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April 18th: Numbers 14 & Mark 11:27–12:12

April 17, 2020



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Refusal to enter the land. The parable of the wicked tenants.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Numbers chapter 14. Let us choose a leader and go back to Egypt. And the Lord said to Moses, And I will strike them with the pestilence and disinherit them, and I will make of you a nation greater and mightier than they.

But Moses said to the Lord, Then the Egyptians will hear of it, for you brought up this people in your might from among them, and they will tell the inhabitants of this land. They have heard that you, O Lord, are in the midst of this people, for you, O Lord, are seen face to face, and your cloud stands over them. And you go before them in a pillar of cloud by day, and in a pillar of fire by night.

Now if you kill this people as one man, then the nations who have heard your fame will say, It is because the Lord was not able to bring this people into the land that he swore to give to them, that he has killed them in the wilderness. And now, please, let the power of the Lord be great as you have promised, saying, The Lord is slow to anger and

abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression. But he will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation.

Please pardon the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of your steadfast love, just as you have forgiven this people from Egypt until now. Then the Lord said, I have pardoned according to your word. But truly as I live, and as all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord, none of the men who have seen my glory and my signs that I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and yet have put me to the test these ten times and have not obeyed my voice, shall see the land that I swore to give to their fathers, and none of those who despised me shall see it.

But my servant Caleb, because he has a different spirit and has followed me fully, I will bring into the land into which he went, and his descendants shall possess it. Now since the Amalekites and the Canaanites dwell in the valleys, turn tomorrow and set out for the wilderness by the way to the Red Sea. And the Lord spoke to Moses and to Aaron saying, How long shall this wicked congregation grumble against me? I have heard the grumblings of the people of Israel, which they grumble against me.

Say to them, as I live, declares the Lord, what you have said in my hearing I will do to you. Your dead bodies shall fall in this wilderness, and all of your number listed in the census from 20 years old and upward who have grumbled against me, not one shall come into the land where I swore that I would make you dwell, except Caleb the son of Jephunneh and Joshua the son of Nun. But your little ones who you said would become a prey, I will bring in, and they shall know the land that you have rejected.

But as for you, your dead bodies shall fall in this wilderness, and your children shall be shepherds in the wilderness 40 years, and shall suffer for your faithlessness, until the last of your dead bodies lies in the wilderness. According to the number of the days in which you spied out the land, 40 days, a year for each day, you shall bear your iniquity 40 years, and you shall know my displeasure. I the Lord have spoken.

Surely this will I do to all this wicked congregation who are gathered together against me. In this wilderness they shall come to a full end, and there they shall die. And the men who Moses sent to spy out the land, who returned and made all the congregation grumble against him, by bringing up a bad report about the land, the men who brought up a bad report of the land died by plague before the Lord.

Of those men who went to spy out the land, only Joshua the son of Nun and Caleb the son of Jephunneh remained alive. When Moses told these words to all the people of Israel, the people mourned greatly, and they rose early in the morning and went up to the heights of the hill country, saying, Here we are, we will go up to the place that the Lord has promised, for we have sinned. But Moses said, Why now are you transgressing the command of the Lord, when that will not succeed? Do not go up, for the Lord is not

among you, lest you be struck down before your enemies.

For there the Amalekites and the Canaanites are facing you, and you shall fall by the sword, because you have turned back from following the Lord. The Lord will not be with you. But they presumed to go up to the heights of the hill country, although neither the ark of the covenant of the Lord nor Moses departed out of the camp.

Then the Amalekites and the Canaanites who lived in that hill country came down and defeated them and pursued them, even to Hormeh. In Numbers chapter 14, everything melts down. The bad report of the ten spies is received by the people of Israel, while the good report of Caleb and Joshua is rejected so fiercely that they would have stoned them had the Lord not intervened.

The people believe it would be preferable for them to have died in Egypt, or even to die in the wilderness, than to die at the hands of the warlike inhabitants of the land, leaving their wives and children as defenseless prey. The rebellion with the golden calf came after Moses' ascension of the mountain of the Lord for 40 days, and this rebellion comes after the spies ascended into the promised land of the Lord for 40 days. Perhaps there's some connection to be developed there.

The chapter begins with the people raising a loud cry, weeping, grumbling against Moses and Aaron, accusing them, and then moves to outright mutiny as they determine to choose a leader and return to Egypt. The raising of a loud cry and weeping is a response of despair. It's the way that Esau responds to his loss of the blessing, or Hagar responds to the prospect of Ishmael and herself perishing in the wilderness.

