

Trusting God into the Unknown

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TEXT: Numbers 32:1-22

Key verse: "The LORD is my shepherd. I lack nothing." -Psalm 23:1 CEB

INTRO

Have you ever realized we have the option to opt-out of something almost everyday: online forms, email subscriptions, mailers. Last week I received an opt out letter in the mail. This one for an electricity supply option. And I had a text message opt out option for notices on a store's sales events.

In addition to these personal opportunities, I was reading along in Numbers last week when I came to an opt-out story. This is the story of 2 ½ tribes of Israel choosing to opt out on...the promised land! Say what?!

I've been reading through the books of the law, the Torah: starting in Genesis in January and continuing on. As I've read, I've journeyed with the people of God. First as Abraham received a promise from God to make him into a great nation with a promised land as he chose to worship the one true God. Then as this promise is reaffirmed to Abraham's son Isaac and then Isaac's son Jacob. God provided for Jacob's family during a severe famine in the land, through one of his 12 sons, Joseph. Then they were in slavery for 400 years in Egypt. I read as God called Moses to lead this people group out of Egypt. The 12 sons of Jacob had become many and were now the Israelites. And God freed them and led them through the wilderness to the promised land. And then they get to the promised land, see how good it is, panic, don't trust God to help them, and they are forced to wander the desert for 40 years. **And yet**, even in that time, God is present with them.

As I shared on Pentecost Sunday, God led the people with a tangible presence of a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night. God provided for them with food, water, shelter. Their clothes did not wear out. They always had their needs met by God.

So, after following their journey over 500 years. I'm ready to read the celebratory moment as they are finally about to arrive at the time to enter the promised land. I'm excited for them, I'd think they'd be excited too. After all, God is about to lead them into the long awaited promised land. The same God who spent the last 40 years leading the Israelites by fire, by cloud, that spoke to them, that parted waters to make a way, that provided food in their wandering, freedom from oppression, safety from enemies,

guidance through the wilderness, shade and refreshment in the desert, and did not let their clothes wear out. This same God is about to lead them into the promised land.

PART 1: OPTING OUT

But here we find, in Numbers 32, 2 ½ tribes coming to Moses and OPTING OUT on this whole promised land thing.

Numbers 32:1-33 NIV

[1] The Reubenites and Gadites, who had very large herds and flocks, saw that the lands of Jazer and Gilead were suitable for livestock.

[2] So they came to Moses and Eleazar the priest and to the leaders of the community, and said, [3] “Ataroth, Dibon, Jazer, Nimrah, Heshbon, Elealeh, Sebam, Nebo and Beon— [4] the land the Lord subdued before the people of Israel—are suitable for livestock, and your servants have livestock. [5] If we have found favor in your eyes,” they said, “let this land be given to your servants as our possession. **Do not make us cross the Jordan.**”

I'm so confused. Make them?! Cross INTO the LONG awaited Promised Land. Wouldn't you think they'd be dying to cross over? Like over the moon excited? Like we've waited our whole lives (which is not an exaggeration but the true reality of their lives wandering in the wilderness). Not to mention, not just their lifetimes but it was promised SO long ago to their ancestors Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Wouldn't you be like, ok, here we go...FINALLY!

But instead they say: “Do not make us cross the Jordan”

To which, not surprisingly, Moses responds: Hold the phone, are you kidding me?!

Ok, that's my paraphrase.

But he did get up on his soapbox for this one:

[6] Moses said to the Gadites and Reubenites, “Should your fellow Israelites go to war while you sit here? [7] Why do you discourage the Israelites from crossing over into the land the Lord has given them? [8] This is what your fathers did when I sent them from Kadesh Barnea to look over the land. [9] After they went up to the Valley of Eshkol and viewed the land, they discouraged the Israelites from entering the land the Lord had given them. [10] The Lord's anger was aroused that day and he swore this oath: [11] ‘Because they have not followed me wholeheartedly, not one of those who were twenty years old or more when they came up out of Egypt will see the land I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob— [12] not one except Caleb son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite and Joshua son of Nun, for they followed the Lord wholeheartedly.’ [13] The Lord's anger burned against Israel and he made them wander in the wilderness forty

years, until the whole generation of those who had done evil in his sight was gone. [14] “And here you are, a brood of sinners, standing in the place of your fathers and making the Lord even more angry with Israel. [15] If you turn away from following him, he will again leave all this people in the wilderness, and you will be the cause of their destruction.”

