

## **LIVING FREE - Week 11**

### **Monday, August 16**

Do you ever have such a moving experience that your words run out? You can say no more, or perhaps you just cannot put what you are feeling into words? Perhaps, something happens so tragic, that you are stopped in your tracks. Or, something shocking takes place, and you do not know where to begin to speak about it. You are literally left speechless. This happened to me almost exactly a year ago. I found on my phone a voicemail from my sister-in-law, telling, not asking, me to call her. I could hear the distress in her message. I called her back right away. She told me that my brother had been found in his own office. He had passed away. I could not take in what she said. I could not speak. I sat and wept. My words could not touch this place. I was silent in distress and grief. There are a few times in the Hebrew Bible when we know that words run out. Translators sometimes skip over these passages because they do not know what to do with them. The first one in the Bible is recorded in Genesis chapter 4. The text says, "And Cain said to his brother..."; then it picks up with, "it happened when they were out in the field..." Why are we not told what Cain said? We are left to guess that Cain invited Abel out to take his life, but there are no words. I don't think it could be captured in words. A quote just would not do to explain what happened.

Now, we have such a place in our text for today:

Numbers 26:1-2

*After the plague the LORD said to Moses and Eleazar son of Aaron, the priest, <sup>2</sup> "Take a census of the whole Israelite community by families—all those twenty years old or more who are able to serve in the army of Israel."*

Actually, there is a blank space in the text after the words: and it came to pass after the plague... The translators did not include this space in the text, but it is helpful for us to know that it is there. Why? What can you say after a plague falls upon Israel? 24,000 people died because of the sins of the people. They turned toward idols, bringing them into their camp. Families were shattered. They are so close to entering the land, and this happens. Words run out. You can only stand silent. The moment is heartbreaking in its sadness. The reason is because none of what happened needed to happen. It seems senseless. The people acted foolishly. Just as the moment between Cain and Abel was heartbreaking as well. Now, we know about moments like this. Someone we love dies, and we have no words to say. Likely, you have experienced this as well. Genesis 35 tells us of another such time. Reuben, the son of Jacob, slept with Bilhah, his father Jacob's concubine. The text comes to a screeching halt. Again, there are no words to talk about how foolish and hurtful this is.

Now, here is the thing about these moments. Scripture almost always marks these moments with a reset. In Genesis 35, we are returned to the family tree of Jacob. Here in Numbers 26, we find once again a numbering of the people. It is as if we are returned to the beginning, when Israel was first numbered. Why does this happen in scripture? That is what we need. We need to remember whose lives we are looking at. We need to start the story over again. Yes, we need a reset of our thoughts and a refocusing on the story at hand. This is often true for us. When we get to places like this, we need to stop and take our bearings all over again. Something so great has happened that we cannot go on as we were. Perhaps, we sit and weep. We need time to take it in. The good news is that the New Testament says when our words run out, we are not alone. God is there with us. The Holy Spirit joins us. The Spirit of God can bring the longings of our hearts before God communicating what we cannot speak.

Here's Romans 8:26:

*Likewise, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.*

There are days when our words run out, but the Spirit of God picks up from there, bringing our groanings before the Lord. There are times when words just do not go deep enough to touch where we are. God doesn't abandon us to our grief, or isolate us in our loss. He comes to us.

Now, as I read these parts of the Hebrew Bible, certainly Jesus was there. On the night he was betrayed, his prayer, and likely his words, ran out and what seemed like drops of blood came forth as sweat. Yes, Jesus knows. I think his part of his purpose in coming for us was to give us the presence of the Spirit in the darkest of nights, the deepest of losses. That we might know God's presence and his love.

Let's pray:

Lord God, we don't want to think about these moments. We want to run. We want to forget. We praise you that you never leave us or forsake us. You never turn away. Because of Jesus, we have your unfailing love. We praise and worship you in his name. Amen.