It's utter desolation and hopelessness. David Foreman observes the way that the place of Egypt shifts in the course of the Israelites' statement. First, the prospect of death in Egypt is held alongside the prospect of death in the wilderness as fairly equal.

Next, however, they are wondering whether returning to Egypt wouldn't be the best option in the circumstances, and shortly afterwards, they're putting that plan in motion. They had started out by recognizing that Egypt and the wilderness were places of death, but before long, they are wanting to go back there, convinced that it is a good option. They might think themselves realist, but their plan is delusional.

Also, we've moved far beyond mere grumbling at this point. The people have determined to reverse the exodus. Moses and Aaron fall on their faces before the congregation, imploring them not to proceed with such disastrous course of action.

In Numbers, this act of falling upon the face is taken in anticipation of God's devastating judgment upon the people's rebellion. We see the same thing in chapter 16 verses 4, 22, and 45, and then in chapter 20, verse 6. Caleb and Joshua tear their clothes. They express how devastated and appalled they are by the turn of events, and they

desperately seek to dissuade the people, presenting a stirring exhortation of courageous faith.

Joshua now raises his voice alongside that of Caleb. Had he spoken up earlier, his association with Moses might have decreased the power of his witness, but now the situation is desperate, and something has to be done. The people are being given a chance to repent, one last chance to receive by faith the encouragement of the faithful spies.

For Caleb and Joshua, it's absolutely imperative that the people fear God enough that they overcome the fear of all the people of the land that stands between them and the fulfillment of the Lord's promise to them. Far from being devoured by the people of the land, they will be bred for the Israelites, easily consumed by the people of the Lord. Caleb and Joshua don't deny the details reported by the other spies.

What they oppose is the faithlessness of their counsel, their failure to trust in the Lord's power to bring them in. However, the response of the people is to seek to stone them. Gordon Wenham remarks that this probably wasn't merely mob violence.

Rather, the congregation had judicial authority. I was using this to condemn Caleb and Joshua for a capital crime, and the process perverting the law also. The rebelliousness of the people has been gathering steam over the last few chapters.

Started with judgments upon outlying parts of the camp, then the rabble complained, and then the people more generally, then Miriam and Aaron, and now the ten spies who represent ten of the tribes and the congregation as a whole. At this point, the Lord intervenes to prevent their lives from being taken, the lives of Joshua and Caleb. The Lord speaks to Moses and declares that the people despise him.

They fail to believe in him despite all of the signs that he has performed for them. The plagues in Egypt, the Red Sea crossing, the provision in the wilderness, the victory of the Amalekites, the appearances at Sinai, all these things. The people are probably not so much questioning the Lord's power as his character, suggesting that he is a malicious deity who seeks to destroy them.

They are seeking to undo his great act of deliverance, the deliverance by which his name would be made great among the nations. This is apostasy of the highest order. As at Sinai after the golden calf, Moses responds by interceding for the people, and he presents a threefold argument.

First of all in verses 13 to 16, the Lord's reputation among the nations. Then in verses 17 to 18, the Lord's promises to Israel and his revealed character and name. He refers back to the theophany of the Lord in Exodus chapter 34.

And then the Lord's steadfast love, his track record of constancy with his people in verse

19. Once again, there's nothing on Israel's side of the covenant to put forward as an argument in their favor. They've utterly broken it.

They've shown nothing but faithlessness. And so Moses must appeal to the Lord's purpose in the Exodus, to his revealed character, to his promises, and to his consistent course of action to that point. Notice the way that Moses appeals to the Lord's self-manifestation of his character in Exodus 34, at the very heart of his argument.

That statement in Exodus 34 verses 6 to 7 reads, The Lord, the Lord a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation. Dennis Olsen remarks upon the subtle differences that there are between this statement and the earlier statement of the Lord's character in Exodus 20 verses 5 to 6. In the statement of chapter 34 of Exodus, to which Moses makes his appeal, it's God's mercy and his love that are foregrounded, rather than his jealousy. God's steadfast love is extensively unpacked within it.

Merciful and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin. God's steadfast love is presented as more generally expressed, not just limited to the obedient. God forgives iniquity, transgression and sin.

And he's not just defined by his justice. God's judgment has to be added as a sort of qualifier in Exodus chapter 34, because the emphasis upon mercy, steadfast love and forgiveness is so prominent. Whereas in Exodus chapter 20, it's steadfast love that is more the qualifier.

