

God Leads Us Through the Wilderness

2016 Fall Sermon Series on Numbers

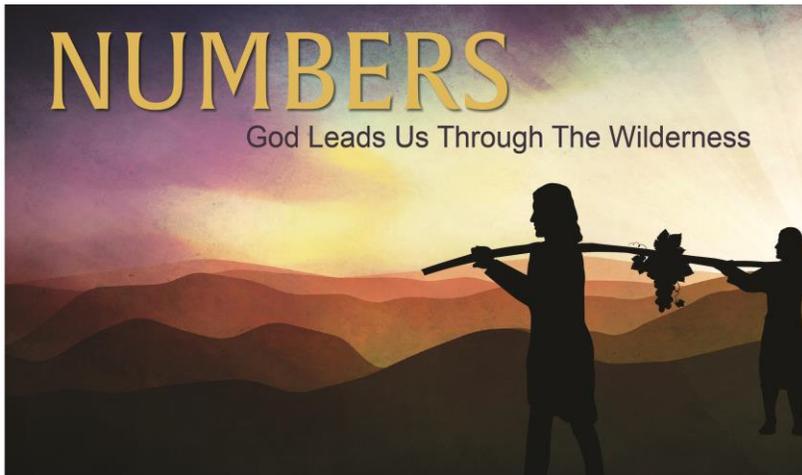
Kenwood Baptist Church

Pastor David Palmer

September 4, 2016

TEXT: Numbers 1:1-19

We begin a new fall sermon series this Sunday, and I am wondering how many of us have gone through a sermon series on the Book of Numbers. We praise God for all of His Word. This series



on the Book of Numbers is entitled: “God Leads Us Through the Wilderness.” In the Hebrew Bible, this portion of Scripture is called: “*In the Wilderness.*” We derive the English names of the Books of the Bible from the Greek translation which calls this book the *Book of Numbers*. There are indeed many numbers in this book. There are two major

censuses of people, and yet the Book of Numbers is really more properly considered to be the portion of God’s story that takes place in the wilderness. After the sweeping narratives of Genesis, and the powerful redemption of Exodus, the intimate holiness of Leviticus, God is on the move again in the Book of Numbers. The Book of Numbers takes us on an epic journey through the wilderness, from Mount Sinai to the very borders of the Promised Land.

I love to travel. I love to take trips. I love wilderness adventures, and it is often the case that when you enter the wilderness, you pick up shared experiences, you grow in faith, you confront your fears, and you can meet with the Lord in powerful ways as the noise of this world gets quiet and your ears are attentive to the Lord. This is exactly what happens in the Book of Numbers. The wilderness proves to be a time of testing, of trial. We confront our brokenness, our fears, and our sinfulness is exposed when we are not able to rely on the comforts of our normal routines. We learn, however, in the wilderness that God's faithfulness overwhelms our fears and that He is with us every step of the way. The wilderness is not a portion of the Bible where God is absent. In fact, God leads and guides us through the wilderness visibly, every step of the way. One of the great lessons of the Book of Numbers is that you cannot go anywhere unless God leads you first. We also find in the Book of Numbers that we are united as a people precisely by following God together. If you look around this sanctuary, you see we really don't

have that much in common. But, we have in common a shared salvation through faith in Jesus Christ and a shared movement in following God together that unites us in a more permanent and lasting bond.

