

## **“The Rabble and their Graves of Craving”**

Reading: Numbers 11:1-6, 16-23; Hebrews 3:1-19

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I learned a fun new word as I was preparing for today’s sermon. If you look carefully at our reading from Numbers for today, you’ll notice that it says that “the rabble” that was with the Israelites “began to crave other food,” and that’s the beginning of one tragic episode in a larger tragic story. The word that our Bibles translate as “the rabble” is an unusual word in Hebrew; in fact this is the only example we have of this particular word. The word is *asaphsoph*, which, like many words in Hebrew, is a fun word to say. It’s not a very flattering word, though, as you might guess from its translation. It suggests that as God’s people, the Israelites, moved out of slavery in Egypt and headed toward the land God had promised them, there was a group of people with them that we might call rabble-rousers or troublemakers. So next time the kids are tearing around the house driving you crazy, you can tell them to stop being an *asaphsoph*, and maybe they’ll slow down at least long enough to ask you what you just called them.

But apparently as the Israelites headed into the wilderness they were not just a group of Israelites: apparently some of the Egyptians or other people living in Egypt were so impressed by the God of Israel that they decided to go with God’s people, but it wasn’t long before they started causing trouble. They begin to complain because the fact that God is miraculously providing them with bread directly from heaven every day is not good enough for them, and they want meat. The problem is not so much with their specific complaint, the problem is that their complaint amounts to them considering a return to Egypt, which is tantamount to rejecting God’s act of saving them from slavery. So the rabble begins their rabble-rousing, and the complaint picks up momentum among the Israelites as well, until God says, in effect, “Fine. You want meat? I’ll give you so much meat you have it coming out your nostrils.”

If God seems a little short-tempered here, we have to remember that this is only one example of many. This is only one tragic episode in a much larger tragic saga. God has just rescued this nation of people as a part of His overall plan of redeeming creation, but it soon becomes clear that this particular group doesn’t really want to be a part of God’s story. They constantly complain and rebel and bicker, until God realizes that in the scheme of His work, this is an entire generation wasted. It’s a generation-long delay in His plan to save the creation He loves, and the only real option is to hope that their children will do better. They are so stubborn and so fixated on their own desires that they end up wandering in the wilderness until that generation dies off rather than going straight into the land God was giving them.

They become a byword for rebellion. They’re an example to future generations of what not to do, which is a sad epitaph to have for your life. Hebrews 3 is just one example of a place where this generation is remembered for having seen what God can do and then going astray, failing the test, rebelling against God. The result, Hebrews tells us, is that they do not enter the place of rest and health that God has for them. They’re exiled to live and die as wanderers out in the wild places.

The thing is, there's nothing wrong with being in the wilderness. Lots of different types of people end up in the wilderness. I think back to some of the different people I've encountered out on the trail while hiking; I know you're not supposed to judge a book by its cover, but in a lot of cases you can tell what sort of person is heading toward you down the trail. Sometimes they're the ones who are in over their heads; you can tell from a mile away that they're miserable and just want to get back to some air conditioning. Sometimes you come across a group of noisy Cub Scouts on a day trip, and most of them are on a grand quest worthy of the bravest knight. Sometimes you meet a person on a mission, a trail runner or a through hiker who has their next stop as their goal, and nothing and no one is going to stop them. Sometimes you come across someone who is out there because they don't have anywhere else to go: maybe they're trying to "find themselves," or maybe they're out there hiding from something or someone.

The thing is that you meet some people in the wilderness and they're a sad sight for one reason or another — they're lost, they're miserable, they want to be anywhere else. For others, the wilderness is a place of testing and growth. They may be out in the middle of nowhere, but they're on their way somewhere else. The line between those two types of people is sometimes very fine indeed. While the Israelites were out in their wilderness, that entire generation of people ended up being a sad sight, but God's intent for them was that they would learn and grow and then go on to a settled land to flourish.

I love the wording we see in this passage of Numbers. They start out craving meat, and they end up being buried in "graves of craving." Their concern is for their appetites, and while I think God intended for us to enjoy His creation with its delights, He has little patience or use for those whose desire is *only* to enjoy His creation. He had something better for them, a land of rest and peace and growth living in His presence and blessing. But He gave them bread from heaven, and they wanted meat. If He had given them a land of rest, they would have wanted something else. That's how these things work.