The arguments that Moses makes here are similar to those he uses in Exodus chapter 32 to 34, but now the reputation among the nations isn't merely about the Egyptians. It's about the nations of the land as well. The promise given to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob isn't prominent here as it was in the Exodus account again.

Rather, God's direct revelation of himself to Moses in chapter 34 of Exodus takes its place. Moses also now appeals to God's constancy with Israel in a way that wasn't as possible in Exodus chapter 34, where there wasn't that same track record of God's dealing with his people in the wilderness in the way that he has dealt with them by that point. The Lord's response to Moses' intercession is according to the revelation of his name.

He forgives, but he does not clear the guilty. And the judgment is poetic. They shall not see the land that they refuse to enter.

They said that they would be better off dying in the wilderness and that would be their

fate. They presented the well-being of their children as reason against entering, but they would be the ones preventing their children's well-being, as their children had to remain in the wilderness for decades on account of their father's sins. The spying out of the land that led to this apostasy had taken 40 days.

They would remain in the wilderness for a year for each one of those days. They're instructed to set out for the wilderness by way to the Red Sea, which, while it isn't the same place as they crossed earlier, literarily suggests a turn back towards Egypt. They're going in the direction they want, but they're going to be wandering in the wilderness.

The false spies are then judged and killed by plague before the Lord, while Caleb and Joshua are told that they will enter the land. They'll be blessed for their faithfulness. And later on we see that they take the land with the same courageous faithfulness that they've demonstrated in these chapters.

The chapter ends with the people compounding their sin by attempting to go into the land without the Lord's blessing or presence, and they're soundly defeated. The liberation from slavery will now be the work of two generations. The first generation was not ready for freedom.

They lacked the courage and the faith and the faithfulness to grasp hold of it when it was set before them, and they would not as a result enjoy it. However, their children would, and there's an element of comfort to be found here. The tragedy of the Exodus generation does not ultimately doom their descendants, who can learn from the sins of their fathers and enter in.

Nevertheless, the events of this chapter cast a very long shadow and are often referred to in later scripture. For instance, in Hebrews chapter 4. Today, if you will hear his voice, do not harden your heart. There is a challenge to us, as there is to all generations following the wilderness generation, that we learn from their negative example and do not harden our hearts at the promise of God, that we enter in, that we grasp hold by faith, and that we persevere and receive the promises.

A question to consider, how can Moses' intercession in this chapter inform our own prayers? Mark chapter 11 verse 27 to chapter 12 verse 12. And they came again to Jerusalem, and as he was walking in the temple, the chief priests and the scribes and the elders came to him. And they said to him, by what authority are you doing these things? Or who gave you this authority to do them? Jesus said to them, I will ask you one question.

Answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things. Was the baptism of John from heaven or from man? Answer me. And they discussed it with one another, saying, if we say from heaven, he will say, why then did you not believe him? But shall we say from man? They were afraid of the people, for they all held that John really was a

prophet.

So they answered Jesus, we do not know. And Jesus said to them, neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things. And he began to speak to them in parables.

A man planted a vineyard, and put a fence around it, and dug a pit for the winepress and built a tower, and leased it to tenants, and went into another country. When the season came, he sent a servant to the tenants to get from them some of the fruit of the vineyard. And they took him and beat him, and sent him away empty-handed.

Again he sent to them another servant, and they struck him on the head, and treated him shamefully. And he sent another, and him they killed. And so with many others, some they beat, and some they killed.

He had still one other, a beloved son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, they will respect my son. But those tenants said to one another, this is the heir, come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.

And they took him and killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard. What will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants, and give the vineyard to others. Have you not read this scripture? The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.

This was the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes. And they were seeking to arrest him, but feared the people, for they perceived that he had told the parable against them. So they left him and went away.

The end of Mark chapter 11 sees Jesus back in the temple again. And there is a movement back and forth between the Mount of Olives and the Temple Mount in this chapter that is worth paying attention to, and we see it continuing throughout the Gospel. Jesus has entered the city like a king.

He declared judgment upon the temple. He'd healed within it. And there are people gathering around and behind him.

He's the head of a movement. And now the leaders, the chief priests, the scribes, and other elders try to trap him. If his authority is from man, it can be dismissed.

If his claim is that it is from God, they have grounds to move against him. So Jesus answers their question with a question. Once again, he's challenging the authority on which they are asking the question and putting them in a position where they are trapped.

The answer to the question that Jesus asks is the answer to the question that the chief priests and the elders ask. Because John the Baptist was sent by God and his prophetic

ministry was one through which God authorised and bore witness to his son. So Jesus traps those seeking to trap him, as he does on many other occasions.