The Book of Numbers stresses the importance of faith. It stresses the importance of obedience for all of life, and this must be learned over time. We have the great joy at our house right now of having two teenagers. It is actually thrilling. We have not accepted the myth that you will hear around you all the time that the teenage years are times of rebellion and frustration. In the Bible, the teenage years are times that marked the transition from childhood to adulthood, the time of increasing responsibility. It is a time when you consider your child as taking the reins, or taking the wheel, if you will, and you think to yourself: "Are they ready?" That's what is happening in the Book of Numbers. It is a time in between God's saving action and when He says: "Now you're ready to take possession of the land." When we go into the wilderness, though, we often become afraid. We fear even the most basic things. God's people fear lack of food and water; they grumble against God and even threaten to go back to their old way of life. Yet, God continually provides water, meat, and manna in the wilderness. The narrative of Numbers reaches the initial climax as 12 men are sent into the land to spy out the place of God's promise. Ten of them return filled with fear, saying God's promises are too great, the challenges are too many, and there are giants in the land. Yet two, Joshua and Caleb, come back with the cluster of grapes, pomegranates, and figs and say: "Don't be afraid. God is with us." That is why you will see on the series graphic all fall Joshua and Caleb, carrying a cluster of grapes, and that's the kind of people that we want to become through this series.

Numbers is remembered throughout Scripture as both a warning and a promise. It's a warning of unfaithfulness and failing to enter the land, and this is remembered in the Psalms and the prophets. It is also a promise for those who hear His voice to move forward under His blessing. This is celebrated in the New Testament, as well. Throughout the series, we will read and study and will have small-group discussions using the *Be Counted* small-group guide. As we begin this morning, we want to see how God begins this portion of His Word, how He reenters us into the narrative of redemption.

In Numbers 1, we will see how God speaks again to us in the wilderness. We read in Numbers 1:1:

"The LORD spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the tent of meeting, on the first day of the second month, in the second year after they had come out of the land of Egypt."

So God's people reach Mount Sinai on the third month after they came out of the land of Egypt, and by this chronological indication, we realize that God's people have been camped at the base of Mount Sinai for about 11 months. God redeems us, brings us to the place of His

dwelling, and then speaks to us from the mountain. You may remember the scene from our fall series the last couple of years that the point of the Exodus, "Let My people go," is that they



might serve Him. The Bible does not envision freedom as autonomy, the right to do whatever you want in your own eyes. In the Bible, it is tyranny, the worst-case scenario. Can you imagine that? It's like taking your children and just releasing them into downtown Cincinnati and saying: "Do whatever seems right in your eyes. I'll be back in a couple of months." God doesn't treat us that way. He brings

us out of the land of Egypt so that we might feel the yoke of His leadership on our shoulders. They were encamped around Mount Sinai for almost a year. This is the place where God reveals His will, speaks His law, His Torah, His instruction on how we are to live as a redeemed people. You can never separate God's law from the narrative in which it is given. This is so important. Oftentimes we imagine that Christianity is a set of rules to be kept and obeyed and that God is distant from us as our heavenly Father wondering: "I've given you My rules. How are you doing?" It's not that way at all. God gives His instruction to us like a father to his children, and you can never take God's law as though it's given in the abstract. It always comes on the heels of His saving actions. Fathers, mothers, never give instructions your children without having demonstrated your benevolence and care and commitment to them first. Yet, when that is clearly on display as we give instruction to our children, that instruction is to be obeyed. Moms and dads often say: "If they would just listen!" This is one of the great cries of Scripture. The central imperative of the Old Testament is: "Hear, listen!" God in His sovereign wisdom, if you haven't noticed, has given us two ears and one mouth for a very important reason.

At the base of the mountain, the Lord then speaks to Moses. We read His first instruction in Numbers 1:2:

"Take a census of all the congregation of the people of Israel, by clans, by fathers' houses, according to the number of names, every male, head by head."

The word here, *head by head*, in Hebrew is the word *Golgotha*. That is actually the Aramaic version, but that word is precious to us as Christians. The Bible doesn't use the word *skull* that often, but it is *head by head* or *skull by skull*, and we know that a couple of thousand years later this will be the place where Jesus is offers His life for us in the place called *Golgotha*, *place of the skull*, or *Calvary*, in Latin. The people are numbered. The entire sacred assembly mattered, and this is important for us to know this morning. Every person matters.