### **Tuesday, August 17**

Not long ago, while visiting an island in the Bahamas, I heard about a meeting to decide land use for a local settlement. The details were strange to me. The decision had to be made by the men in the community because, for married couples, land could only be titled to the husband and not the wife. How could this be the case? The law went back to English property rights. Here's how it worked: *Upon marriage, the husband and wife became one person under the law, as the property of the wife was surrendered to her husband.... Further, a married woman was unable to draft a will or dispose of any property without her husband's consent. (Wikipedia- Married Women's Property Act of 1882)* Yes, so strong was the bond of marriage and the role of the man as the head of the household, that property decisions could only be made by the man. He acted for both himself and his wife in such legal matters. This law in the Bahamas was a holdover from old British Law. Now, in Israel, the Lord had established the rights of survivorship for all land. Because a woman could marry and thereby would join a family not her own, and because the Lord wanted land to be retained by the family it was apportioned to, land could only be passed to male heirs. God's plan was not discrimination against women, but protection of families. The Lord made both men and women equally in his image. Now, here's what happened. A man named Zelophehad died while they were in the wilderness, and his land would be apportioned to others because he had no sons or other male heirs. His daughters challenged this plan because it meant their father would have no allotment in the land. His name would not be attached to any property, and he would have no lasting legacy. These daughters brought their case to Moses, and he didn't know how to answer. So, Moses took the matter to the Lord.

Numbers 27:5-11

<sup>5</sup>Moses brought their case before the LORD. <sup>6</sup>And the LORD said to Moses, <sup>7</sup>"The daughters of Zelophehad are right. You shall give them possession of an inheritance among their father's brothers and transfer the inheritance of their father to them. <sup>8</sup>And you shall speak to the people of Israel, saying, 'If a man dies and has no son, then you shall transfer his inheritance to his daughter. <sup>9</sup>And if he has no daughter, then you shall give his inheritance to his brothers. <sup>10</sup>And if he has no brothers, then you shall give his inheritance to his father's brothers. <sup>11</sup>And if his father has no brothers, then you shall give his inheritance to the nearest kinsman of his clan, and he shall possess it. And it shall be for the people of Israel a statute and rule, as the LORD commanded Moses.'"

Yes, these daughters will be allowed to receive an allotment of land for their father to pass on to the generations that follow, creating a lasting legacy for their father. The Lord seems to change a rule that he himself established. What is going on? Well, whenever we look at God's law, it is meant to reflect God's character. That is what is unchanging. The particulars of the laws may change and the application as well, but the character of God remains the same. In the land, the people will encounter situations not stated in the law. In each case, the Lord provides a ruling based on his character. By the way, the law about property rights in England changed as life was changing in there. I'm afraid things are still catching up in some other countries. Our text today reveals that the Lord wanted to protect families by making sure they had land because land meant resources and provision. In the case of the daughters of *Zelophehad*, protecting the family and their father's name meant passing the land to the next generation through his daughters. It would be difficult to overstate the value of land to them. The future of their family was tied to their land. Your land provided you with status and wealth that could not be taken away. The good

news is that the Lord is just and righteous in all his ways, and hearing the case on *Zelophehad's* daughters, he made a special provision in his law to protect them and their family going forward.

Now, it might seem silly that such an episode is included in God's word, but it carries with it an additional purpose. The people are preparing to enter into the land and receive their inheritance of land from the Lord. This is the land God has long promised to give his people, the land they turned away from and refused to enter almost forty years before. We see that the people have a completely different attitude all these years later. Why is that? These are the children of those that came out. The death of *Zelophehad* reminds us the generation that knew slavery has passed and a new generation has stepped forward. These young people had never been slaves, and they had learned a new life under the leadership of the Lord. This is the life that God invites us into through Christ, one based on the character of our good and gracious Father. This is a life that God purposes for us to learn, one beyond the slavery of our sin, free to honor and serve him through Christ.

