

ST. MARK'S
GILLINGHAM

LONG WALK TO FREEDOM

A SERMON SERIES IN THE BOOK OF
NUMBERS

JANUARY-APRIL 2019



Date	Sermon Titles	Bible Reading
January 13	Introduction to the Long Walk to Freedom	Numbers 10.1-13
January 20	Bewilderment on the Long Walk	Numbers 10.14-36
January 27	Complaint on the Long Walk	Numbers 11.1-15
February 10	Weight of Discouragement on the Long Walk	Numbers 12. 1-16
February 17	What made Joshua and Caleb different?	Numbers 13. 1-33
February 24	Saju Muthalaly's Licensing Service by The Archdeacon of Rochester	
March 10	Rebellion and Prayer on the Long Walk	Numbers 14.1-19
March 17	Holiness on the Long Walk	Numbers 15.1-41
March 24	Providence on the Long Walk	Numbers 20.1-13
March 31	Bronze Snake on the Long Walk	Numbers 21. 1-9
April 14	The End of the Long Walk	Numbers 32. 1- 13
April 21	The Long Walk of the Risen One	Luke 24. 13-35



An Introduction

Is God faithful?

The desert is one of the richest and most helpful images of the Bible. The beauty of the deserts of the Bible lands, the stories set there, and the people of the desert are deeply moving. Days spent in the desert are very hard. It's hot and there is no shade. The terrain is mountainous and very rugged. Just walking through the deserts of the Middle East is difficult work. It leads desert travelers to wonder whether or not they can make it. But just when they feel they cannot go another step, God provides just enough of his presence – just enough shade, just enough water, just enough help from a fellow traveler to make it through the difficult places.

In the hardship and struggle to survive in the desert, we find a metaphor for surviving the desert experiences of heart and soul – the hard times of emotional, spiritual, physical, and relational pain that all of us face no matter where we live. We realise that life moves from one desert experience to another. The heat of our suffering during these times can be overwhelming. We may be weary and thirsty and find little or no refreshment. And yet, God is with us. He is our provider and our protector, and he will give us just enough. While no one looks forward to the desert experiences of life, knowing that in the heat of those desperate times God will provide just enough is hope enough to live significant and purpose-filled lives.

The children of Israel were first-hand witnesses of God's amazing faithfulness. He had led them out of slavery in Egypt and opened up the Red Sea for them to cross. By Numbers chapter 10, the Israelites were about to leave Mount Sinai and God was with them: 'By day the pillar of cloud did not fail to guide them on their path, nor the pillar of fire by night to shine on the way they were to take. You gave your good Spirit to instruct them' (Nehemiah 9:19-20). The future looked bright. Yet, despite all the evidence of God's faithfulness, the rest of the book of Numbers is a catalogue of grumbling, in-fighting and rebellion by God's ungrateful people. Instead of embracing freedom, they longed for the food they ate in slavery and wanted to return to Egypt (chapter 11). There was division at the very heart of the nation's leadership, and factions emerged jockeying for status and ambition, with complete disregard for humility or holiness (chapters 12 and 16). Fear and unbelief stoked

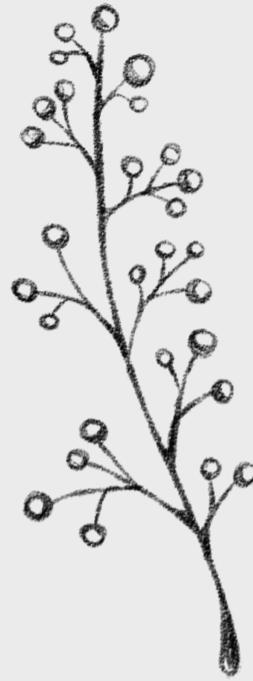
rebellion among the people, and they refused to enter Canaan (chapters 13-14). Such rebellion was not without its consequences. God took the people at their word and a whole generation died in the wilderness, never setting foot in the Promised Land. However, despite these repeated failures, God remained faithful. He even used the pagan seer, Balaam, to affirm his determination to bring Israel to the land of promise, highlighting in glorious technicolour that his blessing on Israel rested not on her faithfulness but on his sovereign will (chapters 22-24). Like the Israelites, God's people still fail him and test his patience. But nothing – not our sin, the circumstances of our lives, nor the anti-Christian agenda growing in the West - will thwart God's redemptive plan. Though we face danger, suffering and even death, we can be sure of God's ultimate protection and eternal blessings. These selected readings from the book of Numbers testify to God's faithfulness and invite us to trust him for today and all our tomorrows.

If there is anything I can do to support you on your, erm... long walk, I am always happy to find time in the diary to listen, pray & discern God's path on your long walk with God. Metaphorically, the church in the West finds itself in cultural and spiritual wilderness, but remember, wilderness is not a bad place... It has, as we will learn this term, a tremendous capacity to also be a place of encounter, refuge and provision. My heart ultimately is that at St. Mark's we will meet the living God in our worship, word and wilderness.

Saju Muthalaly



Tips for Small Groups



Although you can use these notes for personal study, we encourage all members at St. Mark's to join a small group. They are the place we are able to build deep, long-lasting friendships, to grow spiritually and to offer pastoral support to one another on a regular basis. Speak to Amanda Maskell or Pauline Jackson if you would like to consider joining one.

A small group is a dynamic thing. One week it might seem like a group of close-knit friends. The next it might seem more like a group of uncomfortable strangers. A small-group leader's role is to read these subtle changes and adjust the tone of the discussion accordingly.

Small groups need to be safe places for people to talk openly. It is through shared wrestling with difficult life issues that some of the greatest personal growth is discovered. But in order for the group to feel safe, participants need to know it's okay not to share sometimes. Always invite honest disclosure, but never force someone to speak if he or she isn't comfortable doing so. (A savvy leader will follow up later with a group member who isn't comfortable sharing in a group setting to see if a one-on-one discussion is more appropriate.) Have volunteers take turns reading excerpts from Scripture. The more each person is involved even in the mundane tasks, the more they'll feel comfortable opening up in more meaningful ways. The leader should watch the clock and keep the discussion moving. If you've had a fruitful discussion, it's okay to move on without finishing everything. And if you think the group is getting bogged down on a question or has taken off on a tangent, you can simply say, "Let's go on to the next question." Finally, soak your group meetings in prayer—before you begin, during as needed, and always at the end of your time together.

Introduction to the Long Walk to Freedom

Numbers 10. 1-13

The Lord said to Moses: **2** 'Make two trumpets of hammered silver, and use them for calling the community together and for the camps to set out. **3** When both are sounded, the whole community is to assemble before you at the entrance to the tent of meeting. **4** If only one is sounded, the leaders - the heads of the clans of Israel - are to assemble before you. **5** When a trumpet blast is sounded, the tribes camping on the east are to set out. **6** At the sounding of a second blast, the camps on the south are to set out. The blast will be the signal for setting out. **7** To gather the assembly, blow the trumpets, but not with the signal for setting out.

8 'The sons of Aaron, the priests, are to blow the trumpets. This is to be a lasting ordinance for you and the generations to come. **9** When you go into battle in your own land against an enemy who is oppressing you, sound a blast on the trumpets. Then you will be remembered by the Lord your God and rescued from your enemies. **10** Also at your times of rejoicing - your appointed festivals and New Moon feasts - you are to sound the trumpets over your burnt offerings and fellowship offerings, and they will be a memorial for you before your God. I am the Lord your God.'

11 On the twentieth day of the second month of the second year, the cloud lifted from above the tabernacle of the covenant law. **12** Then the Israelites set out from the Desert of Sinai and travelled from place to place until the cloud came to rest in the Desert of Paran. **13** They set out, this first time, at the Lord's command through Moses.



