

In the Wilderness — Guarding the Legacy

Numbers 7–9 (Sermon #3)

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Introduction: The Perils of Mother’s Day Sermons

Mother’s Day is a minefield for preachers.

In any given congregation there are people who had absent or abusive mothers, people who wanted desperately to be a mother and are not, people who have lost their mother and are sitting with fresh grief. And then there is the spectacle of a man standing in a pulpit telling women what a godly woman looks like — with the predictable result of people feeling, afterward, like failures. I have seen it too many times.

And so my practice has become simply to preach whatever passage I am in, and from that passage speak to any holiday or special occasion as the text allows. This is all to say that I was not thinking about Mother’s Day when I started this series in Numbers. At the start of last week, my wife Lee said to me, “I cannot wait to see how you talk about mothers from your passage this Sunday.” That sent me down a rabbit trail, searching for some reference to mothers in our Scripture for today. I found one — and I will share it with you in a moment — and that passage opened up for me a deeper understanding of God’s Word than I had seen before. So bear with me as I nerd out a little.

Let’s begin with prayer.

The Story: A Flashback to the Day the Tabernacle Was Raised

Our passage today is Numbers 7 through 9. The reason I am treating these three chapters as a single unit is that they are bracketed by a set of bookends. Numbers 7:1 begins, “*On the day when Moses had finished setting up the tabernacle...*” and the section closes in Numbers 9:15 with “*on the day that the tabernacle was set up.*” Because of these bookends, we are meant to read this entire section as a coherent whole.

The day the tabernacle was set up, it turns out, was about a month before the Book of Numbers officially opens. Notice that Numbers 1:1 reads:

“The LORD spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the tent of meeting, on the first day of the second month, in the second year after they had come out of the land of Egypt.”

Now look at Exodus 40:17:

“In the first month in the second year, on the first day of the month, the tabernacle was erected.”

Our passage today is a flashback. In Numbers, the people of Israel are gearing up to leave Mount Sinai. As we have seen in our first two studies, a census has been taken, the people have been organized, and the Levites have been assigned their responsibilities for moving the tabernacle. They are about to depart — and in chapter 10, they are on the move. But just before they leave Sinai, there is a remembering, a return to just one month prior.

I imagine Moses, with a hint of irony, having spent a whole year meeting with God, finding craftsmen, gathering materials, and supervising the construction — finally, finally, on the anniversary of their exodus (the first day of the first month of the second year), the tabernacle is complete. There it stands. And then, within fifty days, God says: time to pack up and get going.

But this flashback is doing more than filling in a gap on a timeline. It resolves a problem that was left hanging at the very end of Exodus. Here is the problem. On the day the tabernacle was erected, the glory of the Lord filled it — and made it impossible for anyone to enter. Exodus 40:34–35:

“Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled on it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.”

Do you see the problem? The whole purpose of the covenant was so that the people might live in the presence of God. The whole purpose of the tabernacle was to make that possible. But now that it is built, no one can go in. How will this be resolved? The answer, as our passage will show, is the dedication of the altar through sacrifice. Before we get there, I want to lay a little theological groundwork.

The Holiness Problem: Why We Cannot Simply Walk In

God is holy. He is perfect, pure, and fully righteous. His glory — which is a way of speaking about the totality of his attributes in their fullness — does not permit unrighteousness,

impurity, or evil to stand in his presence. Or to put it the other way around: all that is sinful, all that is impure, simply cannot withstand the glory of God.

The best illustration I can offer is the sun. All of life depends on the sun — we need its light and its warmth. But if we were to get into a spaceship and fly toward it, the closer we came, the more we would be destroyed. There is no one who could withstand it.

This is like the Lord. All of life comes from him, and we depend upon him for life. His light fills every corner of creation. But there is no one who can approach him and remain alive, because they would be consumed by his glory. And God made the sun, which means he is infinitely more glorious than the sun and therefore infinitely more dangerous to approach. This is why no one could enter the tabernacle on the day it was set up — not even Moses. This is why, over and over, Moses is told: to fully see my glory, to fully be in my presence, will kill you.

That is the problem. We are made for God, made to be in relationship with him. But we are unable to approach his holy presence. How will Moses ever enter the tent of meeting where a holy God dwells?

Numbers 7: The Dedication of the Altar

The answer is Numbers chapter 7 — the dedication of the altar.

The tabernacle had a very precise design. If a person stepped through the entrance, the very first thing they would encounter was the altar. Beyond the altar was a washbasin. Beyond the washbasin was the outer room of the tent, where objects symbolizing fellowship and God's mercy were kept. And then there was a curtain separating that outer room from the Holy of Holies — the place where the shekinah glory of God dwelt, above the ark of the covenant. The entire design of the tabernacle is oriented toward drawing a person toward that inner room, into nearness with the Lord. And the only way to get there is through the altar.

The altar is the place where the death that is due upon a person is inflicted upon something else. Instead of Moses dying in his approach to a holy God, here is a bull, a ram, a lamb. These animals die in his place, so that he may encounter and enjoy the presence of the Lord. That is what is happening in Numbers 7.

