



Numbers 11:1-15
The Story
Wanderingⁱ

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Have you ever been on a road trip, and made a wrong turn that led to a pretty significant detour? If you're like me, it's not just on road trips...I go on accidental detours just driving around town – usually because I start driving on auto-pilot and forget where I'm going, especially when it's not part of my usual routine.

But sometimes on a big road trip, wrong turns happen. About 8 years ago, when we were living in Chehalis, which is south of here about 90 minutes, we bought a mini-van from Gwen's sister, Stephanie. Stephanie and her family live in Tampa Bay. We had kind of a small window of space in which to actually get it, so I flew to Tampa on a Wednesday, and the next day I began a three day journey in our minivan back across the country. I was home to Chehalis by about 4:30 in the afternoon on Saturday, and led worship on Sunday. It wasn't that bad of a journey: I had 25 hour days (don't we often wish for that?) because I changed a time zone each day; So I drove 17 hours of driving the first two days, still got 8 hours of sleep, and drove 14 or 15 on the last day. Almost the entire trip was in parts of the country I'd never been to – until I got to Salt Lake City. Because Gwen and I had served at a church in Salt Lake City for four years, I was very familiar with the freeways there. But about 75 miles north of Salt Lake, where I was supposed to go west on I-84 toward Boise, I kept going north on I-15. I'd driven that route a number of times before...but I goofed. I realized my mistake 7 or 8 miles into the detour, but thanks so the fact that it's about in the middle of nowhere, the nearest exit was still several miles off. It was probably a 25 or 30 minute round-trip accidental detour, all because I took a wrong turn.

As we continue to follow the story of God and the working out of his Covenant with Abraham and his descendants, we come to a wrong turn that they take, and it leads to their infamous time of wandering in the desert. We've seen God lead them out of Egypt, they have established worship practices, they've got the Ten Commandments and the fine print explanations that goes with them, they've covenanted with God to do what he tells them to do and go where he leads them to go. And God was leading them to the land

he had promised them, so they could set down roots and be established as a nation through whom God would work to reach the world. But they took a detour.

Now, the Israelites are kind of a cantankerous and picky people (see that in today's passage). **God and Moses both call them "stiff-necked."**

Undoubtedly they weren't all like this. But isn't it always the squeaky wheel that makes the most noise, and gets the most attention? And there are some very squeaky wheels on this road trip caravan. And yet God graciously cares for them and provides for them. He has miraculously provided food for them. We read about that in today's passage as well. Later he miraculously provides water for them. But they're tired of what God has provided for them. They remember the food they ate in Egypt. And some of them express that they'd rather be back in Egypt as slaves for the sake of more food variety, than continue to follow God's leading to freedom in the Promised Land.

So, they are south of that region, south of what we know as Israel today. In order to discern what the land is like, and what it's people are like, Moses sends twelve spies into the land to scope things out. They're to find out about the land and the people who live there. And they go into the land, spend some 40 days there, and then come back with their report. Here's what they said to Moses and Aaron and to the people of Israel: **And they told him, 'We came to the land to which you sent us; it flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. Yet the people who live in the land are strong, and the towns are fortified and very large; and besides, we saw the descendants of Anak there. The Amalekites live in the land of the Negeb; the Hittites, the Jebusites, and the Amorites live in the hill country; and the Canaanites live by the sea, and along the Jordan'** (Numbers 13:27-29).

So the report on the land itself is good. This place that God has said he's bringing his people to is indeed blessed. God is true to his word, and he's leading them to a good place just as he said he would. But there are some obstacles: The towns are fortified, and they're big towns, too. There are all these people who live there, and the people are strong, and they're really big. In fact, a little later in Numbers 13 we get another report from them that

amplifies the size of the people: **Then the men who had gone up with [Caleb]...brought to the Israelites an unfavorable report of the land that they had spied out, saying, ‘The land that we have gone through as spies is a land that devours its inhabitants; and all the people that we saw in it are of great size. There we saw the Nephilim (the Anakites come from the Nephilim); and to ourselves we seemed like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them’ (Numbers 13:31-33).**

They continue spreading this unfavorable report about the people. They're really big. “We seemed small in our own eyes as well as theirs,” they say. “They're like football players and we're like horse jockeys.” But notice that in this second report, they also change the report about the land. Originally, they said the land was great, but the people were an obstacle. Now, besides the people being big, they also say that the land they've gone through “devours its inhabitants.” In other words, it's crummy. “Even if we could defeat them, we wouldn't want to live there.” That's not what they originally said. So which is it: Is it a land of abundance, or is it a land that devours its inhabitants? They're presenting this false, negative viewpoint and trying to persuade people that invading this land isn't such a good idea, even if it is the place God said he's bringing them.