Some of you may be tempted to just pass over these names, these lists, these numbers, and you think: "I'm no accountant. I don't know these people. I can't even pronounce these names!" Yet, it is vital for God's people to know that in Scripture God gives nine chapters of His Word to describe who is there, and if God gives nine chapters, if it is important to Him to record who is there, then it is important for us. That means it is important for us to know the names of one another. It means it is important for us sometimes learn the names of someone who is from a different country. "What does your name mean?" When I meet someone from an ethnic background different from my own, if I don't catch the name, I'll often ask: "Can you tell me, does your name mean something?" I often find out a great window into their lives. If I'm really a loss, I'll say in a posture of humility: "Can you spell that for me? Help me make sure I have it right." Every name matters. In Leviticus 1:3, we hear that the people that are counted:

"From twenty years old and upward, all in Israel who are able to go to war, you and Aaron shall list them, company by company."

It is not that the people younger than 20 don't matter, but we realize that this is a company, a vast assembly that is organized for war, and this is important as the narrative unfolds. This is not a camp in the wilderness for recreational purposes. This is a community that has been saved by God's outstretched arm, and it will be a community on the move that could take possession of the land that God has promised. It is an epic journey, a journey that will have as its outcome a holy war that God will conduct.

We see in Leviticus 1:4 that God calls some of the community into roles of leadership:

"And there shall be with you a man from each tribe, each man being the head of the house of his fathers."

The Hebrew text at the beginning of Leviticus 1:4 says to Moses and Aaron: "There will be these other leaders with you," and this is so important. God is King. He never comes up for reelection! His powers are unlimited, but God leads His people through a plurality of eldership. He leads His people not through a monarchy or tyrannical power. It's the human, fallen instinct to consolidate power in the rule of one person, and God's people are never led this way. God calls Moses and Aaron into consecrated leadership, and He also calls a cluster of others to join with them. This is brought out vividly in Leviticus 1:5ff where these leaders are actually named. Leviticus 1:5 says:

"And these are the names of the men who shall assist you."

The ESV says: "*who shall assist you.*" The Hebrew text gives a more literal image and says: "These are the names of the men *who will take their stand with you.*" They will stand up with you. The ministry of Kenwood Baptist church is dependent on the leadership band of the church, for our ministry is growing. Hallelujah! I thank God for that, but that is the result of

many hearing a call to step forward into leadership, and that leadership is exercised together in community with others. I love joining our staff at 8 o'clock in the morning praying for all that will happen here. I love seeing areas of ministry: worship, student ministries, our small group ministry taking place with shared leadership, and this is powerful and vital for long-term health in ministry. We will see a couple times in the narrative of Numbers that Moses struggles to grasp this, and in some ways people like myself need this reminder. Numbers has profound lessons about leadership. Ministry cannot flourish on the shoulders of just one person. It has never been designed for that. I love this image, that all of these 12 leaders come and stand up. They are named. We are tempted to pass over these names, but we do not allow that at Kenwood. We don't skip around. We submit ourselves joyfully to God, and I can tell you that I poured over these names this week, and I thought: "Are we really going to read all those names?" Then I thought: "Yes, we are going to read all those names." There are some great things in here. Let me tell you just a few things are wonderful.

Right from the beginning, we see that God knows our names. We read later, in the end of the Bible, that the Book of Life has God's people registered by name. God knows how to keep track of every one of us. We see that these groupings are organized according to the 12 ancestral tribes. Levi is excluded from this list because the tribe of Levi has a special function in the Book of Numbers in the carrying of the tabernacle and in guarding the perimeter. But we see the 12 tribes, and we see a representative leader in each one. These names have great meaning to them. Let me tell you about a few. From the tribe of Reuben, the leader who is called to step forward is a certain man named *Elizur*. Zur means *rock*, and *Eli* means *my God*, and so his name means *my God is a rock*. That's a man you want close by. He is the son of *Shedeur*, and in hearing that, you will notice the ancient name of God, *Shaddai*. From the tribe of Simeon, *Shelumiel* comes to take a stand and leadership among God's people. You will recognize here the word *Shalom* and *el* at the end. His name means that *God is my peace*. These are the kinds of people you want around you. Can you imagine? You have a huge task. You have to bring 600,000 people from Mount Sinai to the borders of the Promised Land, and the first two people that God calls to stand next to you are *God is my rock* and *God is my peace*! I think things are looking good, and it gets better. As these names unfold, we see men called forward with names like *God has given, my God is Father, God has heard my prayer, God my kinsman, divine Redeemer is generous*, and the leadership profile fills out with people like this. God calls us to serve Him. The list of names ends in Leviticus 1:16 by stating:

