they're regretting their decision.
- 'He took the staff from the place where it was kept'—Moses used to carry the staff around with him everywhere he went, performing constant miracles with it. Apparently, he doesn't use it as often anymore; so he keeps it in God's tent unless he needs it.
- 'you did not trust me enough to demonstrate my holiness'—something happens when the people gather at the rock. Every other time he's been in a situation like this, he's done exactly what the LORD instructed. But this time he takes matters into his own hands. God tells him to command the rock to pour out water. Instead, he curses at the people and hits the rock twice. God still makes the water gush out, but something really bothers him about Moses' actions. Perhaps it's the fact that he said, 'Must we bring you water . . . ?'—claiming the action for himself and Aaron rather than for God. Perhaps he doesn't like the fact that he portrays God as being unwilling to provide the water. Or perhaps the LORD doesn't like how Moses beefed up the drama factor, with the yelling and the hitting. God had his own plan for the kind of effect he wanted to make with this miracle. But Moses revised God's plan.
- 'you will not lead them into the land I am giving them!'—to me, Moses' disobedience seems insignificant in light of how faithful he has been and how much he has done. But to God, Moses' error is serious and it has serious consequences. By not allowing Moses to lead the people into the promised land, God is saying that in this action he has shown that he belongs more with the generation that will die in the desert than with the one that will go into the promised land. Over the course of his constant contention with this generation, Moses has somehow become like them.
- 'where he demonstrated his holiness among them'—God had wanted to show his holiness by providing water for the people. Sadly, he ends up showing just how holy he is by having to punish his most faithful servant.

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Taking it home:

- *For you:* In this passage, we see Moses' constant battles with the Israelites finally take a toll on his own relationship with God, his joy, and his future. Are you in the midst of any longstanding conflicts? Ask God to protect you from being embittered by that conflict. Ask him to give you the power to bless the person who has been a source of trouble in your life, and ask him to show his holiness and goodness in the situation.
- *For your six:* The Israelites just don't seem to learn from their past. God provides for them again and again, but each time they have a need they see it as a hopeless disaster. The faith they gain from seeing God provide doesn't seem to last to the next problem. Pray for your six that they would have a faith that grows, and that God would give them a good memory of the times he's rescued them or provided for them.
- *For our church:* God had a plan to demonstrate his holiness to the people, and Moses thought he could improve upon that plan. Although the people were blessed and God's holiness was shown, Moses' modifications ended up having big consequences for him. Pray that God would give us trust in him to show himself, and wisdom to resist the temptation to 'improve' upon his plans.