But thank God for Caleb and Joshua. They are the only two who come back and say, “We can do this.” Listen to what Caleb said after the initial report about the land and its people: **But Caleb quieted the people before Moses, and said, ‘Let us go up at once and occupy it, for we are well able to overcome it’ (Numbers 13:30).** In other words: “There's no time like the present.” They're not oblivious to the challenges. They don't deny the first report from the other 10 guys. They agree that there are big strong people there. It's not like Caleb says, “They're right about the land being full of milk and honey, but they're wrong about the people.” They understand the difficulties they would face if they do as he urges. **But he also has faith that God has led them to this point, that God has promised them this new future, and that they need to act on those promises.** This is the minority report that he gives to Moses and the people.

At this point, however, the people continue grumbling and complaining about

being where they are...they start wishing they were back in Egypt where even though they were poorly treated slaves, they had greater variety of food. In 14:2, we read, **“If only we had died in Egypt! Or in this wilderness! Why is the Lord bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword?” (Numbers 14:2).**

Then in verse 10 it says that the whole assembly talked of stoning Joshua and Caleb because they kept insisting that they should go into the land as God was directing them. The people put so much pressure on Moses based on the false and faithless report, that Moses relented and didn't lead them into the Promised Land. This is where their journey got derailed, and they took a wrong turn. **They got scared and uncertain, and let fear lead them, rather than letting the Lord lead them. And so the report that showed a lack of faith in God won the day.** They set aside the route that showed up on their GPS – God’s Positioning System – and took a wrong turn that led to a 40-year detour in the desert so that God could purge them of the faithless people. And then in chapter 14:20-23, the Lord says that he forgives the people for their lack of faith, but there still are consequences. And because of their unfaithfulness, the Israelites will wander in the desert for 40 years, one year for each day the spies spent in the land. The rest of Numbers and then the book of Deuteronomy tell us that that's exactly what happened.

By the way, do you know what that desert got named? The desert of Sin. I kid you not. It's bad enough to be wandering around aimlessly in a desert (the UW football team gave us a great example last night in their game at Arizona State University, as the offense wandered around in the desert)...and it's bad to be caught up in sin, which pulls us apart from God. So wandering around in the desert of sin is a really bad combination. And many of us probably know, in general, the story of the Israelites wandering in the desert for 40 years. We make jokes about it, like, “Why did Moses wander in the desert for 40 years?” Answer: “Because even then men wouldn't stop and ask for directions.” **The thing is: God gave them clear directions.**

So, we can make light of their wandering, but they wandered because of their lack of faith. And that's not really all that funny. In fact, it was deadly serious because not only did they wander for 40 years, but very single one of them

who were over the age of 20 at the time, except Caleb and Joshua, died in the wilderness and never tasted the rewards of God's promised land. Even Moses got to see into the Promised Land, but he didn't make it in physically.

And as I reflect on all this, it makes me wonder: **How often do we let our fears (like theirs about the people in the land), or lies (like theirs about the land "devouring" them)...how often do those things become overgrown and exaggerated, and we let them win the day, preventing us from staying on course with where God is leading?** I know it happens to me. Sometimes I get paralyzed by fear and don't do anything. It's as if I think that if I don't do anything, maybe the situation will go away. Maybe an easier option will surface. And yet that almost always leads to my own desert wanderings, even though God's will for me, and his leading, were pretty clear.

