

"INTRODUCTION TO NUMBERS"

(*THE MESSAGE*)

(Eugene Peterson)

Becoming a truly human community is long, complex, messy business. Simply growing up as a man or woman demands all the wisdom, courage and patience that we can muster. But growing up with others, parents and siblings and neighbors, to say nothing of odd strangers and mean enemies, immensely complicates the growing up.

The book of Numbers plunges us into the mess of growing up. The pages in this section of the biblical story give us a realistic feel for what is involved in being included in the People of God, which is to say, a human community that honors God, lives out love and justice in daily affairs, learns how to deal with sin in oneself and others, and follows God's commands into a future of blessing. And it deals with all this without illusions.

When the Cloud lifted above the Tent, the People of Israel marched out; and when the Cloud descended the people camped. The People of Israel marched at GOD'S command and they camped at his command. As long as the Cloud was over The Dwelling, they camped. Even when the Cloud hovered over The Dwelling, for many days, they honored GOD'S command and wouldn't march. They stayed in camp, obedient to GOD'S command, as long as the Cloud was over The Dwelling, but the moment GOD issued orders they marched. If the Cloud stayed only from sunset to daybreak and then lifted at daybreak, they marched. Night or day, it made no difference—when the Cloud lifted, they marched. It made no difference whether the Cloud hovered over The Dwelling for two days or a month or a year, as long as the Cloud was there, they were there. And when the Cloud went up, they got up and marched. They camped at GOD'S command and they marched at GOD'S command. They moved obediently by GOD'S orders as delivered by Moses. (Numbers 9:17-23)

Many of us fondle a romanticized spirituality in our imaginations—the "God's in his heaven/All's right with the world" sort of thing. When things don't go "Right," we blame others or ourselves, muddle through as best we can (often with considerable crankiness), and wish that we had been born at a different time—"Bible times" maybe!—when living a holy life was so much easier. That's odd because the Bible, our primary text for showing us what it means to be a human being created by God and called to a life of obedient faith and sacrificial love, nowhere suggests that life is simple or even "natural." We need a lot of help.

We need organizational help. When people live together in community, jobs have to be assigned, leaders appointed, inventories kept. Counting and list making and rosters are as much a part of being a community of God as prayer and instruction and justice. Accurate arithmetic is an aspect of becoming the People of God.

We also need relational help. The people who find themselves called and led and commanded by God find themselves in the company of men and women who sin a lot—quarrel, bicker, grumble, rebel, fornicate, steal—you name it, we do it. We need help in getting along with each other. Wise discipline is required in becoming the People of God.

It follows that counting and quarreling take up considerable space in the book of Numbers. Because these things continue to be unavoidable aspects of our becoming the People of God, this book is essential in the training of our imaginations to take in some of the less-than-romantic details by which we are formed into this people of God.