"These were the ones chosen from the congregation."

That is how the ESV renders it. The Hebrew text, again a little more concrete, makes it clear who does the choosing: Hebrew text says: *"These are the people that were called."* God called them. God is calling you. Every single person in the assembly matters to God, and there is a role and a responsibility entrusted to each one. They are called into leadership, and the narrative

resolves in the final scene, that this act of forming and organizing the community takes place publicly. It is not private. There are no backroom decisions for organizing the camp. It is a very public process. God calls, and when God calls you, the simple response is 'yes!' Don't even think about it. Just do it. God calls; you say 'yes,' and then Moses and Aaron take the people that God has called, and on the first day of the second month, they gather the whole congregation together. This is a big church. The biggest church I know of in the world right now is in South Korea, and it's BIG. This 'church' in the wilderness has 600,000 people in it, and so that's a big church! That's a church that needs to be well-organized, and Moses and Aaron take these leaders, bring them before the whole assembly, and they register themselves. They identify themselves by these ancestral groupings. As the narrative unfolds in Numbers 1 and 2, we see the size and scale and scope of God's redemption, the number of people who come out from the land of Egypt, just the men, just the heads of families, is approximately 600,000. So, when you get a mental picture of God on the move, of providing leadership, you are talking about an assembly of probably two million that are on the move.

We see in the final scene in our passage that begins for us this series of Numbers, in Numbers 1:19, this very simple, but powerful, conclusion to the opening scene. The simple, powerful conclusion is:

“ . . . as the LORD commanded Moses. So he listed them in the wilderness of Sinai.

What God told Moses to do he did, and this is what we call the 'command fulfillment.' God speaks, and you do it. Hebrew has a great way of communicating this pattern of obedience throughout the narrative.

As we journey the rest of this fall, we will move this great journey that will end up taking us almost 40 years. The first 10 chapters of Numbers take place in about 20 days; then we move from Mount Sinai to Kadesh Barnea, the area which is right near the edge of the Promised Land to the south. There will be a time of testing and trial of faith. There will be wandering in the wilderness following God as God brings us to maturity in Numbers 13-19. In Numbers 20-25, God's people move from Kadesh Barnea to the plains of Moab, just opposite Jericho, overlooking the Promised Land. The final chapters, Numbers 26-36, take place in the plains of Moab, looking over the Promised Land. In a sense, there are two mountains in the narrative. There is Mount Sinai and Mount Nebo, where we reach at the end. Have you ever noticed that the only way to get from one mountain to another mountain is to go through a valley? The time of the wilderness tests us and proves our faith. This is like a metaphor; it is like a description of the Christian life in between the moment that you accept Christ as Savior and when you are ready to enter all that God has promised. This season of wilderness proves to be the time where we grow up in faith. It has inspired poets and hymn writers. It is cited throughout Scripture with promise and warning.

John Hughes is the one who wrote the music for the well-known and famous Christian hymn, *Guide Me Oh Thou Great Redeemer*. William Williams was the greatest Welsh hymn writer, and this hymn actually has lyrics that are Welsh. William Williams' lyrics translated literally into English describe this journey through the wilderness. He says:

Lord, guide me through the wilderness,
A pilgrim weak of aspect,
There is neither strength nor life in me,
As though lying in the grave, . . .