In fact, in a lot of life, "where God is leading" is pretty clear. I know sometimes there are uncertainties and we may not have true discernment until we just step out in faith and see what happens. But: **There are many things that God has made quite clear in his Word to us.** For instance, God really wants us to love our neighbors: to bless them, help them, be in relationship with them. That's pretty clear. God really wants us to worship him and him alone – not so much for His sake, although he does say He's a jealous God – but mostly for our own. So falling down at the idols of money, materialism, power, and more, just isn't healthy for us, is not how God created us to live, and they have no possibility of delivering eternal life. That's pretty clear. God really wants us to live sexually pure outside of marriage, and within marriage...to be faithful in marriage. That's pretty clear. God really wants Christians to minister to one another and to the community around us, in the name of Jesus...to shine the light of Christ. That's pretty clear. 1 Timothy 2:4 tells us that God's desire is that "all people would be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth" of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. That's pretty clear. Those are just a few. So, many things are quite clear, and God calls us to follow His lead and stay on the path he's put before us, rather than wander off.

But our pride and our selfishness, or the influence of other people

around us, are always seeking to pull us in the wrong direction. They're seeking to get in the way and give us fear or outright lies that lead us away from where God is leading. You may recall from news accounts a few years ago that there was a gal who was visiting Seattle from out of town on vacation or business or something like that, and rented a car. She was driving at night in Bellevue, following the GPS in the car, and I don't know where she was trying to go, but the GPS led her to the mercer slough (water way) off of Bellevue Way and just north of I-90, and she ended up driving her rental car into the water! Like that, there's a lot in life that will give us the wrong directions, and when we follow them, we start wandering in the desert...or into a watery pit. Some things that lead us in the wrong direction look right. They look good. They're bright and shiny and appealing. But they mislead. And for the Israelites it wasn't even so much pride and selfishness that led them away from God, but fear and a simple lack of trust.

So what is God saying to you about where He's leading you? What is His still, small voice speaking into your life in regards to where He's leading you? Honestly, it may be, for the most part, "stay the course." Undoubtedly for all of us there are facets of our lives that need at least a little course correction, but maybe by-and-large, He's saying to you: "keep going in that direction." If the direction you're going in is easy and comfortable, then probably God is trying to lead you into something else. God's will is rarely easy or comfortable. Jesus said, "Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me" (Luke 9:23 and parallel passages in the other Gospels). There's peace in the midst of His will, but "peace" and "easy living" are not one and the same for those who follow Jesus. The Israelites are a great testament to that.

And like the Israelites, it may be that there's some fear, or a sense of apathy, or uncertainty, that is causing you not to move forward as God is leading you. When I started giving serious consideration to the idea that God was calling me into ministry, to be a pastor...that was a major step of faith and a big change in direction in my life. I would have been very content to keep being a ski bum and rack up 100 days or more of skiing each winter, and mountain biking and hiking hundreds of miles every summer.

But that would just been me continuing to wander in the desert. Leaving my comfort zone was kind of scary. But it's better to step out and face those kinds of fears, and follow where God is leading, than letting the fears and lies lead us into a time of wandering in the desert.

Lastly, if you're in the desert now...or for when it happens in the future: **It is important to remember that even in the desert, God is with us and cares for us.** He won't leave you or forsake you. He won't abandon you. You can't run from Him or escape his presence. He won't stop providing for you. He provided for the Israelites as they wandered. He didn't forsake them...he didn't break His covenant with them. But most of them missed out on the blessing of the Promised Land. There are consequences to taking these detours into the desert, but God will not abandon you.

So: where is God leading you? Where is His GPS taking you? If you've gotten off track, taken a detour, and you're wandering in the desert...even if it's in the desert of sin...know that God is with you. Jesus Christ went to the cross for that sin, he went to the cross to lead us to our heavenly father...He's already paid that steep price and gone to that degree...so he's certainly not going to abandon you now. Rather, his GPS is looking to get you on course with His will, and lead you into the Promised Land. I pray we'd stay on course – both individually, and collectively as a church. Let's pray...Amen.

ⁱ Today's sermon correlates to Chapter 5 in "The Story." We took orders for copies of the book, "The Story" at church, but now you can get a copy of the book on your own online through many websites (Amazon.com, cbd.com, etc.). In fact, cbd.com (Christian Book Distributors) has them for \$5, hardback. Just search for "NIV The Story Bible" at their website.