



Tuesday Devotion: Numbers 2 & 3 Week 20; August 11, 2020

Bible Reference: [Numbers 2 & 3](#)

Surrounding the Temple and the Servants

When I was a kid we went camping. I hated much of it—the dirty showers, waking up sweaty, and even setting up camp. What I liked were the fun memories made around the food and campfires. I am glad my family has an alternative to camping—the lake house. We can have all the fun of camping (good food and campfires) with none of the mess.

By the end of the book of Exodus the tabernacle was finished. As God’s dwelling place, the tabernacle is a major part of their lives, and setting it up, taking care of it, and protecting it was a great responsibility which God entrusted to the tribes of Levi. In our text for today, Numbers 2, God identifies how all of this should be done, and which tribes are responsible for each part. He also gives a beautiful picture of how all the tribes should set up camp around the tabernacle.

Before we move too far into Numbers 3, let’s take a moment to think back to the plagues of Egypt. The final plague was the killing of the firstborn sons of all people in the land, including those of the Israelites, unless they put the mark of the lamb on the doorframes of their homes to tell the angel of death to pass over the firstborn sons inside that home...thus the name Passover. These Israelite firstborn children are now “marked” as God’s children, and He had chosen them to take care of the tabernacle.

In Numbers 3 we see that now God is replacing those firstborn sons with the males of the tribes of Levi, person for person, so a count of each had to be taken. It turns out that there are more firstborn children (273 more) than Levite males, so to make up the difference the tribes had to pay a fee—5 shekels per person—totaling 1,365 shekels. That money then went to the priests, Aaron and his sons.

Why is this buy-back happening? Let’s think about the firstborn in terms of the family. Jacob is our firstborn. Over the years we have given him more and more responsibility. He is old enough now that we can trust him to make sure Ellie is ok if we are busy with something. At first it was a hard transition, until we realized the blessing in it. As the oldest, I remember watching my brother and sisters in the summer too. Now imagine the responsibility given to a firstborn Israelite with all the tasks of life at that time; life was much harder back then. Now take it one step further and imagine that since these firstborns are God’s, they are not home, but away caring for the tabernacle. That had to be hard for those families without the help of their firstborn. I can’t imagine not having Jacob around even in 2020, much less in the time of Moses! So now God is redeeming these firstborn and giving their responsibilities to the tribes of Levi.

The money the other tribes have to pay is nothing compared to what they get in return—their helpers back. This is a powerful picture of God setting up His church, but one that is easily missed.

Let's try to relate this to the present day. If the LCMS were to take a tally of all the firstborn and compare them to the number of pastors, we would be in real trouble. There are far less pastors than firstborn, and I bet no one would want to pay the difference. Another discrepancy is where we are "camped." In Numbers there is beautiful imagery of all the tribes of Israel camped surrounding the tabernacle. Unfortunately, that is not a reality for us. The church used to attempt this by saying that we should live close to the church we attend, but in the end, it didn't work because close is a relative term. Our "camps" certainly do not surround the tabernacle as they did back then. The truth is that some traditions we try to keep alive don't work in a culture with many churches. Besides that, it is no longer just one group of people who are God's chosen; after Jesus came and died for all people, we are all God's chosen people.

This brings me to a question that came up this week about why I wasn't wearing a robe/alb for Sunday's service in the sanctuary. If you remember in Exodus, a lot of time was spent talking about the dress of the priest. In the Roman Catholic church during the time of Martin Luther the dress of the priest was also seen as important. Luther, on the other hand, worked to eliminate everything that wasn't actually necessary for saving faith, which is only Jesus. This is referred to as the freedom of the Gospel. The Book of Concord (the statement of what Lutherans think, believe and confess) still gives us freedom to wear these things, but doesn't mandate them. Traditionally there were two reasons to wear an alb/robe: 1) the white of the garment signifies the cleansing received by that person in baptism; 2) to make sure the pastor didn't stand out due to his clothing. But if we take a hard look at the ministry of Jesus, He came and flipped every tradition on its head when the people made it about them and what they did rather than about God. How might Jesus react to this tradition today, especially when most people have no clue why pastors wear albs/robes?

So why did I change? What does this mean for Mt. Calvary in 2020? Well, now that we are online, I worry about those watching who are unfamiliar with those traditions of the church. I don't want them to be confused and "put off" by it, thus hindering them from hearing the Gospel. Yet at the same time, I haven't forgotten about those who understand this tradition in the church and feel more comfortable when the pastor wears a robe, so we are working on how to do both. In the meantime, since we are primarily online, the goal is to be as welcoming and relatable as we can to that audience. This all fits right into our August series—When Worship Gets Weird—and it opens a whole new door of God's creativity to reach new people. In the book of Acts, worshiping weird meant worshiping in the peoples' homes and not in the tabernacle, and their numbers grew, and the Gospel reached many who had never heard it before. While we have been forced into some of these changes, like going online, we are praying that this weirdness will bring the Gospel to more people. Could it be that this weirdness, this creative moment, could take Mt. Calvary to places we never expected? I pray that you will be open to the unique creative moments that come out of the wilderness.

God's Peace,
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