Let's pray:

Loving and gracious God, you are faithful in every season. We know that Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever. We find our resting place and hope in him. Help us to trust in you as the times change. Keep us from fear. Enable us to live in your wisdom. For we pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

### **Wednesday, August 18**

In the Black Hills of South Dakota, a project is underway that was begun in 1948 by Polish sculptor, Korczak Ziolkowski. It depicts a member of the Lakota tribe of Native Americans known as Crazy Horse. The magnitude of this sculpture is difficult to imagine. When completed, it will be larger than Mount Rushmore. Henry Standing Bear recruited Ziolkowski to the project, explaining as he put it that: *My fellow chiefs and I would like the white man to know that the red man has great heroes, too.* Now, here is the thing about this project, Korczak Ziolkowski died almost forty years ago. You see, he began a project he knew he could not possibly bring to completion. After his death, his wife Ruth took oversight of the work. Sixteen years later, the head and face of Crazy Horse were completed. Ruth passed along the work to others in 2010, and she passed away four years later. The work continues.

Here is our text for today:

Numbers 27:12-17

<sup>12</sup> *The LORD said to Moses, "Go up into this mountain of Abarim and see the land that I have given to the people of Israel. <sup>13</sup> When you have seen it, you also shall be gathered to your people, as your brother Aaron was, <sup>14</sup> because you rebelled against my word in the wilderness of Zin when the congregation quarreled, failing to uphold me as holy at the waters before their eyes." (These are the waters of Meribah of Kadesh in the wilderness of Zin.) <sup>15</sup> Moses spoke to the LORD, saying, <sup>16</sup> "Let the LORD, the God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint a man over the congregation <sup>17</sup> who shall go out before them and come in before them, who shall lead them out and bring them in, that the congregation of the LORD may not be as sheep that have no shepherd."*

Now, we have learned that while Moses brought the people from Egypt into the wilderness, he would not complete the work of bringing the people into the land. As we are told, Moses did not honor the Lord when he and Aaron brought water from the rock. He was short-tempered and did not uphold the Lord as holy as we are told here. Here is what happened at this point. The Lord directed Moses to go up a mountain that would give him the ability to see the land. He would not enter into the land, but only see it from a distance. I really think this reflects leadership. Though you might not be able to lead people there, you can see forward. You know where the story is going. Great leaders have this vision, even when they will not live to see it with their own eyes. In a sense, leadership is envisioning a future and leading people toward it. It means not giving up because you know where the story is going. It requires strength and tenacity. But it also requires humility. We see that in Moses as he asks God to appoint his replacement. Though his part in the

mission is coming to an end, he wants to know that the people will be shepherded well and led into the land. Moses knows that the future always belonged to the Lord and not to him.

Here is the way the Lord responds to Moses:

*So the LORD said to Moses, "Take Joshua the son of Nun, a man in whom is the Spirit, and lay your hand on him. <sup>19</sup>Make him stand before Eleazar the priest and all the congregation, and you shall commission him in their sight. <sup>20</sup>You shall invest him with some of your authority, that all the congregation of the people of Israel may obey. -Numbers 27:18-20*

Now, the selection of Joshua may seem to take place quickly, but after reviewing the story of Joshua, you can see that the Lord has been preparing him for this moment his entire life. Early on in the wilderness journey, Joshua led the people in battle. On other occasions, Joshua spent time with Moses at the tent of meeting. And yes, he was one of the two faithful spies that returned with a good report from the land. He pleaded with the people to trust the Lord and to go into the land. Now, God sets him apart to finish the work Moses started. Of course, this is a call to us to see beyond our own horizon and to follow God's lead, to begin projects that will require the next generation to complete. This is often how God works in our world. Indeed, it is in Christ, many generations later, that we find the plans of God brought to fulfillment. He is the one that brings his people into the land where they can receive their inheritance from the Lord. In the process, we are reminded that God works in history, across hundreds of years and scores of generations, to accomplish his purposes. This is our sovereign God. Now, about the Crazy Horse sculpture. After Ruth Ziolkowski passed away, three of her children and three of her grandchildren took up the work, and they continue to this day. There is no telling when the work might be completed. When it is finished, it will be the work of the generations.