Give Thou a pillar of fire to lead me in the night,
And a pillar of mist in the day,
Hold me when I travel places
Which are rough on the way,
Give me manna,
Thus shall I not despair.

Open the sweet springs
Which gush forth from the rock,
All across the great wilderness
May a river of healing grace follow: . . .

I shall trust in Thy power,
Great is the work that Thou hast always done, . . .

Hughes' melody and Williams' lyrics, when it was first performed at the height of the Welsh revival, was first sung with English lyrics because there were so many English industrial workers that came to this assembly. These are the words that we know:

Guide me, O thou great Redeemer,
pilgrim through this barren land.
I am weak, but thou art mighty;
hold me with thy powerful hand.
Bread of heaven, bread of heaven,
feed me till I want no more;
feed me till I want no more.

Open now the crystal fountain,
whence the healing stream doth flow;
let the fire and cloudy pillar
lead me all my journey through.
Strong deliverer, strong deliverer,
be thou still my strength and shield;

be thou still my strength and shield.

When I tread the verge of Jordan,
bid my anxious fears subside;
death of death and hell's destruction,
land me safe on Canaan's side.
Songs of praises, songs of praises,
I will ever give to thee;
I will ever give to thee.

This hymn is our hymn for this series. It really tells the story of the Book of Numbers. God provides food in the wilderness. He provides water, and He takes us to the very edge of Jordan with songs of praises.

Let's apply this opening scene to us in three ways as we start on this epic journey together.

Number one: I want to challenge us as a church family to ***really engage the Book of Numbers*** this fall. I am very serious. I have gotten a lot of diverse reactions, some skeptical reactions. Some have said: "We never thought you'd go through with it." I said: "We're doing it. God thought that these 36 chapters were important, so we are going to spend the fall on them." So I want to challenge you to dig into this. I'm going to give you a clue. One thing that has helped me as I have been preparing for the last two and a half months is that I have read through the Book of Numbers maybe 50 times, and I'm just getting into it. You have got to see the big picture. Don't get lost in the details. I'm not much of an artist, but it has helped me at times to draw out what's happening. We will move together along the way. Engage this portion; read this section of God's Word; learn to listen to God's Word in this section; and join in a small group discussion along the way. So, my first challenge is to really engage this portion. I imagine for most of us this will be like virgin soil, and it was for the Israelites. These were new things to learn, that we have to learn to follow God in the wilderness before we're ready for the Promised Land.

Number two: I want to challenge you to ***prepare your hearts to hear His voice and respond to His call into service and leadership.*** A huge theme in the Book of Numbers is God's speaking and calling people to active service. I want to challenge all of us to be ready this fall for where He is calling you. There are no bleacher seats in the wilderness. Everyone has a part to play, and we want to listen. That is one of the great opportunities of the wilderness.

Number three, and maybe most importantly of all: As a shepherd, I want to remind us ***not to be afraid of the wilderness.*** I remember one of the greatest hikes that I was a part of that we ever took at Kenwood. We had planned to go on the Appalachian Trail. We had made all these preparations, and I think we were going to hike maybe 10 miles the first day, across a ridge and

