

## Study Guide for the Central Church of Christ

January 13, 2019

To Adult Teachers:

January 13, we will study Numbers 1:47-53 and Numbers 9:15-23. Discussion questions are:

1. What kinds of fears and anxieties do you think the Israelites faced as they headed into the wilderness?
2. Read Numbers 9:15-23. How did God make His presence known to his people in the wilderness? How would this visible evidence of God's presence have been reassuring to them?
3. Have you ever experienced God's presence more fully during a personal wilderness experience? If you are comfortable doing so, describe the experience briefly.
4. Mark talked about three inadequate views of God: servant, little buddy, and therapist. Can you think of other inadequate views of God that some people hold?
5. Read Numbers 1:47-53. What words, phrases, or concepts in this passage speak to the holiness of God? What, if anything, do you find unsettling in this passage? (Suggestion: v. 53 indicates that the Israelites had to be protected from the wrath of their own God.)
6. How might a deeper sense of God's holiness benefit a person's spiritual life? If a person does not adequately grasp God's holy nature, how might that person's faith be weakened?
7. What are some practical ways you could organize various aspects of your life so that God is always in the center?
8. In what way does the blood of Jesus protect us from the holiness of God? (See Romans 5:9-11)

### Sermon: *The Holy God among Us*

Numbers 1:47-53; 9:15-23

Review wilderness theme. What do you do when you find yourself there? We have a GPS to get us through: the book of Numbers. Sounds like a math textbook or an accountant's balance sheet. But the name we call the books of the Bible are not part of the inspired text; they were added later by people who wanted to be able to make reference to biblical passages. In the copies of the Old Testament Scriptures used among Jews, the book is not called "Numbers." Its name is taken from a phrase in the first sentence: "In the wilderness."

1. And when we turn to that book we find a thoroughly encouraging thought for those of us who believe: God is with us in the wilderness. There we find a group of newly-freed slaves heading into the wilderness. How will they find food and water in the desert? They don't know. What direction should they travel? They don't know. How will they protect themselves from danger? They don't know. What they do know is that right in the center of their camp, there is a big tent. It's called the Tent of Meeting, or the tabernacle. It is where God has taken up residence. Above the tabernacle is a vertical cloud that glows at night like a column of fire. There's a lot of uncertainty, but they can deal with it as long as they're certain of one thing: God is right there with them, in the very center of their camp. And so we face an uncertain future with the same confidence: we can move forward as long as

God is right here with us, right here in the middle of our muddling. In middle of financial distress, unspeakable loss, a strained and marriage, WWII with teenage kids, major trauma on job. In the middle of a major congregational transition. God is present in it all.