Let's pray:

Faith and gracious Father, establish the work of our hands for us. Yes, establish the work of our hands. We think we must complete our work this day or this year, and you show us your faithful plan that spans the centuries. Give us eyes to see beyond our lives and our days that we might serve you. We pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

### **Thursday, August 19**

Over 38 years ago, Sandy and I stood in front of our pastor and repeated traditional wedding vows. By that time, we had known each other for a few years, but only closely for about a year. I had returned from a year of grad school and was invited to serve on the same church staff that Sandy was serving on. So, yes, when we said our vows, we knew each other, but we had little idea what we were getting ourselves into. In our first seven years of marriage, we moved six times, greeted the arrival of two children, and faced some daunting life challenges. Sandy's father died, two divorces hit my family, and two hit hers. How did we stay together?

That's the subject of our scripture passage for today:

Numbers 30:1-2

*Moses spoke to the heads of the tribes of the people of Israel, saying, "This is what the LORD has commanded. <sup>2</sup>If a man vows a vow to the LORD, or swears an oath to bind himself by a pledge, he shall not break his word. He shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth.*

Into the life of Israel, Moses spoke to the people about the commands of the Lord. This command is about the making and keeping of vows. It is the power we have to create our world with words. Now of course, the whole idea of the power of our words to create the world comes from the Lord himself. Genesis opens with the Lord speaking the world into existence. The Lord might have created in any number of ways, but he chose to speak. Actually, some scholars think that the Lord sang the world to life. That is the picture we are given by C. S. Lewis in his little book entitled, *The Magician's Nephew*. Aslan, the Christ figure in the story, creates Narnia by singing as the boy Digory watches and listens:

*A voice had begun to sing...it seemed to come from all directions at once...Its lower notes were deep enough to be the voice of the earth herself. There were no words. There was hardly even a*

*tune. But it was beyond comparison, the most beautiful noise he had ever heard. It was so beautiful Digory could hardly bear it.*

Now, staying with the creation for a moment. God not only created us with his word, but he made us in his image, and he gave us words. One Jewish translation of Genesis 2:7 says, “and man became a speaking being.” So, Adam is asked by God to name the animals, giving authority to use his words to exercise dominion over the world the Lord created. God created the world with words and called us to follow suit. If words create worlds, then how are we to use our words? Moses gives to the people his commands about making vows. Yes, it is our promises that become the scaffolding where we build our lives. It was the vows Sandy and I shared that got us started into a new and daring life together as husband and wife. It is the promise made by your mechanic that gets him working, and it is that promise to repair your vehicle that you expect to be fulfilled when you come to pick it up. Our promises, our words, create obligations we fulfill, and this is where life comes from. This is why our words are so important. This is why Jesus commanded that our “yes” should mean “yes”, and our “no” should mean “no.” When we fail to live up to our words, then our worlds are destroyed, trust is broken and life suffers. Now, God’s people saw that since the Lord created us and since he is a party to every agreement as a witness, all our promises are before him and include him. As such, we either contribute to the building of trust and establishing of life, or we tear it down. This explains the seriousness of our vows before the Lord. I love the way it is stated here: the person that makes the vow must do all that proceeds from his mouth. He must do what he says. Why is this? In the Lord himself, as he speaks, he acts. This is how he created with his word. This is why we can trust his promises. He said so, and that is all we need to know. We can trust the Lord. He can never lie because, as he speaks, what he speaks is done.

Now, at the time Sandy and I were married, we did not really know what we were saying. We didn’t know what the next day would hold, or how our lives would look ten or twenty years down the road. But we chose to live into the promises we made that day, trusting our future to God. Now, the gospel is also built on the word of God. Jesus is the word become flesh, God entering our world as a human being and then living out the promises of God to redeem a people for himself. Again, as with creation, our salvation rests on the word of God spoken into our world. Once again, the Lord is singing us to life, singing his grace over us. Now, this is a safe place to rest your life, a secure place to anchor your own promises.

Let’s pray:

We are a people of many words, O Lord. Guide us, through your Holy Spirit, to be speakers of truth. May your promises to us be the structure around which we build our lives. Help us to rest in you and your faithful word. For we pray in your holy name. Amen.

