

NINTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
Numbers 27:12-24; Hebrews 13:7-8,17-21; Mark 6:30-34

We read in the Book of Numbers, chapter 20:

And the people of Israel, the whole congregation, came into the wilderness of Zin in the first month, and the people stayed in Kadesh. And Miriam died there and was buried there.

2 Now there was no water for the congregation. And they assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron. 3 And the people quarreled with Moses and said, "Would that we had perished when our brothers perished before the LORD! 4 Why have you brought the assembly of the LORD into this wilderness, that we should die here, both we and our cattle? 5 And why have you made us come up out of Egypt to bring us to this evil place? It is no place for grain or figs or vines or pomegranates, and there is no water to drink." 6 Then Moses and Aaron went from the presence of the assembly to the entrance of the tent of meeting and fell on their faces. And the glory of the LORD appeared to them, 7 and the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 8 "Take the staff, and assemble the congregation, you and Aaron your brother, and tell the rock before their eyes to yield its water. So you shall bring water out of the rock for them and give drink to the congregation and their cattle." 9 And Moses took the staff from before the LORD, as he commanded him.

10 Then Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock, and he said to them, "Hear now, you rebels: shall we bring water for you out of this rock?" 11 And Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock with his staff twice, and water came out abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their livestock. 12 And the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not believe in me, to uphold me as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them." 13 These are the waters of Meribah, where the people of Israel quarreled with the LORD, and through them he showed himself holy.

One mistake. Moses made one mistake, and from a human perspective, a more than understandable one. He let the people of Israel get to him, got angry, just for a moment, and sinned. He did most of what the Lord told him to do, messing up just a little. One mistake, and yet the passage concludes with these words from the Lord, *"Because you did not believe in me, to uphold me as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them."*

Be honest. Does it seem fair? Think about it. Moses had been dealing with this rebellious people every day for far too long for a sane man to bear them. It seemed as though they never stopped complaining. One minute the Lord would deliver them in a marvelous way, the next they'd forgotten all about it and found something else to find fault with. And Moses more often than not bore the brunt of their muttering and second-guessing, finger-pointing and nagging. He couldn't do anything right in their eyes, or so it often appeared, and yet it was Moses who again and again ended up praying for the Lord to forgive them, to show Israel mercy, to deliver them from their just desserts. How could he not break a little, throw a fit once, lose his cool for a moment? And so, yeah, the Lord told him to speak to the rock, and yeah, he struck it instead, but was it that big of a deal?

Yeah, it was. Moses was to speak to the rock to teach Israel a valuable lesson, and pastors and teachers aren't called to stick it to their flock, even when they really deserve it, but to preach to them and teach them, and yes, to pray for them when they've really stepped in it through no one's fault but their own. God wanted Moses to speak to the rock, because He wanted Israel to remember, to learn again, that what God has promised must come to pass. God's Word is living and active. The water they would thus drink would be a reminder to them of the living waters of God's Word. Moses, however, failed to drive home that point, proving his point instead of teaching God's, getting them off his back instead of bringing them to their knees with him in a prayer of humility and thankfulness.

Moses disobeyed, and Moses was punished. Disobedience has consequences. Hear again the Lord's words, *"Because you did not believe in me, to uphold me as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them."*

“Remember your leaders,” the writer to the Hebrews bids us in our second lesson today, *“those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.”* And we do well to do just that as we read our first lesson. Why? Because Moses there serves as a model of faith, of obedience, even obedience to the Lord’s chastisement, in the face of the consequences of his sin. And so as the Lord reminds the prophet that he will not himself be able to enter the Promised Land that he had for so long proclaimed and to which he had so hard labored to bring God’s people, what do we see and hear of Moses? Moses accepts the Lord’s reminder with humility and then prays for his flock entrusted to him by that very same Lord, that very same flock that had so agitated him to the point of the very sin that now kept him from the land for which he’d so long pined. *“Moses spoke to the LORD, saying, ‘Let the LORD, the God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint a man over the congregation 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.’”*

What a shepherd! A model for all pastors. And what a believer! A model for all Christians. As Moses prepares to breathe his last, to be laid into a grave in the land he hoped to pass quickly through in order to lead God’s people into the abundance of their new land, he is contented with the life to come, with the forgiveness of his sins even in the face of sins earthly consequences, with the heavenly rest that was nevertheless still his through faith, with the peace that awaited him, not in Israel but in God’s presence, of which he’d earlier gotten a glimpse. He doesn’t complain, present his case with objections, or accuse God of injustice. No, he prays for his people in this life as he prepares to enter the next.

More words from our second lesson come to mind: *“Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.”* We hear no groaning from Moses. He knew that would benefit neither him nor Israel. No, we hear only evidence of his knowledge of the joy that awaited him in heaven, of the joy of faith that rejoices even in sorrow, not necessarily with cheesy smiles and hokey ditties, but with the contentment of peace in the promises of God.

How have you responded to the adversity brought into your life through your disobedience, however small that disobedience may seem given the situation, whatever excuses you might be able to make for it, or whichever extenuating circumstances you might plead? Have you accepted the Lord’s chastisement with faith and humility? Have you obeyed His judgment? Have you pressed on in service to Him even when your flesh would have you grumble and gripe instead? Have you tried to escape the consequences of your sin, or have you bore up under them, prayed all the more, and yes, prayed even for those who might have contributed to or driven you to your sin, loved them all the more in the hope that they too with you might know God’s heavenly rest someday?

Our second lesson continues, *“Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever.”*

May that prayer find fulfillment among us here, both today and every day, as we find anew that peace made ours through Baptism into the death of our Lord Jesus, the blood of the eternal covenant, shed for us on Calvary and poured down our throats and into our hearts in Holy Communion, as we rejoice in the Lord’s sweet forgiveness, even when trudging through the bitter dregs of the temporal consequences of our sin. You are not like that crowd in our Holy Gospel *“like sheep without a shepherd.”* No, Jesus, the new Joshua, who has delivered His people from the slavery of sin, death, and the devil, is your great Shepherd of the sheep.

God’s Word is sure, and as our Verse of the Day reminds us, will not return to Him empty. And so as we look at Moses today, *“Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.”* Amen.