A Reflection

The code name for the enterprise was “Operation Overlord.” The more popular name was “D-Day”—June 6, 1944, when the combined Allied forces landed on Omaha Beach and signalled the beginning of the end of the war in Europe. It was the largest assembly of military personnel and matériel in the history of warfare. Historian Samuel Eliot Morison wrote, “The Allied forces of soldiers, sailors, aviators, and supporting services amounted to 2.8 million men in England.”

Moses was about to launch his own “Operation Overlord,” and his greatest desire was that Jehovah, the Lord of Hosts, truly be Lord over the whole enterprise. More than two million Jews were anticipating entering Canaan, conquering the inhabitants, claiming the land, and enjoying their promised inheritance. But before all of this could happen, Moses had to organise this assembly of former slaves, who had been enjoying their freedom for only a short time. It wasn’t an easy task. His preparation for conquest involved four stages:

- Celebrating the Passover (9:1-14)
- Numbering the soldiers (chap. 1)
- Organising the tribes (chap. 2)
- Assigning the priestly duties (chaps. 3–4).

Questions for Study

1. What was the purpose of each stage in Moses’ preparation for conquest? Why was preparation so important to Moses? How did his preparation help?
2. What do you sense God is preparing now in your personal life? What do you think God is preparing in the life of St. Mark's?
3. Read Numbers 10. 1-13. Choose one verse or phrase from Numbers 10. 1-13 that stands out to you. This could be something you’re intrigued by, something that makes you uncomfortable, something that puzzles you, something that resonates with you, or just something you want to examine further. Write that here.
4. In our reading, notice the rules and rituals. In the days of Moses, rules and ritual played important roles in the daily lives of God’s followers. Through Moses, the Israelites were given specific instruction for many aspects of daily life and were expected to practice specific rituals in honour of the God who was leading them. While Jesus’ sacrifice changed the system of rules, introducing grace to our relationship with our Creator,

rituals continue to play a part in most churches. The role rituals play varies dramatically from one church to the next, even within the same denomination. How has the importance of ritual in our relationship with God changed since the time of Moses? What are the rituals in our church that matter most today? How do they bring people closer to God? How can they be misused or corrupted?

5. Share the God honouring rituals or Spiritual Disciplines you personally practice with each other.
6. Look at the list of Spiritual Disciplines on the following page. Might God be calling you to take on one? How might we encourage and challenge each other as we seek to become more like Jesus?

MY NOTES/PRAYER/THINGS GOD IS TEACHING ME



SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

Disciplines of Abstinence

These are ways of denying ourselves something we want or need in order to make space to focus on and connect with God.

Solitude: Refraining from interacting with other people in order to be alone with God and be found by him. (Solitude is completed by silence.)

Silence: Not speaking in a quiet place in order to quiet our minds and whole self and attend to God's presence. Also, not speaking so that we can listen to others and bless them.

Fasting: Going without food (or something else like media) for a period of intensive prayer – the fast may be complete or partial.

Sabbath: Doing no work to rest in God's person and provision; praying and playing with God and others. (God designed this for one day a week. We can practice it for shorter periods too.)

Secrecy: Not making our good deeds or qualities known to let God or others receive attention and to find our sufficiency in God alone (e.g., see Matthew 6).

Submission: Not asserting ourselves in order to come under the authority, wisdom, and power of Jesus Christ as our Lord, King, and Master. (If you think of this as submitting to a person as unto Christ then it's a discipline of engagement.)

Disciplines of Engagement

These are ways of connecting with God and other people, conversing honestly with them in order to love and be loved.

Bible Reading: Trusting the Holy Spirit-inspired words of Scripture as our guide, wisdom, and strength for life. (Related disciplines include Bible study, Scripture meditation, and praying God's Word.)

Worship: Praising God's greatness, goodness, and beauty in words, music, ritual, or silence. (We can worship God privately or in community.)

Prayer: Conversing with God about what we're experiencing and doing together. (As we see in the Lord's Prayer the main thing we do in prayer is to make requests or intercessions to our Father for one another.)

Soul Friendship: Engaging fellow disciples of Jesus in prayerful conversation or other spiritual practices. (Related spiritual disciplines or practices include small groups, spiritual direction, and mentoring relationships.)

Personal Reflection: Paying attention to our inner self in order to grow in love for God, others, and self. (The Psalms in the Bible model this.)

Service: Humbly serving God by overflowing with his love and compassion to others, especially those in need. (Also tithing and giving.)

Bewilderment on the Long Walk

Numbers 10. 14-36

14 The divisions of the camp of Judah went first, under their standard. Nahshon son of Amminadab was in command. 15 Nethanel son of Zuar was over the division of the tribe of Issachar, 16 and Eliab son of Helon was over the division of the tribe of Zebulun. 17 Then the tabernacle was taken down, and the Gershonites and Merarites, who carried it, set out.

18 The divisions of the camp of Reuben went next, under their standard. Elizur son of Shedeur was in command. 19 Shelumiel son of Zurishaddai was over the division of the tribe of Simeon, 20 and Eliasaph son of Deuel was over the division of the tribe of Gad. 21 Then the Kohathites set out, carrying the holy things. The tabernacle was to be set up before they arrived. 22 The divisions of the camp of Ephraim went next, under their standard. Elishama son of Ammihud was in command. 23 Gamaliel son of Pedahzur was over the division of the tribe of Manasseh, 24 and Abidan son of Gideoni was over the division of the tribe of Benjamin. 25 Finally, as the rear guard for all the units, the divisions of the camp of Dan set out under their standard. Ahiezer son of Ammishaddai was in command. 26 Pagiel son of Okran was over the division of the tribe of Asher, 27 and Ahira son of Enan was over the division of the tribe of Naphtali. 28 This was the order of march for the Israelite divisions as they set out. 29 Now Moses said to Hobab son of Reuel the Midianite, Moses' father-in-law, 'We are setting out for the place about which the Lord said, "I will give it to you." Come with us and we will treat you well, for the Lord has promised good things to Israel.' 30 He answered, 'No, I will not go; I am going back to my own land and my own people.' 31 But Moses said, 'Please do not leave us. You know where we should camp in the wilderness, and you can be our eyes. 32 If you come with us, we will share with you whatever good things the Lord gives us.' 33 So they set out from the mountain of the Lord and travelled for three days. The ark of the covenant of the Lord went before them during those three days to find them a place to rest. 34 The cloud of the Lord was over them by day when they set out from the camp.

35 Whenever the ark set out, Moses said,
'Rise up, Lord!

May your enemies be scattered;
may your foes flee before you.'

36 Whenever it came to rest, he said,
'Return, Lord,
to the countless thousands of Israel.'



A Reflection

The Hebrew name for the book of Numbers is Sefer Bamidbar, the Book of (lit). In-the-Wilderness. Although the Israelite wilderness experience begins in Exodus and concludes in Deuteronomy, the book of Numbers claims the interior of this world of wilderness as its peculiar territory. It evokes not only geographical terrain, but also an inner landscape, an “inscape,” as it were—a world of imaginative being.

The wilderness image haunts the reader, who contemplates the many vanishings of a whole generation. It is an environment that is hostile to human life. Jeremiah describes its singular horror when he reminds the people: “God has led you through the wilderness, through a land of deserts and of pits, through a land of drought and deadly darkness, through a land that no man passed and where no man dwelt” (Jer. 2:6). The forty-year wilderness journey was intended as a difficult odyssey of self-understanding, a surveillance mission into the human heart.

On this journey, the pilgrim people constantly needed the guidance of God. Their goal was the Promised Land, and the God who delivered them from Egypt promised to bring them into their inheritance if they would trust Him and obey His will. Knowing the will of God and doing it is vitally important to a fulfilled and fruitful Christian life. Jeremiah was correct when he said, “O LORD, I know the way of man is not in himself; it is not in man who walks to direct his own steps” (Jer. 10:23 NKJV). The child of God who fails to say, “If the Lord wills,” is destined for disappointment and failure (James 4:13-17).