Can you imagine how frustrated Moses must have been? Over 120 years old, having just lead these people for the past 40 years in not great circumstances. I’m sure he was beyond exhausted and beyond frustrated at this point. And even though he himself was not going to be permitted to cross into the promised land due to his own past sin, he wanted to at least feel like he had succeeded in getting this next generation into the long awaited Promised Land.

PART 2: SECURITY

Even with Moses' stern lecture, these tribes did not change their minds. They only pushed the limit a bit more as they made a caveat for how they would help the other tribes AFTER securing their own people and possessions...pretty much they were not willing to risk personal loss of their own security as they helped the other tribes.

[16] Then they came up to him and said, “We would like to **build pens here for our livestock and cities for our women and children.** [17] But **we will arm ourselves** for battle and go ahead of the Israelites until we have brought them to their place. **Meanwhile our women and children will live in fortified cities, for protection from the inhabitants of the land.** [18] We will not return to our homes until each of the Israelites has received their inheritance. [19] We will not receive any inheritance with them on the other side of the Jordan, because **our inheritance has come to us on the east side of the Jordan.**”

PART 3: CONTENT TO SETTLE

And they truly were CONTENT to settle for what they saw before them as their inheritance INSTEAD OF what God had promised for them. They were setting for the good they could see instead of the great that they could not see.

[20] Then Moses said to them, “If you will do this—if you will arm yourselves before the Lord for battle [21] and if all of you who are armed cross over the Jordan before the Lord until he has driven his enemies out before him— [22] then when the land is subdued before the Lord, you may return and **be free from your obligation to the Lord and to Israel.** And this land will be your possession before the Lord.

Free from their obligation to their God? To their people? Why would you want to OPT-OUT on that? On those relationships? They were a people set apart and led with care by the creator of the universe with a promise of plenty and peace before them. And they wanted out. They preferred to live the life right where they had landed, where they had gotten comfortable. They had settled. And didn't want anymore of the unknown.

Looking back through their history, I can understand why they might have made this decision. Reuben, the firstborn of Jacob, was originally entitled to a double portion. Unfortunately, pride got in the way and he slept with his dad's concubine (the mom of some of Reuben's ½ siblings). For this act of sin against his father, Jacob didn't bless Reuben, but cursed him saying he would diminish. Later, the tribe of Levi gets selected for serving at the tabernacle, and the tribe of Judah will have kings come from that line. And Jacob's favorite son, Joseph, his 2 sons get to become 2 ½ tribes. I'm guessing that stuck with the family line of Reuben—affected their identity, their worth, their sense of security. Unfortunately, the Reubenites do not learn their lesson from their ancestors. But they repeatedly rise up against Moses and Aaron's leadership. They lead rebellion and when most tribes flourish in the wilderness years, their tribe diminishes in numbers. And then, they get to the big moment, and they opt-out. Looking at the land around them, they figured it was pretty good and a large plot of land. They probably calculated that no matter how great the promised land was, due to their diminished size, it just wouldn't be a big plot they'd receive, and so, they settled. But in that choice, they not only missed out on the promised land, but years later when the Israelites are taken into captivity, these tribes that opted out of the promised land, they were the first ones to be carried off into captivity and became the "lost tribes". There was definitely a high cost for their pride, their choices to be released from their "obligations to their God and their people."

CONCLUSION

In Deuteronomy 3:20, we read an interesting distinction that Moses made about the land:

"When the Lord has given security to the rest of the Israelites, as he has to you, and when they occupy **the land the Lord your God is giving them** across the Jordan River, then you may all **return here to the land I have given you.**"

Those that crossed over to receive their promised land were receiving it from God. Those that wanted what was right in front of them, they were receiving land that Moses had given them permission to stay in.

Even with that clarification, they still wanted to opt out on the promised land and stay with what was right in front of them.

What about us? When given the choice, what do we do? What will we do?
Will we trust God to lead us forward into the unknown or opt-out of the blessing?

Sometimes we can get so weary of the unknown, can't we? So weary of saying Yes and then having our world disrupted. Yes, it's a great adventure, a great story, but sometimes it just feels like too much. Too much sacrifice, too many sleepless nights, road weary bodies, and journeys full of too many goodbyes. We crave security, and sometimes it doesn't matter that God promises to be our security, we would rather make our own. At least I crave my own security at times.

