

Sermon on Numbers 1:1-46 prepared by Jonathan Shradar

Numbers 1:1-19, 44-46

You are meant to thrive on the journey with Jesus belonging to his people.

Last week after service a few of us were chatting and I was fascinated to learn how many of our families had used New Year's Eve to watch Harry Potter movies.

In the Shradar home we have a few Potter fans. They even all have wands. Don't email me about witchcraft...

But in the stories, and abundantly clear in the movies, I am struck by how Harry is always trying to go it alone. Take on Voldermort by himself. It is veiled in not wanting others to suffer, but also I wonder if it is rooted in a bit of pride in self. The Chosen One, surely he can handle it.

But the battles are never just about him. It's bigger than him. A particular scene in Deathly Hallows, Ron reminds him of this and helps him see.

We, like Harry, are conditioned to think only of ourselves. We take the place of priority, quite naturally. And the more we go on like this, eventually we make ourselves the center which the world revolves around!

Loving your neighbor as yourself becomes about making sure you really love yourself... and other crazy ideas arise in the bosom of self.

But humanity, those born in the image of God, were made for more than self. The trinity in community makes humans in their image, the heavenly council in relationship.

It is baked into us, the ache for belonging, for home. From adolescence, when the hormones kick in, they are a natural drive to create a home, a place of belonging.

Thinking last week of NYE revelers, those out late at bars and frequenting hook up and dating apps; they are all subconsciously looking and longing for what I have - a home, where I know and are known. Safe. In comfortable clothes!

This ache can drive us to do crazy things. That which we long prioritized can be set aside. We must be abundantly careful with this longing.

“We live in the midst of a crisis of home. It is evident in the massive uprooting and migration of millions across the globe, in the anxious nationalism awaiting immigrants in their destinations, in the unhoused populations in wealthy cities, in the fractured households of families, and in the worldwide destruction of habitats and international struggles for dominance. It is evident, perhaps more quietly but just as truly, in the aching sense that there is nowhere we truly belong.” The Home of God

Belonging like this, what we ache for in the depth of our souls with or without words to describe it, is not ultimately found in a family at home but in belonging to Jesus - in union with him through faith - made part of his family. Given brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers.

Religious expression rooted in self has ruined our sense of belonging. We are meant for a vision of the God who created, loves, and is renewing the world to come and dwell among us, a vision presented through the church as those that belong to the renewing Savior. Jesus.

Belonging in this way is how we thrive on our way home, to the new heavens and earth.

We begin to see this in Numbers.

A terrible name for a book. Taken from the Greek translation of the Scripture. Likely given because there are two occasions for a census. The Hebrew name is better, “In the Wilderness.”

Written by Moses, it is the fourth book of the Pentateuch. After the exodus, freedom from slavery.

It is a story of two generations, one faithless, the other faithful.

A story of God’s covenant promises to his people.

A story of God’s presence in the wilderness.

Why Number for us, as believers in Jesus in 2023?

Well, we are people on a journey, living as exiles in our own wilderness. Listening for the voice of God to direct our lives.

“The book of Numbers narrates the wilderness journey of Israel on the way to the Promised Land. Its application, then, is especially relevant for life “in the wilderness.” With the oppression of Egypt behind and the bountiful land of Canaan before, the wilderness is a place of transition and testing. It is therefore a time when the people of God must exercise faith, trusting daily in his guidance and provision.”

“Because the New Testament consistently describes the church’s life in the present age as being “in the wilderness,” there is much application in Numbers for us to glean. The Christian is one who has been delivered out of the bondage of sin and brought through the waters of baptism into the pilgrim life of the church, journeying to the promised new heavens and earth.”

“We live as they did — between salvation accomplished and salvation completed. We live between the work of God in accomplishing our salvation at the cross and the time when that salvation will be brought to its consummation when Christ returns. We too live between the times. What is more, our experience of this world is likewise one of wilderness rather than fullness.” Iain Duiguid

As we embark then, from this census we can recognize **we are meant to thrive on the journey with Jesus belonging to his people.**

Today we want to take inventory. This is like making the packing list for the journey, all that we need and all those that belong. It’s the head count... but more than heads. If we have learned anything from the Home Alone franchise, we must have a face and name!

Count Those That Belong to You

The LORD spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai. From the place the law was given.

Numbers 1:2–3 “Take a census of all the congregation of the people of Israel, by clans, by fathers’ houses, according to the number of names, every male, head by head. [3] From twenty years old and upward, all in Israel who are able to go to war, you and Aaron shall list them, company by company.” (ESV)

The warriors. Those that can fight are to be counted.

This is an army roster. Because entering into the Promised Land for Israel would require battling. Taking territory.

So they obediently counted. And they have huge numbers. 600,000 men of age that could go to war. Making Israel as many as two million. “As the stars fill the sky...”

They are told to count so they would know what they have. Strength in numbers.

Did it generate a sort of “pride” in tribe? Clan, family. I wonder if this was a confidence booster reminding the people who they were!

I am of Judah... of Ephraim... of Asher.

And more than that... of Israel. All of these have each other's back. Or at least they are supposed to!