Questions for Study

1. Where is God in Brexit? Don't spend the whole evening on this ,please!
2. Why was knowing God's will so important to the Israelites in Moses' time?
2. How did they discern God's will? (See Num. 9:15-23; 10:1-10.)
3. How do we determine God's will today? (See Ps. 119:105; Acts 16:6-7; Rom. 8:26-34.)
4. In our reading, Moses speaks to Hobab, who was most probably Jethro's son and therefore Moses' brother-in-law, and invites him to accompany him on his journey. Hobab initially declined, but it seems that he eventually agreed because he turns up in Judges chapters 1 and 4. We also read about the Canaanite people of this particular community, later called the Kenites, subsequently being among the Israelites. So, who was really leading the people at this point? God? Yes: we are told in verse 33 that the Ark of the Covenant, representing the very presence of God, was going before them as they moved,

and the cloud of God's presence was seen by day and the pillar of fire by night. God was in charge. What about Moses? In verse 35, he was appointed by God and he had the authority to say when they were going to leave and where they would stop and camp. So what about Hobab? In verse 31, Moses says to him, 'You will be our eyes. You know where the water is, you know where the oasis is; you have the local expertise.' Moses had God's authority, God's presence and God's guidance, yet he asks for Hobab's eyes. He is confident in God but doesn't despise human expertise and wisdom. God has given each of us a work to do for him. Perhaps, like the Israelites, he is calling you to begin a new venture.

5. Share with each other what God is doing in your life. Is there a new venture he is calling you to begin?

6. Spend time in God's presence, seek his guidance. But remember, God has strategically placed mature believers in your life so you can learn from their wisdom and experience. Be humble, be ready to learn from others, recognise that 'You are Christ's body – that's who you are! . . . Only as you accept your part of that body does your "part" mean anything' (1 Corinthians 12:27, msg).

MY NOTES/PRAAYER/THINGS GOD IS TEACHING ME



Complaint on the Long Walk

Numbers 11. 1-15

Now the people complained about their hardships in the hearing of the Lord, and when he heard them his anger was aroused. Then fire from the Lord burned among them and consumed some of the outskirts of the camp. **2** When the people cried out to Moses, he prayed to the Lord and the fire died down. **3** So that place was called Taberah, because fire from the Lord had burned among them.

4 The rabble with them began to crave other food, and again the Israelites started wailing and said, 'If only we had meat to eat! **5** We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost - also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. **6** But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!'

7 The manna was like coriander seed and looked like resin. **8** The people went around gathering it, and then ground it in a hand-mill or crushed it in a mortar. They cooked it in a pot or made it into loaves. And it tasted like something made with olive oil. **9** When the dew settled on the camp at night, the manna also came down.

10 Moses heard the people of every family wailing at the entrance to their tents. The Lord became exceedingly angry, and Moses was troubled. **11** He asked the Lord, 'Why have you brought this trouble on your servant? What have I done to displease you that you put the burden of all these people on me? **12** Did I conceive all these people? Did I give them birth? Why do you tell me to carry them in my arms, as a nurse carries an infant, to the land you promised on oath to their ancestors? **13** Where can I get meat for all these people? They keep wailing to me, "Give us meat to eat!" **14** I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me. **15** If this is how you are going to treat me, please go ahead and kill me right now - if I have found favour in your eyes - and do not let me face my own ruin.'



A Reflection

'I'm a failure, get me out of here!' Moses was a gifted leader. He had all the training, expertise and experience of forty years of government service under Pharaoh, but this massive community protest caused him to doubt his own leadership. In verse 10 we read: 'The Lord became exceedingly angry, and Moses was troubled.' That's actually a little weak, as the original text says that it was evil in the eyes of Moses. The narrator is yet again contrasting the good things that were supposed to be happening at the end of chapter 10 with the evil that is happening now. Moses and God are quite rightly angry. Moses has told Hobab that things are going to be good, but now he sees that things have become terribly bad. It's ironic that in verse 11, Moses accuses God of doing evil to him. The word used in verse 10 is used again here: 'God, why did you do evil to me?' Moses suggests that God should have taken his responsibility as a parent a little more seriously, and not dumped all the chores on to the nanny. He says, 'Lord, I can't take it any more.' This outburst is almost a complete collapse of his self-confidence as a leader. We can look at this positively, and say that at the very least, Moses is not presented here as a James Bond figure. In films, it's amazing how quickly the hero comes up with a solution and always knows exactly what to do. Nor is Moses a management guru, expertly sitting down to diagnose the problem, coming up with creative ideas that will lead to solutions that everyone agrees to and then moves forward. Moses simply collapses. He is face down before the Lord in desperate inadequacy, desperate dependence. There's an absence of self-sufficiency. But I think there's something more serious here. This crisis is causing Moses to doubt not only his own leadership, but God himself.

Questions for Study

1. Feelings of inadequacy and facing criticism are commonplace in Christian ministry. Sadly, opposition does not just come from unbelievers. We also face 'friendly fire' from fellow Christians. What has sustained you in those seasons of your life?
2. What situations have caused you to doubt God?
3. Our ministry among youth, children and families at St. Mark's seem to be wounded. Share what God might be saying to us about how we ought to invest in our young people's work.
4. When you are wounded, how do you cling to Christ more closely, look to him for strength and guidance, trust his word and his promises?

5. How can you use this time of weakness to deepen your relationship with Christ?
6. The scene in verses 1-3 – the people grumbling, God’s anger and judgment, followed by Moses’ intervention and the containment of the problem – is replayed throughout the book. You would be surprised at what the people complained about. What do you think the Israelites would have remembered the most about the years of slavery in Egypt? Just one year before this event they had been an oppressed, exploited minority, being beaten and put to slave labour in Egyptian agriculture and construction projects, doing all the dirty work that the Egyptians didn’t want to do. What would they remember? The hard labour, the humiliation, the genocidal murder of the little boys? No. They remember the fish. It was very tasty and it was free. Talk about a selective memory! They reckoned that a healthy diet in slavery was better than a normal diet in freedom. They had been having a miracle a day – manna – but it wasn’t good enough and they found it boring. How perverse! Are we different from the Israelites? How are we like them?
7. When our circumstances are difficult we are quick to question whether God loves us and is for us. We conveniently ignore all the miracles of grace that God performs each day – simply because life has not turned out how we had hoped or imagined. We quickly forget God’s faithfulness to us in the past, the times we have seen his goodness, the answered prayers and the guidance we have received. Today, open your eyes to see God’s mercies and remember his acts of kindness to you. Literally, count your blessings; set aside time to write them down on the list below.

MY NOTES/PRAYER/THINGS GOD IS TEACHING ME



BAPTISM

SUNDAY 21ST APRIL 2019 IS EASTER SUNDAY. AT THE 10.30AM SERVICE, WE WILL BE HOLDING A BAPTISM SERVICE (BAPTISM BY IMMERSION).

THERE IS ALSO AN OPPORTUNITY TO RENEW YOUR BAPTISMAL VOWS.

IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO TALK THROUGH BAPTISM OR ANY OTHER ASPECT OF YOUR CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP PLEASE DON'T HESITATE TO CONTACT THE CHURCH OFFICE.

TO ARRANGE A TIME WITH EITHER SAJU OR AMANDA.