### ***Friday, August 20***

Diana Komp, an MD and writer, has published a book entitled, The Anatomy of a Lie. In her book she explains how she came to write the book and what she learned about honesty. As a writer, she had traveled to Europe where she hunkered down to study and write in an old Austrian castle. While there, she noticed in the castle library a volume dating back to the civil war, written by a man who was a member of the Union army who had been taken prisoner. The man who wrote the book was H. Clay Trumbell. The title was, A Lie Never Justified. It tells the tale of his struggle to free himself from the bondage of his captors. It seems that one day some of the other prisoners there with him concocted a plan for their own escape. But as this man listened to the plan, he realized that in order for the plan to succeed, he or one of the other men would be forced to lie to one of the guards. He refused, and the other prisoners simply could not believe it. Why would he not lie to escape from the hands of the enemy? This man reasoned that, in war, the enemy could be killed. God’s word allowed that. But nowhere was a person given the right to lie, even in war. God forbids lying in the Ten Commandments.

As Diane read this book, wondering how this book had ended up in a European castle, she was cut to the heart. Just before she was to leave the country, she had to take her dog, Babu, to be boarded while she would be away. When she called the kennel, they asked her if her dog was

up-to-date on all its shots. “Yes,” she had lied because she was in a hurry and would not have had the time to get her dog to the vet. When she took her dog to the kennel, there was a sign that said, “If your dog is not immunized we will do it at your expense.” Diane saw the sign and realized she didn’t need to lie before. But she couldn’t bring herself to tell the truth then. After all, how would she look if she admitted she had just told a bold-faced lie? Her pride pushed her into another lie.

Now, we return to our text from yesterday to take another look at how we make our worlds with our words:

Numbers 30:1-2

*Moses spoke to the heads of the tribes of the people of Israel, saying, “This is what the LORD has commanded. <sup>2</sup>If a man vows a vow to the LORD, or swears an oath to bind himself by a pledge, he shall not break his word. He shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth.”*

The text has a very interesting way of talking about making a vow. It says that we bind ourselves by pledge with what we say. Yes, when we speak our words, we are putting ourselves out there. Putting ourselves on the line you might say. We rise and fall with our words. If we do what we say, trust in us grows. We grow. But if we do not, then trust in us fades, and we do as well. So, imagine what happens when we make a vow we do not keep, when we tell a lie instead of speaking the truth. The very fabric of our world unravels. We begin to unravel with it. Who are we if our word is not good? Who will we become to others when our word cannot be trusted? You see, in the law of God, the Lord was creating life for a people meant to live in freedom. A free people require truth that makes trust possible. Why does freedom require truth and trust? Think about it. If our words cannot be trusted, then force is required. As the Jewish people are heading toward the land, they will require truth to walk together. Freedom depends on people keeping their word, as the rabbis say. As trust is eroded, our relationships are eroded and destroyed as well. Then what will our society, our community, be built upon? Again, we will need force, and where force is used, people cannot really be free. Maybe that man in the prison camp was getting at something important and the reason God commanded his people not to lie.

Now, likely we can think about a time when a lie seems to be justified. Perhaps to protect the life of someone, but our default must always be to truth, which becomes the glue for a free people, the means to cement trust and build community. I am not sure we think that keeping our word is this important, but it is in the building of trust, person-to-person, that relationships are formed, and free people can come to live free. It is knowing your doctor is keeping her word, and your auto repairman can be trusted, that enables you to live each day. Now, of course, those in Christ know the truth of this because our faith rests on a truth from God, the one who can never lie. We rest secure in his love and his promises because of Jesus, because the word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth. Yes, that was the thing about Jesus. He explained that if we knew the truth, the truth would set us free, and we would be able to come from darkness and into the light of life.

Let’s pray:

Gracious God, each of us have been hurt by words, words falsely spoken, promises broken. We know the pain of betrayal and dishonesty. Only you can make it possible for us to live as people of truth, rather than of the lie. Promise us your wisdom and your Holy Spirit that we might order our lives based on the word you have spoken to us, and that we might be bearers of your truth as well. For we pray in your name. Amen.

