

Establishment of a Nation (1525 – 1400 BCE)

Challenge to Leadership

Readings: *Numbers 16:1-50; 17:1-13; 18:1-32*

Reflections:

- This is one of the stories many wish wasn't in the Bible. It is a long drawn out sequence about people rebelling against Moses' leadership, Moses challenging them and God vindicating Moses. The part is the most troubling is how the families including wives and young children are all judged and killed in a horrible way with the earth opening up and crushing them. What a horrible picture!
- This raises one of the most common questions people raise when reading the story of Israel. Why does God judge and kill so many people if he is truly a God of love? Throughout all of Scripture, both Old Testament and New Testament, God is portrayed as the God of life and death. He alone holds divine privilege and right regarding all matters of judgment, life and death. With this said, we need to remember a few things.
 - First, God's perfection and holiness require that he not tolerate evil. This is a good thing because if he did, it would mean that he at some level was evil and we would all be in a lot of trouble. What is amazing is not that he is holy and holds in his power both life and death (if you are creator God that is rightfully yours) but that he is so incredibly loving and merciful.
 - Second, we must remember that from the divine perspective, physical death is not final death. God makes it clear that there is a final judgment as well. Whatever the circumstance of our death, whether it is because of accident, disease, war, or natural disaster, all people will die one day and stand before God.
 - Third, Scripture repeatedly records that when God's judgment falls, those who have hearts that are soft towards him and are viewed by God as righteous are often rescued out from that judgment. Whether it was Noah and his family, Lot's family or Rahab the prostitute and her family in Jericho, God demonstrates over and over that he looks for ways to preserve those whose hearts are set towards him.

- Fourth, in Scripture we also see that when God's judgment falls, it comes on communities that were either in complete rebellion or practicing some terrible things like child sacrifice and human sacrifice. We as nations have in the past decided to go to war and kill many people for economic reasons or to preserve a prosperous lifestyle. Is it right to look critically at God's decision to judge humanity at times for their open rebellion against him or when humanity commits terrible abuses against one another?
- Lastly, as we reflect on the times God judges a person or a group of people, we must remember that the vast majority of terrible deaths and human atrocities have been committed throughout history by humans against humans. Although at times we blame God, he has actually nothing to do with it. It is simply humanity exercising our freedoms to our own destruction. There are clear examples as in this case where God chooses to judge in a horrific way but this is the rare exception compared to the track record of the human race.
- After this judgment Aaron's priesthood is clearly and miraculously affirmed. The provision for the Levites is established clearly. The Priests are given as a gift to the larger community. They are given the best of everything including all the tithes to enjoy. They are still to give the best of the best to God. They are not given land but they are to see God as their security. Land was viewed as a source of security and provision where for the Levites, their only security was God. We as Christ-followers are like the Levites. We are called to live among all people without attachment to any land or country. We are to live as peacemakers and bridge builders between God and humanity.
- The Levites not having land seems to parallel Jesus caution regarding following him in Matthew 8:18-20: "When Jesus saw the crowd around him he gave orders to cross to the other side of the lake. Then a teacher of the law came to him and said, 'Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.' Jesus replied, 'Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.'"