EMAIL: ADMIN@STMARKSGILLINGHAM.ORG

PHONE: 01634 570489



Weight of Discouragement on the Long Walk

Numbers 12. 1-16

Miriam and Aaron began to talk against Moses because of his Cushite wife, for he had married a Cushite. **2** 'Has the Lord spoken only through Moses?' they asked. 'Hasn't he also spoken through us?' And the Lord heard this. **3** (Now Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth.) **4** At once the Lord said to Moses, Aaron and Miriam, 'Come out to the tent of meeting, all three of you.' So the three of them went out. **5** Then the Lord came down in a pillar of cloud; he stood at the entrance to the tent and summoned Aaron and Miriam. When the two of them stepped forward, **6** he said, 'Listen to my words:

'When there is a prophet among you,
I, the Lord, reveal myself to them in visions,
I speak to them in dreams.

7

But this is not true of my servant Moses;
he is faithful in all my house.

8

With him I speak face to face,
clearly and not in riddles;
he sees the form of the Lord.

Why then were you not afraid
to speak against my servant Moses?'

9 The anger of the Lord burned against them, and he left them.

10 When the cloud lifted from above the tent, Miriam's skin was leprous - it became as white as snow. Aaron turned towards her and saw that she had a defiling skin disease, **11** and he said to Moses, 'Please, my lord, I ask you not to hold against us the sin we have so foolishly committed. **12** Do not let her be like a stillborn infant coming from its mother's womb with its flesh half eaten away.'

13 So Moses cried out to the Lord, 'Please, God, heal her!'

14 The Lord replied to Moses, 'If her father had spat in her face, would she not have been in disgrace for seven days? Confine her outside the camp for seven days; after that she can be brought back.' **15** So Miriam was confined outside the camp for seven days, and the people did not move on till she was brought back.

16 After that, the people left Hazeroth and camped in the Desert of Paran.

A Reflection

'Who does he think he is?' This was the essence of Aaron and Miriam's complaint against Moses. At first glance, the conflict seemed to revolve around sibling rivalry. Moses was the younger brother, and you can imagine Aaron and Miriam's jealousy that he was still getting the limelight after all these years. There also seemed to be an ethnic issue. Verse 1 mentions twice that Moses' wife, most likely his second wife, was a Cushite. Cush was an important powerful kingdom just south of biblical Egypt, in what we could now call southern Egypt or part of northern Sudan. His wife would have been a black African. We are not exactly sure why Aaron and Miriam objected to this marriage, but ethnic prejudice and racial hatred seem to have played a part. However, verse 2 exposes the real source of the conflict. Even though Aaron and Miriam had been appointed by God to their roles (Micah 6:4) - Aaron was a high priest, the head of the whole priesthood in Israel, and Miriam was a prophet (Exodus 15:20) - they were jealous of Moses' position. Moses was the one through whom God was revealing his will, law and word, and Aaron and Miriam questioned his unique relationship to God and his uniqueness in relation to them. In terms of biblical history and salvation, at this stage of the biblical revelation, Moses certainly did occupy a unique position. It was not because he claimed or wanted it, but because God had chosen him and put him there. It is a familiar tactic among the discontented and disaffected, and insinuates an arrogance about Moses that the narrator is going to tell us is not there. It accuses him of a monopoly that he did not want; it implies that Moses was hogging all the gifts and status, when in fact that was the opposite of what he wanted (Numbers 11). And so Aaron and Miriam protest. Both of them had God-given gifts and responsibilities of their own. But this is a case of spiritual jealousy, discontent and an attack on a brother. It may have looked like a family feud, but there was a profoundly spiritual issue attached.

Questions for Study

1. In your Christian walk, how do you remain secure and relish in your own gifting and not covet other people's gifting?
2. Humility is not just for Christian leaders but for all disciples of Christ. Meditate on Jesus' humility and what it means for you, in your particular situation, to cultivate his mindset. Meditating on Philippians 2:5-8 might prove tremendously helpful to understand Jesus' humility.

3. Ponder and discuss these questions: Can you serve your boss and others at work, helping them to succeed and be happy, even when they are promoted and you are overlooked? Can you work to make others look good without envy filling your heart? Can you minister to the needs of those whom God exalts and men honour when you yourself are neglected? Can you pray for the ministry of others to prosper when it would cast yours in the shadows?
4. Is it obvious when you have spent time with Jesus? When Moses met with God, his face shone. Your face may not shine but you may be more patient in difficult situations, quicker to forgive, joyful rather than critical, kind rather than bitter. Time with God – studying and praying through his Word (and then obeying it) – is the only way that we become more like Christ. Make these times a priority. Then, like a candle in a cracked clay jar (2 Corinthians 4:7), the life of Christ will shine out through you and draw others to the Saviour. How are you encouraging each other to spend time with Jesus?
5. Raymond Brown in his commentary puts it like this: ‘Moses learnt the importance of silence and let the Lord do the talking . . . Aaron learnt the value of prayer’ – though he was a high priest, he had to learn the power of the prayer of others (his own brother). ‘Miriam learnt the generosity of grace’ because eventually she was pardoned, cleansed, healed and restored, and ‘the people learnt the seriousness of sin’, although we have to say that they didn’t learn it very well. What about us? What do we learn? It depends on whom you identify with in the story. Is the Holy Spirit convicting you that you are behaving like Miriam and Aaron: critical, undermining and jealous, guilty of discontent? If so, let’s repent of our ways. Is the Holy Spirit impressing on you the humility of Moses, his integrity in leadership, his reliance on God in difficult days? Is the Holy Spirit urging you to trust God, let him vindicate you and, in due course, exalt you?

MY NOTES/PRAAYER/ THINGS GOD IS TEACHING ME



What made Joshua and Caleb different?

Numbers 13. 1-33

The Lord said to Moses, **2** 'Send some men to explore the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelites. From each ancestral tribe send one of its leaders.'

3 So at the Lord's command Moses sent them out from the Desert of Paran. All of them were leaders of the Israelites.

4 These are their names:

from the tribe of Reuben, Shammua son of Zakkur;

5 from the tribe of Simeon, Shaphat son of Hori;

6 from the tribe of Judah, Caleb son of Jephunneh;

7 from the tribe of Issachar, Igal son of Joseph;

8 from the tribe of Ephraim, Hoshea son of Nun;

9 from the tribe of Benjamin, Palti son of Raphu;

10 from the tribe of Zebulun, Gaddiel son of Sodi;

11 from the tribe of Manasseh (a tribe of Joseph), Gaddi son of Susi;

12 from the tribe of Dan, Ammiel son of Gemalli;

13 from the tribe of Asher, Sethur son of Michael;

14 from the tribe of Naphtali, Nahbi son of Vophsi;

15 from the tribe of Gad, Geuel son of Maki.

16 These are the names of the men Moses sent to explore the land. (Moses gave Hoshea son of Nun the name Joshua.)

17 When Moses sent them to explore Canaan, he said, 'Go up through the Negev and on into the hill country. **18** See what the land is like and whether the people who live there are strong or weak, few or many. **19** What kind of land do they live in? Is it good or bad? What kind of towns do they live in? Are they unwalled or fortified? **20** How is the soil? Is it fertile or poor? Are there trees in it or not? Do your best to bring back some of the fruit of the land.' (It was the season for the first ripe grapes.)

21 So they went up and explored the land from the Desert of Zin as far as Rehob, towards Lebo Hamath. **22** They went up through the Negev and came to Hebron, where Ahiman, Sheshai and Talmai, the descendants of Anak, lived. (Hebron had been built seven years before Zoan in Egypt.) **23** When they reached the Valley of Eshkol, they cut off a branch bearing a single cluster of grapes. Two of them carried it on a pole between them, along with some pomegranates and figs. **24** That place was called the Valley of Eshkol because of the cluster of grapes the Israelites cut off there. **25** At the end of forty days they returned from exploring the land.

26 They came back to Moses and Aaron and the whole Israelite community at Kadesh in the Desert of Paran. There they reported to them and to the whole assembly and showed them the fruit of the land. **27** They gave Moses this account: 'We went into the land to which you sent us, and it does flow with milk and honey! Here is its fruit. **28** But the people who live there are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large. We even saw descendants of Anak there. **29** The Amalekites live in the Negev; the Hittites, Jebusites and Amorites live in the hill country; and the Canaanites live near the sea and along the Jordan.'