land that this camp cite. After we arrived at the beginning of the hike and this group of men stepped out of the church van, it was raining, and we knew that this was the moment. We looked around wondering if anyone was going to say anything. It's raining, and when we walk away from the van, that's it. There were awkward silences, but no one said anything except: "Let's start walking." The fog was thick and heavy. There was a large ornate stone entrance marking the trailhead to the Appalachian Trail on the left side of the parking lot, which we did not see at all because of the thick fog. Instead, we exited on the right side of the parking lot and went down what we found out much later was a fire break. I remember going into the wilderness, hiking for a couple of hours and thinking: "Boy, Appalachian Trail. I thought this would be better maintained." There were trees down, and after about two hours we heard the sound of a semi-truck, and I thought: "There shouldn't be semi-trucks in the wilderness." It was still raining, and this was in the early days of GPS, and only one man in the group had a phone, and he was searching for bars on the phone. We pooled our resources, and another man had a waterproof map, and he got the coordinates. We laid out the map to find out where we were, and we learned in that moment that we had gone totally the wrong way. Instead of a 10-mile hike on a ridge line descending at the end to a camp, we had hiked 16 miles that first day, up and down. I would say that in that first day, there were 10 grown men who were just this close to crying out for their moms. But, God taught us a great deal, actually: Check the map! God gave us shared experiences, but in reality, that time, that adversity, about mile 12 and 13 started to really show the character of the group. It actually got quite difficult, but I loved seeing men see others who were struggling and saying: "Let me carry your bag." I loved seeing that when one man stopped and said: "I don't think I can continue," another man pulled over and said: "Let me hold your bag for a minute," and then asked: "What in the world did you bring? Reaching in the bag, he found canned goods! Dehydrated foods are better for 10-12 mile hikes than canned soup and cans of green beans.

But, the wilderness has a great deal to teach us about following God, and it is something we must experience together. John Eldridge, who wrote *Wild at Heart*, said this:

"Truth be told, most of us are faking our way through life. We pick only those battles we are sure to win, only those adventures we are sure to handle, only those beauties we are sure to rescue.

"There is something else I am after, out here in the wilderness. I am searching for an even more elusive prey . . . something that can only be found through the help of wilderness. I am looking for my heart.

"True strength does not come out of bravado. Until we are broken, our life will be self-centered, self-reliant; our strength will be our own. So long as you think you are really something in and of yourself, what will you need God for? I don't trust a man who hasn't suffered; I don't let a man get close to me who hasn't faced his wound. Think of the

imposters you know—are they the kind of man you would call at 2:00 A.M., when life is collapsing around you? Not me. I don't want clichés; I want deep, soulful truth, and that only comes when a man has walked the road I've been talking about.”

That's the challenge, for us to mature in faith and enter it together. God will meet us there.

What does Israel do right before setting out? The first thing they do before the journey actually begins is to celebrate the Passover, to remember what God did to save them in the first place. Numbers 9 is a celebration of the Passover, and then the journey actually begins in Numbers 10. Therefore, it is right for us, as we start this journey, to remind ourselves what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.

Jesus told His disciples: “I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer.” Jesus, on the night in which He was betrayed, took bread and broke it in the presence of His disciples. He said: “This is My body which is broken for you.” He took the cup and said: “This cup is the New Covenant in My blood which is poured out for you.” The summons for us this morning is to commit ourselves anew, afresh to Jesus Christ who will lead us safely home. When Jesus Himself was baptized and filled with the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit's first act in the life of Jesus Christ was to take Him out into the wilderness. The Lord will lead us through this day.

This is not the table of Kenwood Baptist Church. It is the table for everyone who has committed themselves to Jesus Christ. If you've heard His call in your life and you have trusted Him for salvation, you are welcome to partake with us. It doesn't matter your denominational background, your church membership. If you have committed yourself to Christ, we invite you to partake and He will lead us through the wilderness. Would you prepare your hearts to pray with me?

Precious Lord Jesus, we thank You that You are God who leads us through the wilderness. We thank You, Lord, that you desire maturity in us, the sons and daughters of the King. Father, I pray this morning for those of us who are absolutely terrified by letting go or leaving that which seems comfortable and safe. Help us, Father, to repent of the small vision of You and who You are calling us to become. Lord, I pray that You would speak mightily throughout this fall to call us serve you each and every one, and that, Lord, You would overwhelm our fear with Your stunning faithfulness. We thank You that Your faithfulness has manifested itself supremely here in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We ask you to prepare our hearts now to partake of Him.

In Jesus' Name, Amen.