In these moments, I have to ask myself, "Do I stay where I am? or trust God to continue to lead me in the unknown? Do I live in fear? Or choose to pray and trust God to preserve my life and be ever present through it all?" Sometimes the truth is I dig in my heels a bit and don't want to budge.

I still remember an experience I had in 2018. I was in extreme pain, with a yet-to-be-diagnosed health situation. I remember the unknown of it all at the time. I remember getting imaging done and how much pain I was in. **And yet** in all of it, how close God's comforting presence was with me in that scary, sterile environment. And, how God reassured me with a wrap-around presence in that moment. I've gone through MANY health crises since, and I have often thought back to that time. How God was there with me, in the pain, ever present, giving me a way forward of peace into the unknown. So I try to trust and follow God...even when the feeling isn't there, because I remember and trust in who God is...the I AM...the same today as was yesterday. Remembering God will be the same tomorrow too! God doesn't leave me...God does not forsake me. This is the same God of the Exodus and of Psalm 23, leading the lovers of God forward with protection, provision, and continuous presence.

This is the God who prepares a way in the desert. Provides refreshment. The God who sets a table for us to celebrate and enjoy God's goodness even in the midst of enemies all around us. So, will we trust and follow our good shepherd? Will we come to the table God prepares for us and celebrate?

In Psalm 23 we read David's declaration of God's goodness, "The comfort of your love takes away my fear. I'll never be lonely, for you are near. You become my delicious feast even when my enemies dare to fight. You anoint me with the fragrance of your Holy Spirit; you give me all I can drink of you until my cup overflows. So why would I fear the future? Only goodness and tender love pursue me all the days of my life."

COMMUNION

In our in-person service we take a moment for communion after the teaching. Taking the elements together as we remember Jesus' goodness to us. I invite you listening wherever you are, to also take a moment to pause and celebrate and remember. The communion elements don't need to be a cracker and grape juice for you to enter into this moment. Whatever you can find, will do just fine.

As we enter this time of communion, we enter a moment at the table Jesus has set for us: a moment to come to the table and celebrate.

Join with me in prayer:

Jesus we say yes to celebrating your goodness in our lives. In rejoicing in God's presence even in the midst of all the attacks we may be facing at this moment of fear or uncertainty, we get to feast on Your presence, Your goodness, Your provision. And for those who are struggling, uncertain, hurting, Jesus please bring your comforting presence to them and show them how this table is spread out before them too, ready when they are ready. Amen.

Scripture Reading:

Psalms 23:1-6 TPT

[1] Yahweh is my best friend and my shepherd. I always have more than enough.

[2] Yahweh offers a resting place for me within luxurious love.

God's tracks take me to an oasis of peace near the quiet brook of bliss.

[3] That's where Yahweh restores and revives my life. God opens before me the right path and leads me along in footsteps of righteousness so that I can bring honor to God's name.

[4] Even when your path takes me through the valley of deepest darkness, fear will never conquer me, for you already have! Your authority is my strength and my peace.

The comfort of your love takes away my fear. I'll never be lonely, for you are near.

[5] You become my delicious feast even when my enemies dare to fight. You anoint me with the fragrance of your Holy Spirit; you give me all I can drink of you until my cup overflows.

[6] So why would I fear the future? Only goodness and tender love pursue me all the days of my life. Then afterward, when my life is through, I'll return to your glorious presence to be forever with you!

Benediction: Responsive Reading based on Psalm 23

One: We are a Resurrection people

called by God to live a Resurrection life.

**All: Christ is risen, Christ is risen indeed!
We live our lives each day
knowing that Christ has opened the way to new life
to be lived in fullness and forgiveness each and every day.
Even when our lives take us through the dark valleys,
we know we are never alone;
Our Risen Lord is always with us.
in our interactions with our brothers and sisters in this world. Amen**

One: So let us not deny the resurrection in our lives,
but rather go boldly into the world
knowing that in this resurrection life we are a forgiven people
as we share the good news of God's grace,
in word and deed with the world around us. Amen

**All: The LORD is our shepherd,
we shall not be in want
for the Lord makes us lie down in green pastures,
and leads me beside quiet waters.
The Lord restores our souls
and guides us in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.**

One: Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil, for the Lord is with me;
the Lord's guidance comforts me.

**All: For the Lord prepares a table before us
in the presence of those who would harm us.
The Lord provides us with all we need
and our cup of blessing overflows.**

One: Surely goodness and love will follow us all the days of our lives,

All: And we will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.