30 Then Caleb silenced the people before Moses and said, 'We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it.'

31 But the men who had gone up with him said, 'We can't attack those people; they are stronger than we are.' **32** And they spread among the Israelites a bad report about the land they had explored. They said, 'The land we explored devours those living in it. All the people we saw there are of great size. **33** We saw the Nephilim there (the descendants of Anak come from the Nephilim). We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them.'



A Reflection

They didn't know it yet, but the Israelites were on the brink of arguably the most awful catastrophe in their history up to this point. They arrived at the very southern edges of the land of promise, the oasis that was there at Kadesh, and they decided to send out spies into the land. The spies' initial report is very positive. They tell Moses, 'We went into the land to which you sent us, and it does flow with milk and honey!' (verse 27). They even brought back a big bunch of grapes to prove how fruitful the land was. But then something happens. In verse 28 the spies' report very suddenly shifts into a grossly exaggerated negative account. Caleb silenced the people before Moses and urged, 'We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it.' The other ten spies say, 'Sorry, but we can't.' The ten spies then spread negativity and an inferiority complex among the people: 'We can't attack those people . . . We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes' (verses 31, 33). Their account bred fear among the Israelites, which Moses recorded in Deuteronomy 1:28-29: "'Our brothers have made our hearts melt in fear. They say, 'The people are stronger and taller than we are; the cities are large, with walls up to the sky. We even saw the Anakites there.'" Then I said to you, "Do not be terrified; do not be afraid of them."

As Raymond Brown puts it, the spies 'magnified the problem and then minimised the resources that they had,' and their report leads to the people's rebellion. 'That night all the members of the community raised their voices and wept aloud. All the Israelites grumbled against Moses and Aaron, and the whole assembly said to them, "If only we had died in Egypt! Or in this wilderness!"' (Numbers 14:1-2)

Questions for Study

1. I have deliberately set 3 questions for today (and the next study) so that you can spend more time praying and interceding for the life of the church. It is easy to look at the huge problems in our world, the rising opposition to Christianity and the massive task of evangelism, and to feel so fearful and inadequate that we don't actually do anything. How do you think we as a church need to deal with the overwhelming task of reaching our parish with the Good News of Jesus Christ?
2. As we seek to love Gillingham and serve this town in God's name, how do we rely on his power and resources?

3. Today set aside time to intercede and pray for the mission of the church. God promises to equip us for all that he calls us to do. Just as he multiplied the five loaves and two fish, he can multiply our efforts and use them for his glory.
4. Pray for those attending the Marriage Course.

MY NOTES/PRAYER/ THINGS GOD IS TEACHING ME



Rebellion & Prayer on the Long Walk

Numbers 14. 1-19

That night all the members of the community raised their voices and wept aloud. **2** All the Israelites grumbled against Moses and Aaron, and the whole assembly said to them, 'If only we had died in Egypt! Or in this wilderness! **3** Why is the Lord bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be taken as plunder. Wouldn't it be better for us to go back to Egypt?' **4** And they said to each other, 'We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt.'

5 Then Moses and Aaron fell face down in front of the whole Israelite assembly gathered there.

6 Joshua son of Nun and Caleb son of Jephunneh, who were among those who had explored the land, tore their clothes **7** and said to the entire Israelite assembly, 'The land we passed through and explored is exceedingly good. **8** If the Lord is pleased with us, he will lead us into that land, a land flowing with milk and honey, and will give it to us. **9** Only do not rebel against the Lord. And do not be afraid of the people of the land, because we will devour them. Their protection is gone, but the Lord is with us. Do not be afraid of them.'

10 But the whole assembly talked about stoning them. Then the glory of the Lord appeared at the tent of meeting to all the Israelites. **11** The Lord said to Moses, 'How long will these people treat me with contempt? How long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the signs I have performed among them? **12** I will strike them down with a plague and destroy them, but I will make you into a nation greater and stronger than they.'

13 Moses said to the Lord, 'Then the Egyptians will hear about it! By your power you brought these people up from among them. **14** And they will tell the inhabitants of this land about it. They have already heard that you, Lord, are with these people and that you, Lord, have been seen face to face, that your cloud stays over them, and that you go before them in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. **15** If you put all these people to death, leaving none alive, the nations who have heard this report about you will say, **16** "The Lord was not able to bring these people into the land he promised them on oath, so he slaughtered them in the wilderness."

17 'Now may the Lord's strength be displayed, just as you have declared: **18** "The Lord is slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation." **19** In accordance with your great love, forgive the sin of these people, just as you have pardoned them from the time they left Egypt until now.'



A Reflection

Unbelief was the root cause of the massive rebellion in Numbers 14. In the same way, unbelief vexed Jesus throughout his ministry. Remember when he was unable to do any good work because of the unbelief among the people. 'You of little faith,' he once said to his disciples (Matthew 8:26). Of course, unbelief can afflict us at any point, even as mature Christian believers, when we're confronted with a future that seems uncertain or when God calls us into some new path of obedience. It is one thing to sing and celebrate all that God has done in the past, but it is quite another to be sure that he'll provide in the future. Unbelief can weave into our hearts and lead to disobedience. This episode at Kadesh was so serious that it echoes on through the Bible. In the New Testament, Paul mentions this rebellion in 1 Corinthians 10, and so does the writer of Hebrews, in chapter 3:16-19: Who were they who heard and rebelled? Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt? And with whom was he angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies perished in the wilderness? And to whom did God swear that they would never enter his rest if not to those who disobeyed? So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief.

Questions for Study

1. Unbelief slithers into our hearts and spreads its poison. Reflect and respond to these questions: Has it stopped you talking about Jesus to colleagues on your frontline or praying fervently? Has it stopped you recognising God's daily blessings? Has unbelief in who God is, what his Word says and what his promises mean for you led you into some disobedience?
2. Today, set aside time to repent of your unbelief; ask God's help to take him at his word and trust him with your life. Cry out to God like the father in Mark 9:24: 'I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!' If it would be helpful, pray with a mature Christian about your struggles.
3. God is ready to wipe the Israelites out, but Moses steps into the breach between the people and the wrath of God. He intercedes for them and appeals to God to hold back his anger and bear their sin. He appeals to God's reputation (verses 13-16), God's character (verses 17-19) and God's covenant (verse 19). What does Moses teach us about praying?
4. How do we intercede for the people of Gillingham and the people on our frontline?

5. Moses appeals to the very things that are God's priorities, and pleads with him to act to the glory of his name, to act consistently with his own character and in accordance with his promise. Use this as a framework as you pray for others today.

Alternatively, use the decreasing circle of prayer

Creation and the environment

You could pray for international initiatives on the environment, local action, and current emergencies. You could bring it home to practical, personal responsibility by each of us as stewards of creation.

Nations in need

Pray for particular countries, not just those the media are focusing on at present. Look for fresh angles, specific people who bear heavy responsibility. Avoid giving a news report.

Local community

What are the issues locally? If you were not a Christian in church on a Sunday, what would be your concerns for Gillingham be? Pray for the schools, the local councillors, community groups, our preschool, guests at Foodbank and other users of the old vicarage and the church hall. Be specific praying for Gillingham.

Individual needs

You could give thanks for good things in the church family this week as well as praying for personal needs.

Holiness

on the Long Walk

Numbers 15. 1-41

The Lord said to Moses, **2** 'Speak to the Israelites and say to them: "After you enter the land I am giving you as a home **3** and you present to the Lord food offerings from the herd or the flock, as an aroma pleasing to the Lord - whether burnt offerings or sacrifices, for special vows or freewill offerings or festival offerings - **4** then the person who brings an offering shall present to the Lord a grain offering of a tenth of an ephah of the finest flour mixed with a quarter of a hin of olive oil. **5** With each lamb for the burnt offering or the sacrifice, prepare a quarter of a hin of wine as a drink offering.