Numbers 7 is probably the most boring chapter in the entire Bible. It is the second longest chapter in Scripture, after Psalm 119. What makes it so long — so relentlessly, wonderfully long — is that it describes twelve days of sacrifices that are all exactly the same. I will read just the first day:

“And the LORD said to Moses, ‘They shall offer their offerings, one chief each day, for the dedication of the altar.’ He who offered his offering the first day was Nahshon the son of Amminadab, of the tribe of Judah. And his offering was one silver plate whose weight was 130 shekels, one silver basin of 70 shekels, according to the shekel of the sanctuary, both of them full of fine flour mixed with oil for a grain offering; one golden dish of 10 shekels, full of incense; one bull from the herd, one ram, one male lamb a year old, for a burnt offering; one male goat for a sin offering; and for the sacrifice of peace offerings, two oxen, five rams, five male goats, and five male lambs a year old. This was the offering of Nahshon the son of Amminadab.” (Numbers 7:11–17)

And then, as you read through the rest of chapter 7, every tribe gives the exact same offering. That repetition is what makes this chapter so long. Why was every single sacrifice on every single day written out twelve times? The answer is that all the people of Israel, represented by the twelve tribes, are equally in need of a savior. They are equally condemned, equally falling short of the glory of God. No one can approach the Lord on the basis of their own merit or works — not even Moses. The altar becomes the means of substitution. The death that is due upon the people is received by an animal, a lamb, in their place.

At the end of chapter 7, beginning at verse 84, there is a summation of all the sacrifices: twelve silver plates, twelve silver basins, twelve golden dishes, thirty-six bulls, seventy-two rams, seventy-two lambs, and seventy-two goats — two hundred and fifty-two animals sacrificed on the altar over twelve days. And it is only then, after all of this, that Moses is able to enter the tent of meeting. Numbers 7:89:

“And when Moses went into the tent of meeting to speak with the LORD, he heard the voice speaking to him from above the mercy seat that was on the ark of the testimony, from between the two cherubim; and it spoke to him.”

The tabernacle was set up, and it was not until twelve days later — after two hundred and fifty-two sacrifices — that Moses could enter.

Numbers 8–9: Light, Levites, and Passover

What were the first words God spoke to Moses when Moses finally entered the tent of meeting? I am paraphrasing here, but essentially: *“Could someone please turn on the light?”* Numbers 8:1–3:

“Now the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Speak to Aaron and say to him, When you set up the lamps, the seven lamps shall give light in front of the lampstand.’ And Aaron did so: he set up its lamps in front of the lampstand, as the LORD commanded Moses.”

I think these first words are significant. God is saying, in effect, *It is time to get to work. It is time to be in relationship.* The last time God had dwelt with man and woman was in the Garden of Eden. After Adam and Eve sinned in Genesis 3, God approached them — and they hid. That hiding, that flight from God’s presence, has been the condition of humanity ever since. Now, because of the covenant, because of the tabernacle, because of the altar dedication, humanity need not hide from God any longer. That is the whole purpose of all of it. In a way, the tabernacle represents a new creation taking shape — and so, just as in the first creation God spoke first, *“Let there be light,”* the new creation of the tabernacle begins in the same way.

Reading on through Numbers 8 and into Numbers 9, two things happen, and they are woven together. In Numbers 8, the whole tribe of Levi is dedicated for service to the Lord:

“And you shall bring the Levites before the tent of meeting and assemble the whole congregation of the people of Israel. When you bring the Levites before the LORD, the people of Israel shall lay their hands on the Levites, and Aaron shall offer the Levites before the LORD as a wave offering from the people of Israel, that they may do the service of the LORD.” (Numbers 8:9–11)

And then, interwoven with this, the people go into the celebration of the Passover. Numbers 9:1–3:

“And the LORD spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the first month of the second year after they had come out of the land of Egypt, saying, ‘Let the people of Israel keep the Passover at its appointed time. On the fourteenth day of this month, at twilight, you shall keep it at its appointed time; according to all its statutes and all its rules you shall keep it.’”

Can you imagine what it must have been like to celebrate that first Passover? How overwhelming, how powerful, how full of wonder. Remembering how the Lord had done battle on their behalf against Egypt, and how in that final and decisive act, death had come through the land — killing all the firstborn of Egypt while the firstborn of Israel took shelter under the blood of the lamb painted on the doorposts. Exodus 4:22–23 tells us that this last act — the death of the firstborn — was a form of reciprocating judgment:

“Then you shall say to Pharaoh, ‘Thus says the LORD, Israel is my firstborn son, and I say to you, “Let my son go that he may serve me.” If you refuse to let him go, behold, I will kill your firstborn son.’”

The death of the firstborn was judgment upon Egypt for its own heinous sin against God. But what is so striking about this final mighty act is that it was not aimed only at the Egyptians. In all the other acts of God against Pharaoh — what we often call the plagues — only the Egyptians suffered the boils, the flies, the hail, and so on. But in this last act, everything was under judgment — including Israel. Death came for them too. They escaped only by taking refuge under the blood of the lamb on the doorposts, saying to death: *you cannot come in here*. This is the night the Passover remembers — a night of judgment that in the morning became deliverance.