The parable of the tenants that follows is important to read in the light of Israel's identity as the vineyard. Jesus introduces the parable in a way that highlights the background of Isaiah 5 and Psalm 80. Isaiah chapter 5 verses 1 to 7 reads, Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard.

My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones and planted it with choice vines. He built a watchtower in the midst of it and hewed out a wine vat in it and he looked for it to yield grapes.

But it yielded wild grapes. And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard.

I will remove its hedge and it shall be devoured. I will break down its wall and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste.

It shall not be pruned or hoed and briars and thorns shall grow up. I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting.

And he looked for justice, but behold bloodshed, for righteousness, but behold an outcry. The prophecies of Isaiah have often been in the background of the book of Mark and here is no exception. We also see references in Psalm 80 verses 8 to 16.

Isaiah's parable focused upon the failure of the vineyard to produce good fruit. Jesus, however, focuses upon the wickedness of those working within it. The fruit seems to be there, but the workers are rebellious.

The master is sending his servants, the prophets and finally his own son and all are being rejected. In speaking of the killing of the son within the parable, Jesus is presenting to the people who will orchestrate his death their part in the fulfillment of this parable. Listening to the parable to this point, you can imagine that the chief priests and the scribes and the elders would have thought in terms of the background of Psalm 80.

The vineyard of God has been exposed to the enemies of the Lord, to the enemies of the people who are ravaging it. And they're going to pray for God to deliver them. The real problem are the Romans or some other force that's oppressing the land from outside.

But even though a passage like Psalm 80 is playing in the background, the enemies of the land are not actually the Romans in this parable. It's the elders and the chief priests and the scribes themselves. And a further biblical allusion can help us to see what's

taking place here.

In Genesis chapter 37, 18 to 20, we read of Joseph approaching his brothers. They saw him from afar and before he came near to them, they conspired against him to kill him. They said to one another, here comes this dreamer.

Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits. The wicked tenants in this parable speak in a manner similar to the brothers of Joseph. They are members of the people, they are the tribes of the land, and they are rejecting the one that has been set apart by the father to receive the firstborn portion.

By using this particular parallel, maybe we can see Jesus inviting us to read his story in the light of the story of Joseph. He's the one who's going to be placed into the pit. He's the one who's going to go down into the far country.

He's the one who's going to deliver his people and he's going to be raised up, seated at the right hand of power. He's going to have criminals on either side of him. He's going to provide bread and wine.

And the raising up of his body from the far country is going to be at the heart of God's great act of deliverance of his people. The wicked tenants will be deprived of their position. This isn't a claim about Israel itself being dispossessed, but about the wicked tenants of the chief priests and the scribes.

Their places will be taken by the twelve and others who are the true tenants of the vineyard of Israel. It also looks forward to fruit from Israel. The vineyard isn't abandoned.

It's given into different hands. And Jesus quotes Psalm 118 verses 22 to 23 here, a verse that is used in reference to resurrection in Acts 4 verse 11 and 1 Peter 2 verses 4 and 7. The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. The quotation interprets the parable.

The chief priests and the leaders of the people might have identified the wicked tenants with the Romans or some other party. Although it's not found in Mark's Greek, there seems to be a word play behind the use of this verse with sun, ben, and stone, eben, being played off against each other. The rejected sun is the rejected stone.

And this brings temple themes to the foreground. Jesus is the rejected stone and he becomes the cornerstone of a new temple. In Isaiah chapter 8 verses 14 to 15, and he will become a sanctuary and a stone of offense and a rock of stumbling to both houses of Israel, a trap and a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

And many shall stumble on it. They shall fall and be broken. They shall be snared and taken.

And Daniel chapter 2 verses 44 to 45, And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed, nor shall the kingdom be left to another people. It shall break in pieces all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand forever. Just as you saw that a stone was cut from a mountain by no human hand and that it broke in pieces the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver, and the gold.

Later in the story Jesus will be buried in a tomb cut out of the rock. He is the stone quarried from the rock, prepared as the cornerstone of a new temple of the Lord. The wicked tenants get their comeuppance, but the focus of the parable ultimately rests upon the vindication of the rejected son.

Once again, the response of the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders is determined by their fear of the people. They could not respond to Jesus' question about authority concerning John the Baptist because they feared the people, and once again they cannot respond properly because they fear the people. A question to consider, how might Jesus' quotation from the Psalms that opens up his parable remind us of the setting and also connect with Jesus' actions in the previous chapter?