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Lent 4 Midweek

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

## Jesu Juva

### “The Torah Story”: Numbers – Adolescence and Rebellion

If there is one book in the Torah that I think most of us can best relate to, it would be the book of Numbers. Reading through it, it is eerily familiar. It's not like the other books that we've read so far. It speaks not of the beginning of things and the great Patriarchs, like Genesis. It is not quite so filled with the miraculous and awesome, like Exodus. And it is certainly not like reading through the book of Leviticus – although there is some overlap there at the beginning. The book of Numbers sounds more like life as we know it. There is struggle, confusion, doubt, fear, complaining, impatience, weariness, and discipline. The people of Israel are growing up into the people of God. They are learning. They are stretching their wings, and testing God. They think they're adults and yet they act like children. Or in other words, they're in that in between time that children look forward to and parents dread – **adolescence**.

The Book of Numbers is the story of God's people from Mt. Sinai to the Promised Land . . . and all the stuff that happened in between, in the wilderness. The book begins with the people receiving final instructions from the Lord, and then they move out from Mt. Sinai. Almost immediately there is grumbling, as they find out that the wilderness is not an easy place in which to live and move and have your being! And so it begins . . . Moses, *are we there yet?* How much farther? *Are we there yet?* We're tired of this manna! We want something else. *Are we there yet?* Egypt was better than this. Let's go back. *Are we there yet?* But the Lord is patient and longsuffering with His adolescent people. He provides for them and watches over them.

Until finally they arrive at the border of Canaan. There is much excitement, but there is also the fear of the unknown. The spies sent to check out the land report that the people living there are large and strong, and so fear overtakes the people. The struggle that lies before them seems too great for the promise of God. And so forgetting the victory of the Lord and the strength of His arm in conquering the Egyptians, they will not go in. Their faith is not ready. And so God does not make them go in, but graciously gives them more time – 40 more years. 40 more years of

wandering in the wilderness. 40 more years to think about God's promise. 40 more years to worship, to receive, to trust . . . to grow up.

Those 40 years were not easy ones for the people of Israel. Because growing up is hard. They face battles, but they learn to trust. There is rebellion, and they receive the Lord's discipline. There is shortage, but they receive the Lord's provision. There is death, and they receive the Lord's comfort. And through it all, their Father keeps them. He proves His goodness, shows His mercy, and delivers them from their worst enemy - *themselves!* Chastening, disciplining, rebuking, teaching, training, providing, and forgiving. And so at the end of the 40 years, when the people again find themselves on the border of the Promised Land, they are ready. Their faith has been tested and tried in the furnace of affliction, by the perfect faith-smith. And so they are strengthened and ready, and will this time enter into the Land promised to their fathers.

**How very much like your life and mine.** For from the time of our birth at the font, when we were born as children of God in the waters of Holy Baptism, we are on a journey. A journey through this life to the Promised Land of Heaven. And on this journey, our Lord is working in us - chastening, disciplining, rebuking, teaching, training, providing, and forgiving. Like the people of Israel, do we not also sin and rebel, grumble and grouse, doubt and fear? But now, as then, through it all, our Father keeps us. Proving His goodness, showing His mercy, and delivering us.

It is not easy. We may not always understand the "whys" and the "hows" and ask for answers. We may look back and yearn for the good ol' days of Egypt. It is all part of growing up in our faith. Of learning to trust. Even when dark our road. Even when your life feels stuck in the middle of a hot, dry wilderness. That when the time comes for you to cross the border from this life and into our Promised Land - however and whenever that will happen for each of us - we too will be ready. Ready to face the large and strong enemy named death, who is far too large and strong for us, but not for our God.

For God has promised us the victory. That just as He rescued His people from the hand of their enemies, so too will He rescue us from our enemies - from sin, death, and the devil. That all that seek to separate us from God be defeated, and we be brought safely home. Not because of what we have done, but because of what He has done. And it was in the midst of His people's wilderness wandering (in the book of Numbers) that God gave us a picture of that very deliverance - with the

bronze serpent raised up on a pole. That icon of death with His promise attached to it, that all who looked on that death-dealing image – with faith in God’s Word – would not die, but live.

And so it is for us today. For it was not only the serpents in the wilderness that God was granting deliverance from, *but from a far worse serpent than that*. From the serpent who desires not just our physical death, but our spiritual death as well. From the serpent who deceived Eve and desires to deceive us as well. The serpent who bids us put our faith in ourselves, doubt God and His promises, and look for our good in the pleasures of this world and life. This serpent who has sunk his deadly fangs into each of us, injecting us with his poison, to satisfy his own insatiable appetite for death. . . . But against that serpent hangs not a bronze snake, but the only-begotten Son of God on the pole of the cross. God using death to defeat death, with His promise that all who look in faith upon our Saviour there will not die, but have eternal life. For there in Christ is the death of our death, the routing of our enemy, and the forgiveness of our sin. His victory proven in His resurrection from the dead. His victory that will be our victory as well.

And so we will sing at the end of the service tonight, “*Hold Thou Thy cross before my closing eyes.*” (LSB #878 v. 6) The cross on which the King of Glory hung. The cross on which hung the Son of God, from whose side the water and blood flowed to fill chalice and font. The cross from which our Saviour said, “*Father, forgive them.*” (Luke 23:34) And washed, fed, and forgiven we are. His gifts keeping us and sustaining us in our journey, in the wilderness, until we receive our rest, safe and sound, in the Promised Land.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.