

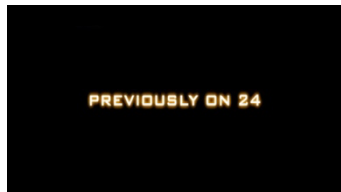


Liminality: The In-Between – Reflections for the Week of May 2, 2021

This week we kicked off a 5-week series for May. This month we will reflect on some lessons we can learn

from the Old Testament book of Numbers. The Israelites had left Sinai and set out for the Promised Land. They were “in-between”—beyond the safety of what they had known, but not yet where God was leading them. Our reflections for this week are brought to you by Ed Green, one of our pastors who likes to camp.

Day 1 The Story thus far...



One of my favorite shows from a few years back was “24.” The Fox TV show focused on twenty-four hours in the life of Jack Bauer, a counter-terrorist agent based in LA. Bauer consistently had a knack for being in the wrong place at

the wrong time. Bauer found himself dealing with crisis after crisis to save the country. Each episode began with a recap of significant activities from the previous hours to bring viewers up to speed for what was about to happen.

We probably need to do that with the book of Numbers in the Old Testament. Numbers contains, appropriately, a bunch of numbers. Technically, there are two censuses that are taken (chs 1, 26); one, before the Israelites set out from Mount Sinai, and the second, before they enter the land, following their years of wandering.

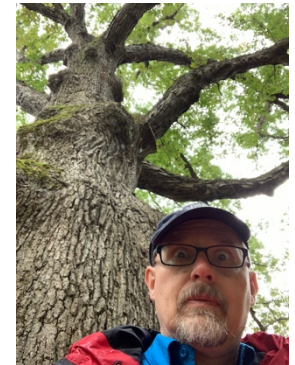
The Israelites had been delivered by the Lord from slavery in Egypt just over a year prior. They had traveled to and encamped in the wilderness at the base of Sinai, the mountain of God. There they had met Yahweh, their God, accepted the terms of his covenant with them, and had been instructed through Moses on how they were to worship him and live as his people in the world.

Read Exodus 19:3-8. In these few verses are revealed the identity of the people of God. Three phrases describe who they were to be in relationship to their God and the world; they were (1) his “treasured possession,” (2) “a kingdom of priests,” and (3) “a holy nation.” When Moses laid all this out before them, they agreed to the terms of the covenant, which was later reiterated and ratified in ch 24. Everything they did would now be a reflection of their relationship with him.

What is interesting is that Peter uses the same language to describe, as followers of Jesus, our identity. Read 1 Peter 4-10. Just like those Israelites so long ago, everything we do flows from our identity as God’s chosen people on mission with him in the world. What does it look like for you to be those today?

Day 2 Going back even further...

Last year I spent a wet afternoon hiking through Sugar Creek MetroPark. It was the first time I saw the Three Sisters. The Three Sisters are ancient white oak trees that are over 550 years old. That pre-dates Columbus’s voyage to the New World! (Two are still standing, but the third came down in a storm in 2008.) It’s hard to imagine that amount of time, but it helps me to put time and history in perspective.



When the book of Numbers opens, the exodus had occurred a year earlier, but the Israelites had been in Egypt for over four hundred years. Approximately two hundred before that, God called a man named Abram (later known as Abraham) who lived in ancient Mesopotamia, in the city of Ur (Genesis 11:27-32; Acts 7:2-4). When God called him, he made Abraham a promise. Read Genesis 12:1-7. These are foundational verses for the Story of what God is up to in human history. God calls him to leave what he has known, the safety of home, and to go “to the land I will show you.”

God promises that Abraham will be a great nation, he will have a great name, and he will both be blessed and a blessing to all peoples on earth. He first travels from Ur to Haran (in modern-day southeastern Turkey), and later from there to the land of Canaan. It is this land that God promises to give to his descendants.