The Firstborn and the Legacy: Where Mother’s Day Comes In

Now, here is the connection I had never seen before, and it took Lee’s question about Mother’s Day to make me look for it.

The theme of the firstborn ties this entire passage together. I am reading from Numbers 8:14–16:

“Thus you shall separate the Levites from among the people of Israel, and the Levites shall be mine. And after that the Levites shall go in to serve at the tent of meeting, when you have cleansed them and offered them as a wave offering. For they are wholly given to me from among the people of Israel. Instead of all who open the womb, the firstborn of all the people of Israel, I have taken them for myself.”

There is my Mother’s Day verse. If “open the womb” does not shout Mother’s Day, I do not know what does.

But what is the significance of opening the womb — of being the firstborn? Most people, if asked, would say that the firstborn occupy a position of primacy: first in family rank, authority, and inheritance. That answer, however, is not quite right. It is wrong precisely because the entire book of Genesis, in story after story — Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, Reuben and Joseph, Ephraim and Manasseh — shows us that God’s blessing does not follow the order of birth. It follows grace. The big deal about the firstborn has nothing to do with anything they merit by virtue of being born first.

Rather, the firstborn are a *legacy* — a living reminder of the salvation the Lord won in Egypt. Exodus 13:11–15 makes this connection explicit:

“When the LORD brings you into the land of the Canaanites, as he swore to you and your fathers, and shall give it to you, you shall set apart to the LORD all that first opens the womb. All the firstborn of your animals that are males shall be the LORD’s. Every firstborn of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb, or if you will not redeem it you shall break its neck. Every firstborn of man among your sons you shall redeem.”

This seems strange, even unnecessary. Why? The Lord anticipates the question. Reading on:

“And when in time to come your son asks you, ‘What does this mean?’ you shall say to him, ‘By a strong hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery. For when Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the LORD killed all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the firstborn of man and the firstborn of animals.’”

The reason we redeem the firstborn of humans is so that we remember — so that we relive and keep alive before us the salvation God brought us into. The redeeming of the firstborn is how the people of God guard their legacy.

Returning now to Numbers 8:14 and 16:

“Thus you shall separate the Levites from among the people of Israel, and the Levites shall be mine... For they are wholly given to me from among the people of Israel. Instead of all who open the womb, the firstborn of all the people of Israel, I have taken them for myself.”

The Levites are chosen by the Lord not because of merit or birthright, but as a legacy — a daily, embodied reminder of the Lord’s salvation. Every Levite, serving at the tent of meeting, represents the ongoing observance of the Passover. Every day of priestly service was meant to be lived in the shadow and power of God’s saving acts. The flashback ends. It is now time to move into the wilderness.

Application: Mothers, the Womb, and the Cross

I want to close with two things.

First — at my own peril — let’s talk about mothers, since it is Mother’s Day.

The passage I read is not one I expect gets used very often for Mother's Day sermons: *"Instead of all who open the womb, the firstborn of all the people of Israel, I have taken them for myself."* Over the past sixty or seventy years there has been a significant cultural shift in the West — a rightly motivated effort to see women as more than their biology. Women contribute to society in ways that are not reducible to bearing children. Women in the West today are leaders, entrepreneurs, teachers, doctors, scientists, astronauts, and so much more. And I believe this is good and right, because I believe that God created both men and women in his image, and that the Spirit of God is poured out on both men and women to do great things for his glory.

But I do think that with the rise of these opportunities, something else happened that was not good: motherhood itself was quietly demoted. The womb came to be seen, in many quarters, as something like a physical liability — an obstacle to be managed if a woman is to succeed in life.

Yet in our Scripture today, and throughout the Bible, the womb is held up as a place of sacred, divine mystery — a place where life is brought into being in a way that only women can know and experience. And here in Numbers, it is the Lord himself who points to the womb, to the opening of the womb, and says to his people: *I want you to remember me, and what I have done, when a child is born.* So today, on Mother's Day, it is right to call your mother and right to remember her. But we are also called, in accordance with God's Word, to be reminded of God's divine power, his grace, and the sacred mystery of life that motherhood represents.

Second — and this is where I want to land — our passage in Numbers 7 through 9 helps us understand the cross of Christ.

Throughout all of human history, two things have remained constant. God's holiness has not changed. And neither has human sinfulness. Read the book of Genesis: there is no sin that people commit today that is not already there. We have not grown or evolved our way out of pride, ingratitude, selfishness, and greed. And because God is holy and we are not, we cannot approach him and live. We cannot withstand his presence on our own.

But here is the good news. Jesus — the great high priest who represents us, the firstborn of all creation — redeems us. He redeems us by becoming the substitutionary death, offered on a cross, so that all of us — not one man, but all of us — may draw near to God. That is the goal. That is the whole objective: to draw near to the Lord. And it is in Christ, through his finished work, that the curtain separating us from God is torn open. 1 Peter 2:24–25:

"He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls."

How does a person draw near to the Shepherd and Overseer of souls? Not through sacrifice. Not through works. Through faith — trusting in the work that Christ has done.

That is the invitation.