6 "'With a ram prepare a grain offering of one-fifth of an ephah of the finest flour mixed with a third of a hin of olive oil, **7** and a third of a hin of wine as a drink offering. Offer it as an aroma pleasing to the Lord.

8 "'When you prepare a young bull as a burnt offering or sacrifice, for a special vow or a fellowship offering to the Lord, **9** bring with the bull a grain offering of three-tenths of an ephah of the finest flour mixed with half a hin of olive oil, **10** and also bring half a hin of wine as a drink offering. This will be a food offering, an aroma pleasing to the Lord. **11** Each bull or ram, each lamb or young goat, is to be prepared in this manner. **12** Do this for each one, for as many as you prepare.

13 "'Everyone who is native-born must do these things in this way when they present a food offering as an aroma pleasing to the Lord. **14** For the generations to come, whenever a foreigner or anyone else living among you presents a food offering as an aroma pleasing to the Lord, they must do exactly as you do. **15** The community is to have the same rules for you and for the foreigner residing among you; this is a lasting ordinance for the generations to come. You and the foreigner shall be the same before the Lord: **16** the same laws and regulations will apply both to you and to the foreigner residing among you."

17 The Lord said to Moses, **18** 'Speak to the Israelites and say to them: "When you enter the land to which I am taking you **19** and you eat the food of the land, present a portion as an offering to the Lord. **20** Present a loaf from the first of your ground meal and present it as an offering from the threshing-floor. **21** Throughout the generations to come you are to give this offering to the Lord from the first of your ground meal.

22 "'Now if you as a community unintentionally fail to keep any of these commands the Lord gave Moses - **23** any of the Lord's commands to you through him, from the day the Lord gave them and continuing through the generations to come - **24** and if this is done

unintentionally without the community being aware of it, then the whole community is to offer a young bull for a burnt offering as an aroma pleasing to the Lord, along with its prescribed grain offering and drink offering, and a male goat for a sin offering. **25** The priest is to make atonement for the whole Israelite community, and they will be forgiven, for it was not intentional and they have presented to the Lord for their wrong a food offering and a sin offering. **26** The whole Israelite community and the foreigners residing among them will be forgiven, because all the people were involved in the unintentional wrong.

27 “But if just one person sins unintentionally, that person must bring a year-old female goat for a sin offering. **28** The priest is to make atonement before the Lord for the one who erred by sinning unintentionally, and when atonement has been made, that person will be forgiven. **29** One and the same law applies to everyone who sins unintentionally, whether a native-born Israelite or a foreigner residing among you.

30 “But anyone who sins defiantly, whether native-born or foreigner, utters blasphemy against the Lord and must be cut off from the people of Israel. **31** Because they have despised the Lord’s word and broken his commands, they must surely be cut off; their guilt remains on them.”

32 While the Israelites were in the wilderness, a man was found gathering wood on the Sabbath day. **33** Those who found him gathering wood brought him to Moses and Aaron and the whole assembly, **34** and they kept him in custody, because it was not clear what should be done to him. **35** Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘The man must die. The whole assembly must stone him outside the camp.’ **36** So the assembly took him outside the camp and stoned him to death, as the Lord commanded Moses.

37 The Lord said to Moses, **38** ‘Speak to the Israelites and say to them: “Throughout the generations to come you are to make tassels on the corners of your garments, with a blue cord on each tassel. **39** You will have these tassels to look at and so you will remember all the commands of the Lord, that you may obey them and not prostitute yourselves by chasing after the lusts of your own hearts and eyes. **40** Then you will remember to obey all my commands and will be consecrated to your God. **41** I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt to be your God. I am the Lord your God.”’



A Reflection

The events described in Numbers 15–17 probably occurred shortly after Israel’s tragic failure at Kadesh-Barnea, and they reveal clearly that the people still hadn’t learned how to trust and obey. No wonder the Lord rejected the older generation and made a new beginning with the younger generation! God had a special word of encouragement for the younger generation: “After you enter the land I am giving you as a home” (Num. 15:2 NIV). The younger generation faced thirty-eight years of wandering, but the Lord guaranteed that they would one day enter the land and claim their inheritance. The children suffered because of the sins of their fathers and had to participate in history’s longest funeral march. The older generation of Israelites repeatedly refused to submit to the authority of God’s Word as well as the authority of God’s appointed leaders. Believers today commit the same sins, and the consequences are evident: divided churches, dysfunctional families, and disobedient individuals.

Questions for Study

1. Why is holiness important to God?
2. How do you nurture holiness in your life?
3. What is the purpose of the different kinds of offerings- burnt offering, meal offering, peace offering, sin offering, and trespass offering?
4. Burnt offering typify the worshipper’s devotion to God. Meal (grain) offering speak of the worshipper’s dedication of his labor to the Lord. What are the different kinds of offerings we give to God in today’s church?
5. The sacrifices described in Leviticus 1–7 took care of sins of commission, but the instructions in our reading, especially in 15:22-29 have to do with unintentional sins of omission, things that the people should have done but didn’t do. The sin might be corporate and involve the entire nation (Num. 15:24-26), or it might be the transgression of an individual (vv. 27-29). Even though the people who sinned didn’t realise their failure, what they didn’t do was still a sin and had to be dealt with. “I didn’t know” will not avail at the throne of God. The sinners had to come God’s appointed way so He could forgive them and restore them to fellowship and blessing. If the whole nation sinned, they had to bring a young bull for a burnt offering (dedication), plus the required drink offering and grain offering, and a male goat for a sin offering (atonement). The individual who sinned

had to bring a year-old female goat as a sin offering. God promised to forgive those who truly sought Him by faith (vv. 25-26, 28). Of course, forgiveness didn't come because of the blood of animals, but because Christ shed His blood for sinners, fulfilling what these animals symbolised (Heb. 10:1-18). In the light of this how is Jesus the fulfilment of all the law and the prophets?

6. Pray for our Annual Meeting which is held on April 28th, straight after our morning service. The annual meeting receives reports of the general parish activities and financial matters. The annual meeting may also elect new members to PCC & deanery synods.

MY NOTES/PRAYER/THINGS GOD IS TEACHING ME



Providence on the Long Walk

Numbers 20.1-13

In the first month the whole Israelite community arrived at the Desert of Zin, and they stayed at Kadesh. There Miriam died and was buried.

2 Now there was no water for the community, and the people gathered in opposition to Moses and Aaron. **3** They quarrelled with Moses and said, 'If only we had died when our brothers fell dead before the Lord! **4** Why did you bring the Lord's community into this wilderness, that we and our livestock should die here? **5** Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to this terrible place? It has no corn or figs, grapevines or pomegranates. And there is no water to drink!'

6 Moses and Aaron went from the assembly to the entrance to the tent of meeting and fell face down, and the glory of the Lord appeared to them. **7** The Lord said to Moses, **8** 'Take the staff, and you and your brother Aaron gather the assembly together. Speak to that rock before their eyes and it will pour out its water. You will bring water out of the rock for the community so that they and their livestock can drink.'

9 So Moses took the staff from the Lord's presence, just as he commanded him. **10** He and Aaron gathered the assembly together in front of the rock and Moses said to them, 'Listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?' **11** Then Moses raised his arm and struck the rock twice with his staff. Water gushed out, and the community and their livestock drank.

12 But the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, 'Because you did not trust in me enough to honour me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them.'

13 These were the waters of Meribah, where the Israelites quarrelled with the Lord and where he was proved holy among them.