What would it have been like to be Abram, setting out, but not knowing the destination? Have you ever left home, not knowing where you were going to end up? (There are some people who vacation that way...they just take off. Crazy!) Abram leaves the safety of what he knew to go into the unknown, trusting in this God who had called to him. Is there any space, or any place, that God may be calling you into, but you haven't stepped out, because you just don't know where you'll end up? What is holding you back?

Day 3

Liminality. We haven't really defined it yet, have we? The term was first used by anthropologists to describe the disorientation in rites of passage, where individuals are no longer what they were before the ritual, but they do not yet hold the status they will following the ritual.

As we explore liminal spaces this month we are describing them as times when we find ourselves "in-between." Those times of "in-between" can last just moments, or much longer—whether for individuals, or smaller or much larger groups of people. We find examples of both in the Bible.

This week we already looked briefly at the example of the Israelites after they left Egypt and before they entered the land promised to them by God. On a bigger time scale, the family of Abraham lived in this liminal space between when God made the promises to Abraham and when they saw the fulfillment of those promises.

Think of times in your own life when you have experienced those times of liminality. Puberty is a liminal span of time, when our bodies are maturing and we are no longer children, but we are not yet adults. Sociologically, the college years function the same way. Our lives are in transition from one stage to another. Women who are

pregnant are living in liminality: in a very real sense they are "a mom," yet they have not given birth yet and haven't experienced the many facets of being a mom like nursing, changing the baby's diapers, and teaching them their ABCs.



Here are some questions to think about today: What were those times of liminality like for you? How did you handle those transitions? How did you change? What did you feel like as you navigated those liminal spaces? Finally, how do your experiences affect how you view others going through their own liminality?

Day 4



Abraham was given the promise, yet he never saw its fulfillment. He lived and died as a foreigner in a land not yet his own. The old biblical term was "sojourner." Abraham was not alone in being a sojourner. One of the most familiar chapters in the Bible is the so-called "hall of fame of faith" found in Hebrews 11. Take a few minutes today and read this important passage.

"All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own" (11:13, 14).

These men and women of faith were living in what we could call a liminal space. Reflect on this today: how did these people navigate this space "in-between" the promises they had from God, and the fulfillment of those promises? How did Abraham live by faith as he waited twenty-five years for the son he was promised? What

challenges do you face in your own life, as you wait for God to keep a particular promise?

Day 5

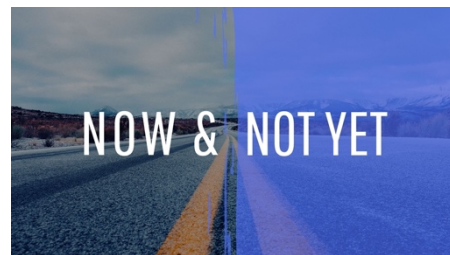
In Acts 1 we read of Jesus' ascension. After Jesus was taken up, two angels told this to those who were gathered: "Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven" (1:11).

Throughout the New Testament the perspective is that EVERYTHING has changed since Jesus came. He is the focal point of human history. (Even in our culture, we divide our understanding of history in terms of BC and AD.) Through his life, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension, he has brought salvation to the world and made possible that restoration that God was working toward since the Fall in Genesis 3.

But while that restoration has begun, it has not been completed. Jesus taught us that the Kingdom had come. But he also taught us to pray, "your Kingdom come, your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10). The Kingdom of God is here, but not fully, in the way it will be in the future. And God has chosen to include us in his mission to restore the world.

We often describe this perspective with these words: "Now and not yet." This is where we live at the macro-level. In liminality. It is not comfortable. Life is hard. We do not yet see the time promised, when "he

will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (Revelation 21:3, 4). Things are not what they were, but they are not yet what they will be—and in that tension, we are called to



live by faith (like Abraham and those saints of old), and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

We "wait for the blessed hope, the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good" (Titus 2:13, 14). We live "in-between," in the meantime, in liminality.