This generation was a sad story, a tragic loss and a waste of time. The author of Hebrews, writing many generations later, still uses them as an example of what not to do. And Hebrews puts us in the same position as them: we are in the wilderness, faced with the choice of which way we will go. We can choose between those graves of craving, or we can go on to enter God's place of rest. There is a rest still waiting for us: not the same as it was for those Israelites, but we're not in the same wilderness. But the choice is still the same.

There's an interesting episode that happens right in the middle of this bit about the quail. This gathering, this rabble of people craving meat got things started, and part of God's response is to tell Moses to begin another gathering of people, this time some of the elders of the nation. While these elders are gathered, God pours out His Spirit on them, and they begin proclaiming God's words. But a couple of them don't play by the rules and they don't join the gathering, but God pours out His Spirit on them anyway, and Moses' second-in-command gets worried because they're not following the rules. He's worried that these guys might be a threat to Moses' authority. But Moses responds by saying, "I wish *everyone* got God's Spirit like that."

He's more concerned about God's presence and their response to it than he is about other things.

The way out of the wilderness is not to focus on our cravings, our desires that cannot be satisfied while we're there. The way out of the wilderness is not through complaining. Though I do think God is more than big enough to take our questions and doubt, and they are often very natural, the way out of the wilderness will rarely be found by asking God, "Why me?" The way out of the wilderness is found by responding to the Spirit of God. It seems like such a trite answer: of *course* the preacher is going to tell us to respond to God. But when it comes to our spiritual lives, the wilderness has to do with preparation and testing. Hard times reveal character and priorities. Do we stand or fall? Do we rise up or crumble? Do we hold fast to the God we proclaim, or do we blame and complain?

It's significant, I think, that this *asaphsuph* seems to have more influence over the people than their Spirit-filled leaders. It tells us something about this generation that the rabble says, "We want meat!" and the entire nation is soon saying, "We want meat!" Seventy of their leaders are suddenly filled with God's own Spirit, on the other hand, and they begin proclaiming God's own words, and...nothing much happens. It happens once and that's it, maybe because no one really listened. They spend the next forty years complaining, not prophesying. It seems so often true that we stoop to the level of the lowest among us, that the basest impulses can, if we're not very careful, listen more closely to them, and they drag us down to those graves of craving. Listening to that rabble leaves us stuck out in the wilderness; we fail the test. It is in hearing and responding to God's Spirit that we pass the test and arrive in the place of rest God has for us, and strangely enough that rest can come even in the midst of the wilderness, since the rest comes from being in God's presence. It's not the place, it's not the circumstances, it's the company.

And yet in God's economy, even those lowest, basest people seem to have a place, if only they'll take it. There is a rest waiting for all of us, maybe even the *asaphsuph*. God did not lead them into the wilderness with the intent of leaving them in their graves of craving. The intent was not that this generation would be a warning to future generations. They were intended to be an example. It's interesting how much God's plan gets influenced by the choices of the people involved in this story. Sometimes we think of God's plan being a great, impersonal web of fate that has to be completed or a checklist of events that needs to be checked, and God's plan really has to do with completing a set of *circumstances* and *events*. But God's plan is actually about the formation of people like you and me, people like Moses and the *asaphsuph*. Yes, He wanted to settle them in their land of rest, but more than that, He wanted to form them into a certain type of people. All of them — great and small, Israelite and foreigner, leader and rabble — they were all called to respond to the presence of God and arrive in His place of rest.

Deep people often go through the wilderness at some time, sometimes many times, and the fact that they either pass the test or learn from their failure is part of what makes them deep. Sometimes we wind up in the wilderness because God sends us there as a test.

Sometimes we're there because we've done something to set our own course into the wilderness. Sometimes we're there because life doesn't always make sense and bad things happen. In any event, when we're there, the response is to turn to God. We ought not let ourselves be influenced by the naysayers and the rabble-rousers, the wanderers with no direction other than their graves of craving. Instead, we can influence them, and invite them to wander with us into God's rest.



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