A Reflection

It is a scene that still has the power to shock and disturb. The people complain. There is no water. It is an old complaint and a predictable one. That is what happens in a desert. Moses should have been able to handle it in his stride. He has been through far tougher challenges in his time. Yet suddenly he explodes into vituperative anger: “ Listen, you rebels, shall we bring you water out of this rock?” Moses raised his hand and struck the rock twice with his staff” (Num. 20: 10-11).

Why this aggressive response?

The chapter begins this way: “In the first month, the whole Israelite community arrived at the desert of Zin, and they stayed at Kadesh. There Miriam died and was buried. Now there was no water for the community...” (Num. 20: 1-2). Many commentators see the connection between this and what follows in terms of the sudden loss of water after the death of Miriam. Tradition tells of a miraculous well that accompanied the Israelites during Miriam’s lifetime in her merit. When she died, the water ceased.

There is, though, another way of reading the connection. Moses lost control because his sister Miriam had just died. He was in mourning for his eldest sibling. It is hard to lose a parent, but in some ways it is even harder to lose a brother or sister. They are your generation. In the death of a sibling, you face your own mortality. Miriam was more than a sister to Moses. She was the one, while still a child, to follow the course of the wicker basket holding her baby brother as it drifted down the Nile. She had the courage and ingenuity to approach Pharaoh’s daughter and suggest that she employ a Hebrew nurse for the child, thus ensuring that Moses would grow up knowing his family, his people, and his identity.

Questions for Study

1. Bereavement leaves us deeply vulnerable. In the midst of loss we can find it hard to control our emotions. We make mistakes. We act rashly. We suffer from a momentary lack of judgement. Have you lost a loved one? How did you respond? What was helpful? What was unhelpful? What wisdom would you pass on to someone who hasn't experienced the death of someone close?

2. How do we as a church support people who are grieving the loss of a loved one?

3. Because Moses and Aaron had not honoured the Lord at Meribah, they weren't permitted to enter the Promised Land with the new generation (Num. 20:2-13). Moses repeatedly asked God for permission to enter the land (Deut. 3:23-29), but the Lord refused to relent. How do you reflect on Moses' disappointment? Do you have any disappointment with God? How do you reflect and pray through your own disappointment with God?

4. After Moses delivered the messages recorded in Deuteronomy, he was permitted to ascend Mount Nebo (Pisgah) in the Abarim Mountain range, and view the land that Israel would inherit (Deut. 32:48-52; 34:1-4). Centuries later, Moses and Elijah would stand in glory on the Mount of Transfiguration when they talked with Jesus about His impending death on the cross (Matt. 17:1-8), so he did finally make it to the Promised Land. Prophet Isaiah writes,

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways,"

declares the Lord.

"As the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Pray this truth for each other.



Bronze Snake on the Long Walk

Numbers 21.1-9

When the Canaanite king of Arad, who lived in the Negev, heard that Israel was coming along the road to Atharim, he attacked the Israelites and captured some of them. **2** Then Israel made this vow to the Lord: 'If you will deliver these people into our hands, we will totally destroy their cities.' **3** The Lord listened to Israel's plea and gave the Canaanites over to them. They completely destroyed them and their towns; so the place was named Hormah.

4 They travelled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go round Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; **5** they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, 'Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!'

6 Then the Lord sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. **7** The people came to Moses and said, 'We sinned when we spoke against the Lord and against you. Pray that the Lord will take the snakes away from us.' So Moses prayed for the people.

8 The Lord said to Moses, 'Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.' **9** So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived.



A Reflection

We may think that nothing grows in the desert. But make no mistake: wilderness is fertile ground for complaint. At face value, complaining doesn't seem like much of a crime—surely it must fall into the misdemeanor category. But as we read God takes the business of complaining very seriously. To God the Israelites' complaints amount to a rejection of him. He says, "You have rejected the LORD, who is among you, and have wailed before him, saying, 'Why did we ever leave Egypt?'" (Numbers 11:20). God's evaluation of the situation constitutes a critical development in the narrative. Apparently the Israelites were not merely griping about the food; they were complaining against God. They were not simply rejecting the food; they were rejecting their God. Their complaint about manna accompanied by their longing for Egypt implied, "God, we were better off in Egypt. We were better off without you." Something in their complaint bordered on cosmic treason.

We must however bear in mind that there is a difference between complaint and an honest expression of our feelings before God. God invites us to be honest. Honesty with God is productive and healing. But there can be a fine line between honesty and complaint, and when traveling through wilderness, it may provide our greatest opportunity for transformational growth, but it also provides an enormous opportunity for bitter resentments to flourish—for faith to shrivel.

Questions for Study

1. What do you think is the difference between complaint and honest expression before God?
2. Is there a tendency in you to complain? Through choosing to complain, the Israelites forfeit the opportunity to become a people of faith. With each difficulty, God is whispering, "Will you trust me?" With each collective complaint, they yell, "No, we will not!"
3. What echos of the "bronze snake on a pole" do you see in the New Testament?
4. How is Jesus the source of all true healing?

5. Do spend some time praying specifically for healing & restoration that is available in Jesus and use the following as prompts to intercede:

- *Pray for people living in a trouble-spot in the news, for peace and a new start.*
- *a country in longer-term need and for good government and international help*
- *the role of the United Nations, the Red Cross and other agencies*
- *courage and patience for those negotiating peace.*
- *those who are ill in the church family, for healing and comfort*
- *people with long-term learning difficulties, for patience and progress*
- *people who are lonely, depressed or suicidal, for good listeners to be healers*
- *people in prisons and remand centres, for humane treatment and hope.*
- *people who are feeling left behind and forgotten, the long-term unemployed, the elderly and the isolated, for everyone to be valued as unique*
- *social work and agencies providing care in our community*
 - *voluntary organisations of all sorts working tirelessly throughout the community, for a continuing flow of volunteers and energy*
- *every member of the community, for motivation to respond to need wherever it presents itself.*
- *those in hospital and those awaiting treatment, for patience and prayerfulness*
- *people with major decisions to take, for wisdom and clarity of thought*

The End of the Long Walk

Numbers 32.1-13

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 favour in your eyes,' they said, 'let this land be given to your servants as our possession. Do not make us cross the Jordan.'

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 for forty years, until the whole generation of those who had done evil in his sight was gone.



Questions for Study

1. Looking back over the series, we've examined parts of the book of Numbers. What expectations did you bring to this study? In what ways were those expectations met?
2. What is the most significant personal discovery you've made from this study?
3. What surprised you most about Numbers? What, if anything, troubled you?
4. In what ways have you grown closer to Christ during this study? Take a moment to celebrate those things. Then think of areas where you feel you still need to grow and note those here. Make plans to revisit this study in a few weeks to review your growing faith.
5. The messages in Numbers include trust, forgiveness, discipline, God's provision, and God's promises. Spend time praying for each of these topics-for yourself, and for those in the life of the church.
6. Whether you've been studying this in a small group or on your own, there are many other people at St. Mark's working through the very same issues you discovered when examining Numbers. Take time to pray for each of them, that God would reveal truth, that the Holy Spirit would guide you, and that each person might grow in spiritual maturity according to God's will.
7. Don't forget to pray for the various ways God has called us to follow him as a church focusing your prayers on Peace and Hope, the ministry on university campus, reach, ministry among children and young people, men's ministry, preschool, sung worship leaders, audiovisual team, Tearfund Saahara project. Don't forget to pray for St. Mary's Island Church.

The Long Walk of The Risen One

Luke 24. 13-35

13 Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. **14** They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. **15** As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; **16** but they were kept from recognising him.

17 He asked them, 'What are you discussing together as you walk along?' They stood still, their faces downcast. **18** One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, 'Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?'

19 'What things?' he asked.

'About Jesus of Nazareth,' they replied. 'He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. **20** The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; **21** but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. **22** In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning **23** but didn't find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. **24** Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see Jesus.'