While our journey doesn't require physical war (despite what some false prophets declare), it is full of battles nonetheless.

Ephesians 6:12 “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” (ESV)

One another...

Romans 14:17–19 “For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. [18] Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. [19] So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.” (ESV)

1 Corinthians 12:25–26 “...that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. [26] If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.” (ESV)

Hebrews 10:24–25 “And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, [25] not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.” (ESV)

Saved and redeemed from sin we are made part of a body part of a Kingdom. And we need others to fight for us. To carry us. To care for us.

This is the church, a clan among others, with the purpose of building up, defending, reminding each other who we are. And it is good to know who these are!

So take inventory. Create a prayer list - those you reach out to in times of need. Let them know you are counting on them.

Now, make sure you have a basis for a relationship...and proximity to these people. I can't text Tim Keller and tell him I am counting on him to intervene in my life when things get thick.

Families, friends, church, small groups.

We are regrouping this month and some of us will be adding new folks to our count here. Those that we can rely on to spur us on, to anchor us, to hold up our arms in battle.

On Mordor, Samwise says to Frodo “I can't carry the ring, but I can carry you...” We need to recognize the Gamgees among us.

Requires access to your life. Commitment to be part of the war party. Honesty about where you are. In Numbers, “not always a question of where the Israelites are located *geographically*, but where they are to be found *spiritually*.”

This is what our fighting friends help us discern. And make progress.

Levels of belonging. (Tribes, nation).

3 for up close, full access to your life.

10 for the journey, your prayer chain, encouragers, troop.

Church, for exhortation, unity, and mission.

As we begin the year, count those that belong to you. Where you are cared for, protected and brought onward to the promise.

If you don't have any, ask to be added to the number!

Count Who You Belong To

Counting those that belong to you is easy because we are served. This though is where real life is found - in giving yourself away for others. Being the one others count on for care, protection.

This census was more than just a count. It was a reminder to those counted that they were part of the army. They would be relied upon in the battles.

It would require self-sacrifice. Maybe even their lives.

For us on the journey, this is not the risk of death, but it can feel like it. It requires more than access, availability is needed.

When you belong to others, you are reliable.

We can't say, "I have your back" but I only see you twice a quarter.

"I am here for you" but my calendar is full.

This count gives us space for repentance and prioritizing. Making room for those we belong to.

We all have the exact same amount of time. It is what value that might differ. And being part of the family of God is an invitation to value each other above other things.

Not to unleash guilt, but to remind you what we are supposed to be about as followers of Jesus.

Galatians 6:2 “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.”
(ESV)

Galatians 6:9–10 “And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. [10] So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.”
(ESV)

It’s where we thrive, living life not just about me, about us, family, tribe, nation.

Served and serving.

Protected and protecting.

Available. Giving access to your life as an invitation.

Paying attention to those you belong to.

I am on everyone’s list - but you are meant for more than me.

Count those that belong to you.

Count who you belong to...

Philippians 2:1–7 “So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, [2] complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. [3] Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. [4] Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. [5] Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, [6] who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, [7] but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.” (ESV)

Be Counted Belonging to Jesus

Here in Numbers the list of names of those to help Moses and Aaron with the census were spoken by God. He knows them. He is present in the wilderness for the whole journey.

The merciful, gracious, and ultimately faithful One in the story.

And the New Testament tells us that Jesus is on the journey with them too.

1 Corinthians 10:1–4 “For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, [2] and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, [3] and all ate the same spiritual food, [4] and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ.” (ESV)

Jesus would himself say that he is the manna, the bread from heaven.

It is this faithful God that is inviting the people into obedience. Here they did... **Numbers 1:19** “ as the LORD commanded Moses. So he listed them in the wilderness of Sinai.” (ESV)

But this generation will struggle with obedience as the story unfolds.

We need a perfect obedience, a righteousness that ensures the promise land...

We have this in Jesus. The sinless One who lived in our place, fully obedient to the Father.

“The gospel is not that Jesus survived the wilderness and so can you. It is that Jesus went through the wilderness faithfully in our place, establishing the perfect righteousness that he now gives to us. His obedience credited to us as a free gift is what enables us to stand in God’s presence... What is more, having passed through the wilderness, Jesus has now ascended into Heaven to prepare a place for us. This wilderness will eventually end, to be replaced by the promised land of rest.” Duiguid

The One who provides sustenance, water and bread, but also his blood to atone for sin and establish a new covenant of grace with us. Those who turn from their

disregard of God, that come to Jesus for redemption from the slavery to sin, for new life and promise, are all written in the book of life and secure in him forever.

If you haven't belonged to Jesus, now is the time to come, to confess that you have been looking for answers in the wrong places, for belonging in temporary things.

He is still counting those that are his, he is still welcoming people home.

Matthew 11:28–30 “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. [29] Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. [30] For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (ESV)

And it's his Spirit that empowers us for the battle. For serving our fighting friends.

Be counted as Christ's.

Count those that are for you.

Be counted as someone for others.

You are meant to thrive on the journey with Jesus belonging to his people.

No matter how “magical” you feel alone with the Spirit, you were made for belonging - for this Kingdom, for these people.

May it be so with us.