### **Saturday, August 21**

In 1998, Sandy and I were living in New Jersey and serving a church there called Grace. It was a church we helped to plant in the late 1980s. At the time, our church was planting another congregation about 45 minutes north of where we were located, just outside New York City. The first couple to agree to help us start the new church was a couple that met in Miami and had been part of Granada. So, in 1998 we swung through south Florida raising funds for the new church. It was then that Sandy and I first visited Granada. The result of our brief visit was that the pastoral search team of Granada reached out to us and asked us to consider moving to Miami to serve

here. Immediately, I said “no,” but I also did something else. I began asking God to show us when it would be time to leave the church in New Jersey. After prayer and consideration of our setting I felt there were six things I should not leave undone. These things needed to be completed before we could consider taking a call to another church.

Now, here is our scripture for today:

Numbers 31

*The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, <sup>2</sup>“Avenge the people of Israel on the Midianites. Afterward you shall be gathered to your people.” <sup>3</sup>So Moses spoke to the people, saying, “Arm men from among you for the war, that they may go against Midian to execute the LORD’s vengeance on Midian. <sup>4</sup>You shall send a thousand from each of the tribes of Israel to the war.”*

Now, this is an interesting scene because it directly precedes Moses’ death and the transition of the people into the land of promise. While we have learned that Moses began projects that he would not be able to see to conclusion, there were matters he needed to wrap up before his time ended. This was one of those matters. Here is the backstory for this matter left undone. After Balak, the king of Moab, and Balaam his hired prophet failed to curse Israel, they still sought a way to destroy Israel. Rather than resorting to war, they found a place of weakness. They used Midianite women to draw the Jewish men into sexual sin and into idolatry. The plan came off successfully. This was a more deadly attack than open war ever could have been. They drove a wedge between the Lord and the people he loved. This led to a devastating loss of life and morale for Israel. This was the source of the unfinished business of Moses. What Moab did was a declaration of war, and the Lord told Moses to engage the enemy. After that, Moses’ work would be done.

Now, this leaves us with an interesting question. How do we know which projects we must complete and those we are free to leave to other leaders? In this case, the Lord directs Moses to finish this particular work. Moses wasn’t acting on his ego or a desire for revenge. That is the thing to learn here. Our projects belong to the Lord. We seek to honor him in each one. Sometimes, as he did with Moses, he removes us from service. At other times, he asks us to move forward and to carry on the work. We see this in Jesus and his ministry. He finished the work of accomplishing our salvation at the cross, but he did not continue to develop the church. He left this work to his apostles and to other servants that went forth with the gospel message. All those years ago, I prayerfully recorded six things that I believed God wanted me to complete before considering a call to serve anywhere else. Then I did not hear from Granada’s search team for an entire year. They kept searching, and we kept serving in New Jersey. Then, led by God through prayer, they contacted us and asked whether we might reconsider coming to Miami. At the time, I returned to my journal and what I had recorded the year before. Five of the six projects had been completed, and the six was underway. Sandy and I realized that receiving a call then became a real option for us. After setting aside two weeks to talk and pray about the decision, we said “yes” to coming to Miami. The rest is history. None of us can stay where we are forever. The day will come when God will bring our ministry and our lives to a close. In the meantime, we serve with all our heart. What are the things you feel God has for you to accomplish in your life, to make sure you do not leave undone? Years ago, often I would visit with a friend over lunch who would listen to a Bible teacher named J. Vernon McGee. This man taught through the entire Bible chapter by chapter. When he finished, he would simply start again at the beginning. As he was getting older, he found himself in a battle with cancer. He didn’t know whether he should keep teaching or not. After prayer, God led him to believe that God would give him time to finish going through the Bible. It was then that I noticed he slowed his pace to a verse or two a day! Indeed, God gave him time to finish teaching. That’s the good news. If God has something for you to do, he will make sure you have time to do it.

Let’s pray:

Faithful and gracious God, I seek your face for wisdom and for your timing in my life. Provide me, even in the small things, a sense of your purpose at work in my life. Remind me that my times are in your hands, and you will provide what I need for the work you call me to. I pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.