25 He said to them, 'How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! **26** Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?' **27** And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

28 As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus continued on as if he were going further. **29** But they urged him strongly, 'Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over.' So he went in to stay with them.

30 When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. **31** Then their eyes were opened and they recognised him, and he disappeared from their sight. **32** They asked each other, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?'

33 They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together **34** and saying, 'It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon.' **35** Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognised by them when he broke the bread.



A Reflection

Just as God redeemed Israel from slavery in Egypt at the first Passover, now at this last Passover Israel was redeemed by God. Liberated from pagan domination, sin, the power of the evil one and death itself, the new Israel was set free in a new exodus to serve God in peace and holiness. He now invites his followers on a journey to a new promised land.

The two on the road had been seeing the history of Israel as the story of how God would redeem Israel from suffering, but it was instead the story of how God would redeem Israel through suffering. Perhaps Luke is saying that we can only know Jesus, can only recognise him, when we learn to see him within the true story of God, Israel and the world.

Jesus had spoken of his own resurrection at various stages, from Luke 9:22 onward. Two of his greatest stories had ended with a strong reference to rising from the dead (15:24, 32; 16:31). But nobody had truly heard what he was saying. They were puzzled, and understandably so; “resurrection,” in that world, was what God would do in the end for all the righteous dead, giving new embodiment to everyone from Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron and Miriam down to the most recent righteous martyrs. Though people could speak of a prophet like Elijah or John the Baptist returning from the dead, what they probably meant by that was that someone would come who seemed to embody the same spirit. “The resurrection” itself would be a large-scale event. After Israel’s great and final suffering, all God’s people would be given new life, new bodies. We shouldn’t be surprised, then, at how surprised they were on the first Easter morning.

Questions for Study

1. When were you surprised—even stunned—by something?
2. Why was the crucifixion so devastating for the followers of Jesus?
3. The couple on the road to Emmaus may well have been husband and wife, Cleopas and Mary (see John 19:25; “Clopas” there is probably the same person as “Cleopas” here). What kept Cleopas and his companion from recognising Jesus?
4. How can this story of Jesus’ encounter with the pair offer a model for us as we find ourselves in difficulties, confusion or grief?

5. Jesus explained to the confused pair what had to happen to the Messiah from the whole Old Testament, beginning with the five books of Moses including Numbers.
6. What are the similarities and differences between the meal in verses 28-35 and the very first meal recorded in the Bible in Genesis 3:6-7?
7. Luke intended that his readers should see the simple meal here pointing forward to the breaking of bread, which quickly became the central symbolic action of Jesus' people. Jesus was recognised by the couple in the breaking of the bread (v. 35). How is he also made known to us in the Lord's Supper or Communion?
8. Read 24:36-53. Based on these verses, what sort of body do you think Jesus had after he was raised from the dead?
9. What are the elements of the mission of the church as seen in 24:36-53?
10. How are we as a church in Gillingham participating in this mission?

MY NOTES/PRAYER/THINGS GOD IS TEACHING ME



Numbers

Then & Now

An Article by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks



November 1989. The Berlin Wall falls. The Cold War comes to an end. The Soviet Union begins to implode. A young American political scientist, Francis Fukuyama, captures widespread attention with an essay entitled "The End of History." In it he argues that the two great institutions of the modern West, liberal democracy and the market economy, have not only proved stronger than Soviet communism but are about to conquer the world. People are no longer willing to make the sacrifices or endure the privations of war for the sake of nation, class, or creed. John Lennon's vision in his 1971 song "Imagine" - "Nothing to kill or die for / and no religion too / imagine all the people / living life in peace" - is, he claims, about to be realised, a secular equivalent of the Messianic Age.

Within three years, bloody ethnic war had broken out in the former Yugoslavia - first in Bosnia, later in Kosovo - between Muslims, Orthodox Serbs, and Catholic Croats, groups that had lived peaceably together for many decades. A rueful liberal intellectual, Michael Ignatieff, wrote that the forces of "blood and belonging" had prevailed. In 1993, Harvard political historian Samuel Huntington predicted not the "end of history" but instead a sustained and dangerous "clash of civilizations."

Fast-forward to January 2011. Aided by the new electronic media, a series of mass protests broke out in North Africa and the Middle East, beginning in Tunisia. There were insurgencies in Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen, civil uprisings in Bahrain and Egypt, and mass demonstrations in Algeria, Iran, Lebanon, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Oman, and Sudan. The phenomenon was

quickly named the “Arab Spring,” in the belief that what had happened in Eastern Europe in 1989 was about to happen in the Middle East as well: a grassroots-led rejection of tyranny in favour of democracy, liberalisation, and human rights.

As I write these words five years later, almost all of that hope has been destroyed as authoritarian regimes still prevail in Egypt and Bahrain, while civil war is tearing Syria, Libya, and Yemen apart at the cost of hundreds of thousands of lives. The twenty-first century has seen swathes of the Middle East, Africa, and Asia descend into a Hobbesian state of nature, a war of “every man against every man” in which life is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” What succeeded the Cold War has turned out to be not peace and liberty but rather the old-new barbarism and oppression. Meanwhile, the liberal democratic West seems less sure of itself than it has been for many centuries. Thus do dreams of freedom end in a nightmare of chaos, violence, and fear.

This is why the book of Numbers – in Hebrew, Bemidbar, “In the Wilderness” – is a key text for our time. It is among the most searching, self-critical books in all of literature about what Nelson Mandela called “the long walk to freedom.” Its message is that there is no shortcut to liberty. Numbers is not an easy book to read, nor is it an optimistic one. It is a sober warning set in the midst of a text – the Hebrew Bible – that remains the West’s master narrative of hope.

The Mosaic books, especially Exodus and Numbers, are about the journey from slavery to freedom and from oppression to law-governed liberty. On the map, the distance from Egypt to the Promised Land is not far. But the message of Numbers is that it always takes longer than you think. For the journey is not just physical, a walk across the desert. It is psychological, moral, and spiritual. It takes as long as the time needed for human beings to change. That, as we discover in Numbers, can be a very long time indeed.

Political change cannot be brought about by politics alone. It needs human transformation, brought about by rituals, habits of the heart, and a strenuous process of education. It comes along with knowledge borne out of painful experience, preserved for future generations by acts of remembering. It calls not only for high ideals but also a way of life that translates ideals into social interactions. You cannot create a democracy simply by removing a tyrant. As Plato wrote in *The Republic*, democracy is often no more than the prelude to a new tyranny. You cannot arrive at freedom merely by escaping from slavery. It is won only when a nation takes upon itself the responsibilities of self-restraint, courage, and patience. Without that, a journey of a few hundred miles can take forty years. Even then, it has only just begun.



If you would like further study the book of Numbers, the following books which I have heavily relied on for preparing these notes will be useful.

- Raymond Brown, *The Message of Romans* (Bible Speaks Today)
- Dennis Cole, *Numbers* (New American Commentary)
- Iain Duguid, *Numbers* (Preaching the Word)
- Roy Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers* (NIV Application Commentary)
- Gordon Wenham, *Numbers* (Tyndale Old Testament Commentary)
- Jonathan Sacks, *Numbers: The Wilderness Years* (Covenant & Conversation Book 4)
- Christopher Wright (Numbers (30 Days Devotional)
- Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *Bewilderments: Reflections on the Book of Numbers*
- Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Wiersbe Bible Study Series: Numbers: Living a Life That Counts for God*



Marriage Course

Could your marriage be even better than it already is?

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Who is it for?

It is for couples who are seeking to strengthen their relationship. Some couples do the course to intentionally invest in their relationship, others are looking to address more specific challenges. Either way, the course offers essential tools and practical ideas to help you build a relationship that lasts a lifetime. The Marriage Course is based on Christian principles but designed for all couples with or without a church background. For more information email: admin@stmarksgillingham.org

