

Immerse Day 61 :: April 26

Ahhh, Balaam. What an interesting character he turns out to be, proving that God has sovereignty even over a stubborn, greedy sorcerer. In some ways, I feel sorry for King Balak. What power he gives to Balaam, who may have (in the past) been really good at connecting events into compelling narratives regardless of their veracity!

More interesting to me is the way the Israelites make meaning from their experiences. After the plague has claimed its victims, the Lord tells Moses to take a second census "of the whole Israelite community by families...". When we compare this census to the one taken a year into the Exodus, we find that some of the tribes have experienced a significant decline in population. Notably the tribe of Simeon has decreased from 59,300 to 22,200, and Zelophehad, son of Hopher had no sons, only daughters. Additionally, the total numbers of the 1st and 2nd census are very similar.

My Bible suggests that the Israelites looked at the census and perceived meaning from the census beyond a mere mathematical count. They looked at the decline of Simeon's clan and understood the decline to be a judgment against the clan. We read that Zelophehad's daughters asked Moses for their father's inheritance and that the Lord granted them their inheritance; their request is characterized in the footnotes of my Bible as "unprecedented" and as "an act of courage and conviction". Finally, the relative unchanged numbers between the first and second census, apparently, indicated to the Israelites that the Lord continued to bless them despite their disobedience. Had they interpreted it differently, I wonder if they would have had the fortitude to enter into Canaan. The meanings we attach to past events are powerful, especially after calamity.

Worried about my children's reaction to the pandemic and to our family's personal struggles in the past year, I did a little reading about Post-Traumatic Growth. I was familiar with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, but certainly not all people experience decline after trauma. Some people experience renewed purpose and emerge stronger than before the trauma. I learned that people's resilience depends on their ability to make productive meaning from their experiences. In the context of post-traumatic growth, habits of gratitude like writing thank-you notes or praying prayers of gratitude result in a different chemical composition in our brains than if we blame, shame, or condemn ourselves and/or others. The habits of gratitude, empathy, and generosity elicit the release of different chemicals that, once in our brains, propel us to better decision-making and better affect, in general.

Balaam was hired to weave curses or blessings on others, and in so doing, perhaps he not only concocted a possible reality, but made that possibility more likely merely by uttering it out loud. Similarly, perhaps the census and the judgments and attributions associated with the census numbers made the Israelites more capable of crossing the Jordan River simply because the Israelites recorded them and attached meaning that created momentum.

Perhaps that is true, too, of us now that the pandemic is waning. I wonder if that is why we read, in Phillipians 4:8 "Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable-if anything is excellent or praiseworthy-think about such things." The stories we tell that predict post-pandemic life, the attributions we make about the pandemic's impact, and the behaviors we label as "blessing", "unprecedented", and "courageous" will frame the meaning we make about the past year. I've never taken this to mean that we ought to ignore suffering or pain. Certainly, witnessing pain and suffering has a valuable place in healing. However, thinking also has its place. I have found that when I commit to thinking about, especially when life is really hard, that which is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, and admirable, I end up cultivating curiosity about God and am better able to identify his presence in the midst of my suffering. With that curiosity, I find that I have the stamina to learn new information and gain confidence as I move into the next day.

Pastor Steve challenged us to consider who is suffering and how we can help. I think that those who remain uncertain about their experiences in the pandemic will suffer if they continue to focus exclusively on the losses and the grief. Certainly, there is time to lament and to sit in discomfort in order to find a new path to God. There is also a time to search and think about one's experiences in terms of growth and learning and blessing and unprecedented courage as well. I hope I am able to listen well to those who are crafting their stories, and I pray that my questions will help them frame their experiences in ways that recognize loss but also celebrate growth.