2. But we need to stop for a moment to ask what kind of God it is who is among us? Many of us miss his presence because we misunderstand his nature. We substitute the god of our imagination, a god that bears little resemblance to the true God. We imagine that God is our servant, ready to jump at our slightest whim, then get mad at him when he doesn't fulfill our wishes. Or that God is our little buddy who tags along with us and is anxious to join into whatever we decide to do, but also ready to butt out whenever we tell him to get lost. Or that God is our therapist, always understanding, empathetic, and affirming. But the problem with these gods is that when the going gets rough in the wilderness, they disappear like desert mirages. Only when we train our eyes to see the true God will we be able to perceive his presence in times of trouble and tragedy.
3. When we turn to the book of Numbers, we find an unsettling reality about the God who dwells in the middle of His people: he is a holy God. *Read Numbers 1:50-53.* A little background. This comes at the end of a census that was taken of the Israelites. The purpose of the census was to count all the men of military age. They needed to know how many men would be able to serve in the army to defend against their enemies. But the tribe of Levi was not counted in the census. They were not to serve in the army, because they were needed to protect the people from a different threat: the danger of a powerful, mysterious, holy God who lived in the middle of the camp! That God had his boundaries, and if those boundaries were crossed, His wrath would break out on the whole camp. The Levites were to guard the tabernacle, not to protect it, but to protect the people from the holy God who lived there. This is not a popular view of God, but it is a true view of God. The God who lives among us is not domesticated or tame. He is a holy God. Massively different from us, mysterious, beyond our knowledge. And he is dangerous, especially to those who take him for granted or who pay little attention to his directives!
4. So how do we live with such a God? Let me suggest a couple of ways. First, our holy God insists that we organize our lives in such a way that he is the center. The Israelites did not travel down the road until they found a nice campground, then set up camp and invite God to join them. No, they waited until the column of cloud moved and they followed. When it stopped, they set up the tabernacle under it and camped around it so that God was in the center. So often, we arrange our family life by the cues we take from our friends, our communities, the movies and TV shows we watch. We get ourselves and our children involved in so much stuff that we scarcely have an unscheduled minute. We take on projects and commitments that drain us physically, emotionally, and financially. Then we invite God to come in and bless our mess. If we respect God as holy, we need to ask a different question. Instead of "what do we want to do?" or "What is everyone else doing," we ask, "Where is God in all of this?" To what is he calling us? Where is he leading? When we find out where He is, we need to organize our lives around him. John V. to Tim K. on marriage: "Where is God in all or this?" Vital question for congregational life, and one that is seldom asked. Usually, what does the majority want?
5. Second, the fact that our God is holy demands that we respect the boundary between him and us. He is an exclusive God who will not give his place to others (*Read Isaiah 42:8*). Nor will he allow people to put anyone or anything in the place that is rightfully his. Tim Keller, who ministers in Manhattan, has correctly observed that our three chief idols are money, sex, and power. All three were given to bless us, but when we pursue them as the ultimate good, we put them in God's place. And when we put any person (including ourselves) or thing in God's place, we can expect an intense and fierce response from a God who is holy. We dare not put anything in his place. If we do, he will destroy it, discipline us, or withdraw his hand of protection and blessing from us (or some combination of the three). Wow! That's a pretty harsh and judgmental view of God, isn't it? Compare to the response you would get from your wife if you attempted to put anyone else in the place she occupies in your life. You could expect an intense, fierce, and unyielding response. Wow! That's a pretty harsh and

judgmental view of wives, isn't it? Not at all! Marriage is the most intimate of all relationships. To protect that intimacy, it must be exclusive. A wife will not put up with any rivals for her husband's affection (nor should she). And neither will God.

6. (T) And yet (and this is scary), I recognize a tendency in my life to try to put myself or money, sex, and power in God's place. So how do I keep from being incinerated? As we've already noted, the Levites stood guard around the tabernacle to keep the Israelites from crossing boundaries that would bring God's wrath on the whole community. Why were the Levites given this task? To answer, we have to go back to the Passover, an event recorded in Exodus 12. You remember this as the night that the Israelites were freed from slavery. Each family slaughtered a lamb for dinner, and then smeared its blood on their doorposts. That night, the death angel went through Egypt and caused all the firstborn males to die. But when he came to a house with the blood of the lamb on the doorpost, he passed over it and the firstborn of that family lived. Imagine being one of those firstborn sons. The rest of your life, you would know each day that you are alive not because you are better looking or nicer or better behaved than anyone else, but simply because you were saved by the blood of the lamb. And God told them that because he had saved all the firstborn sons, from that time all firstborn males would belong to him. (*Read Numbers 3:13*) Not human sacrifice, but entirely dedicated to God's service. But recognized that taking the firstborn male from each family and inducting them into lifelong service would be disruptive to families. So he made an alternative: in place of all the firstborn sons, God took the entire tribe of Levi in their place. (*Read Numbers 3:45*)
7. So now we know why the tribe of Levi was given the task of guarding the holiness of the tabernacle. They were identified as those who had been saved by the blood of the lamb! They alone were allowed inside the sanctuary, but only because of the blood of the lamb. Now, in New Testament times, God did not suddenly stop being holy! Yet, we are allowed (even invited) into God's presence. But *only* because of the blood of the Lamb. Listen to the words of the writer of Hebrews: *Read Hebrews 10:19-22*. We are allowed into the very throne room of God! Understanding this will make a difference in our prayers. We approach only by Jesus' sacrifice. It will make a difference in how we speak. "O my God." It will make a difference in how we worship. It's not a feel-good session or a pep rally, but an encounter with a dangerous God who is approachable only when we claim and cling to the blood of the Lamb.

What does the future hold for you? Your family? CCC? I don't know? I do know this: we have the presence of God among us, if we have eyes to see him and the courage to follow him.