

“Breaking Camp”

Introduction: One of the issues we all must wrestle with at some point in our lives has to do with meaning and purpose. Where did we come from? How did we get here? Why are we here? Unless we can answer those questions satisfactorily, we will live our lives with little sense of real purpose or significance. Either we’ll conclude that everything we see and experience is totally random, and that we are just carbon chemistry that swirls around in a meaningless universe, or we’ll come to believe that we’re the stars of a story that we create. In general, both of these options can lead to a kind of survival of the fittest mentality in which we pursue our own happiness above all else. Ultimately, it leaves us unsatisfied and wanting.

Could there be something else, a purpose that goes far beyond the pursuit of our own happiness, but that still leads to our well-being in the process? The biblical record, 66 books written over a span of 2,000 years, reveals that there is. It reveals what we could call God’s grand love story. It’s a story that begins with Abraham, takes root in a people called Israel, comes to a climax in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, and continues on through the church and the power of the Spirit as we take part in extending God’s mission in the world. If we can see our story, both as individuals and as a church, as connected to this larger story, it can make a great deal of difference in how we wake up each morning!

For the last few months we have been considering the part Jesus has to play in this story as portrayed in the Gospel of John. We’re going to pause in that look for the next few months and step back more towards the beginning of the story to consider God’s call on the community of people known as the Israelites. We won’t stop talking about Jesus, but we want to consider how God set the tone long ago for his people to live in community and interact with the culture around them, being a light to the nations, or shining stars, as we considered last week (Phil. 2:12-16).

What does the experience of Israel have to teach us about being the people of God and living within the significant, and eternal purposes of this God? To that end, we’ll be looking at selections from the book of Deuteronomy, which largely contains pastoral exhortations by Moses intended to instruct and motivate God’s people for mission. What we’ll see this morning is that at some point, God calls his people to “break camp,” to move outside the boundary of their community and bring the love of God to the neighbors who live around them.

I. Wilderness Wandering

A. What’s significant to notice right off the bat is that breaking camp is not easy. In fact, it took forty years to happen! As the Deuteronomy opens, Moses is addressing the Israelites as they stand outside of the Promised Land, just east of the Jordan River. It’s a spot the parenthetical note in v. 2 tells us takes only eleven days to reach from Horeb. Horeb is another name for Mt. Sinai, that place where God had brought his people following his rescue of them from slavery in Egypt. You might recall that some 400 years before that time of slavery, God had made a promise to Abraham that he would make him and his descendants into a great nation, and that they would in turn become a blessing to every other nation. God remembered this promise, even through several centuries of slavery, heard the groaning of this people, and rescued them.

B. So, God had brought them to Horeb (Mt. Sinai) to reveal himself and his law, what was to define and give shape to their ongoing relationship with him. They had a good time with God in the mountains, but God had told them that it was now time to break camp, enter the land, and begin to fulfill the purpose for which he had rescued them – being a light to the neighboring peoples around them, revealing his faithfulness and mercy, that he was the God who welcomes

the stranger, the alien, the orphan, and the widow. Formally, this is how God had described it to them at Horeb, or the base of Mt. Sinai:

You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. [Ex. 19:3-6]

An important observation to be made here is the priority of grace, of divine initiative. The rescue from Egypt was a gift from God. The land to which his people were going was a gift from God. It had been promised by God to Abraham and his descendants. But it was a gift that needed to be received and “worked out” (cf. Phi. 2:12). By faith and obedience, their call was to mediate God’s presence, as “priests,” and it was to reveal God’s holy and loving character, as a “holy nation.” They were to be those whom God had blessed to be a blessing (Ge. 12:1-3), as our adult SS class in Genesis will emphasize this year. We’ll see this over and over in Deuteronomy. Typically, we’re used to believing that the OT is all about law. But the law, as we will see, is only the means God gives to respond to his initiative, his grace, in the lives of his people.

C. Not that this is always easy! Engaging the Canaanite culture into which they would go and live would be a challenge to both their faith and their loyalty. And in fact, this first generation never even got started. As we see in v. 3, Moses is speaking to the Israelites, not eleven days but forty years after they had been rescued and brought to Horeb. What had happened, of course, as the prior books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers tell the story, is that the Israelites had grown afraid. Out of fear, they resisted both their mission, and the Lord. When they sent spies into the land, the report came back that the people were big and intimidating. The culture was a scary place. But instead of living with faith in God’s power and obedience to his law, they ran. As a result, God let them keep running and they wandered in the wilderness for forty years, until that first generation had all died. So as Deuteronomy opens, Moses is renewing God’s call. It is up to the next generation to respond and go and be God’s people, his light, to the neighboring peoples, crossing the border, as it were, from fear to faithfulness, from salvation to mission, from theology to ethics, from wilderness to fruitfulness.

II. Crossing Our Border

A. What does this very early chapter of God’s big story have to do with us? It sets the tone for mission, for stepping out from our camps and into our culture, for participating in the ongoing, significant, and eternal purposes of God. Although the time and situation are very different, the apostle Peter applies this call to his first century Christian readers [1 Pet. 2:9-12].

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

[In light of such grace] Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they may accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

Peter calls the community of God’s people that is now the church to neither run from the culture nor be absorbed in it, but to live good and Godly lives, which he goes on to apply to life in society, at work, and at home.

B. Importantly, and especially when we might move toward fear, we need to remember that God’s people have never been called to do this under their own power. To the new generation

poised to enter the Promised Land, Moses reminds them of victories over Sihon, king of the Amorites, and Og, king of Bashan. These kings refused to allow the Israelites to pass through their territories peacefully, and so God made sure that they got through (Num. 21:21-35). It was a part of his pledge to always be with them. Centuries later, when Jesus called his followers to mission through what is known as the Great Commission, bookending his call to head out and make disciples of the neighboring peoples are these declarations: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me . . . And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Ma. 28:18, 20b). He’s got the power and he’s always with us. If that’s the case, and if we are seeking to do what he’s asked, why should we ever be afraid?

C. So as we begin to put the pieces of God’s grand love story together, can you begin to see that God has a universal goal for his people? Can you begin to sense that God has created us and rescued us intentionally to play a very specific role in his unfolding story, participating in his mission in the world beginning right where we live? We were not rescued, like Israel was not rescued, to sit on the sidelines and to remain in our camps but to break camp and get into the game. It’s where we’ll find meaning, purpose, and even adventure!