

Pastor Jonna Bohigian
God Provides
 Numbers 20:6 – 11

Dear friends in Christ, grace and peace to you, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

As I'm heading toward the finish line of my ministry with you, I'm remembering. I'm remembering a lot of firsts – my first visit to St. Timothy's, my ordination, my first-time serving you communion, the intimidation of these spotlights when I first stood under them, my first visits with Teesie Carmack and Mary Ellen and George McCarthy, my first musical performance with two great kids in a hospital. I have been reminded of the dear ones who are now with the Lord – Dee Abeloe, Norm Conrad, Olga Walters, Jim Guise. I have been reminded of Confirmation classes, choir rehearsals, and the near disaster when I forgot my sermon at home, and Alek needed to speed over here with a printout before I *completely* embarrassed myself. I have remembered times when you have forgiven me and we were able to make things right. I have remembered sharing my lack of confidence with you at our annual meeting, and Warren Finch making a beeline for me, telling me that he not only believed that I could do the job I'd been called to do, but that I could do much more. I remember Michael Stamos telling me how important it was to have me here, to encourage his daughters as young ladies of faith. I've remembered some of the pastoral care conversations we've had, *flooring* me with your vulnerability and trust. I've been reminded of so many memories which have given me the confidence to take this step of faith into the unknown, trusting that God *will provide*.

I've also had other memories – memories *not* from St. Timothy's, but of other chapters in my life which have ended. I've been reminded of the conclusion of other ministries, memories of our family moving, memories of relationships which painfully ended. I've been reminded of memories that I don't want to repeat, *begging* me to finish well.

One of those memories was of when I was cutting my teeth in youth ministry, and I believed that I had received a vision that could catapult our youth ministry into great success. It was *do or die* in my mind. I was *very* passionate about this new vision. And almost immediately, I encountered a roadblock, my first detractor. I was so angry that this person disagreed with my vision, and I took it as a personal attack.

I harbored this anger for a number of months, and seemingly out of the blue, the thought came to mind, *What is more important in the end – that this particular vision gets accomplished, or that your heart is right with God? Don't you think that God can accomplish God's purposes in more than one way?* I immediately knew that this thought hadn't come from me. It was more generous than I felt, so I *knew* it must have come from the Spirit. I resonated with that thought, and I knew it was true and good, but I just *couldn't* bend my heart to change course and to forgive. It would sadly be *years* until forgiveness would come into my heart, and only as a gift, when I could *finally* let go of the anger that had captured me.

It has been a *lot* – processing my emotions, interacting with yours, old memories flooding back, being reminded that the relationship of pastor and congregation truly *is* beautiful, fragile, and *unique*. I have been thankful for your words of blessing and affirmation, though my new call may not be entirely *understandable* to you.

I want to thank Pastor Jim, for your kindness, support, and trust, as I have concluded my ministry at St. Tim's. Your ability to support me even when my calling has created more work for you, has truly been a gift. Thank you!

I wish that I could do this perfectly, and that we all could have the same expectations of how this ought to go, and that this chapter in your life and in mine could be wrapped up nicely with a bow. But the reality is, I am human and so are you, so differing expectations, pain, and sin will be unavoidably intertwined in our story. But thanks be to God that he can redeem all things, and that grace, forgiveness, and hope are continually at work in our lives through the Holy Spirit! Your grace, forgiveness, love, and words of blessing have been incredible gifts to me!

When my husband, Alek, was cutting *his* teeth in ministry, his pastor told him, "When I was in my 20's and 30's, I wondered *how* the church could have survived all these years without me. In my 40's and 50's, I *realized* how the church survived all those years without me. In my 60's and 70's, I've wondered how the church has survived *with* me."

Pastor Rick's honesty and humility have long endeared us to him. And the older we get, the more we recognize that we are on a similar journey: In our 20's and 30's, we've wondered how the church could have survived without us. As we near our 40's and 50's, we are realizing how the church *has* survived all these years without us. And one day, when we are in our 60's and 70's, we *too* will wonder how the church has survived *with* us. The older I get, the more my crow's feet settle in, the more I realize the importance of humility.

It can be difficult to be humble when we're in the thick of it, whatever the "it" is. We have a lot of information, we've got skin in the game, boots on the ground, and something is at risk – our reputation, our success, our future prospects, our finances. When we believe that we are in the right, it's difficult to let go.

As I waded into our passage from Numbers 20, I wondered about the parts *unsaid* – Moses' motivation, why God's punishment was so strict, what this might mean for us. This story is one of those odd trivia questions of biblical history. What was the reason Moses could not enter the Promised Land? Answer: Because Moses struck the rock to get water for the people. It's a weird story, and there's not a lot to it. The people want to fight Moses and Aaron, *again*, because they are thirsty and they have no food.

These people are *ridiculous*! They're always complaining! They had the chance to get into the Promised Land, and they *refused*! It's *their fault*! They were afraid to enter the land, so they stayed in the miserable desert instead! It was a *mercy* that God didn't kill them right then and there, but allowed them to keep living!

And poor Moses! He had to put up with all of those whiners who nearly stoned him twice, who resented his leadership, and continued to disobey God. Numbers 12 says that Moses was the humblest man on earth; they couldn't have *gotten* much better than him (Num 12:3)! If it weren't for Moses' interventions, God may have wiped them from the face of the earth – a *couple* of times! Who knows?!

As I read about Moses' leadership, I simply can't *imagine* the task he has! He deserves better. He's too good for these people.

This situation in Numbers 20 seems like a *blip on the screen* for Moses. He always seems to do the right, obedient, gracious thing (except for maybe the slaughtering of the 3,000 after

the golden calf incident). He's the one who talks *God* off the ledge, so it really seems odd that scolding the people and striking the rock would be *anything* of consequence to God.

The text is not entirely clear, so we can speculate as to what's going on, which is kind of fun. Perhaps this is making clear what God said a few chapters earlier, in Numbers 14:30, "'Not one of you will enter the land I swore with uplifted hand to make your home, except Caleb son of Jephunneh and Joshua son of Nun.'" Perhaps Moses felt *ambivalent* about God's command to speak to the rock, because Moses had been successful in getting the same outcome by hitting the rock in the past. Why do something different when you know what works? Perhaps Moses was concerned that *this* time, God wouldn't defend him against the Israelites? Maybe *this* time, God would be gracious to the people by giving them water, and they would finally kill Moses.

The small window that we are provided seems to pose more questions than it does answers. But we *do* know that God told Moses to do *one* thing, and Moses did *another*. The LORD tells Moses and Aaron, "'Because you did not trust in me enough to honor me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them'" (Num 20:12b).

Moses was *not* the provider and savior of his people; *God* was. Moses was not the sustainer of his own life or the community's; *God* was. In failing to treat God as *holy*, Moses treated God as *common* – a *power* to *wield* instead of a *Person* to *yield*. Moses did not obey God. He took the power of God and wielded it for his own purposes.

And God said "no." No more. You're done. *I am* the provider, sustainer, and savior of this people, *not you*. "'I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me'" (Ex 20:2 – 3).

It makes sense why God would have placed *this* as the first of the ten commandments: You shall have no other gods before me. It makes sense because *this* is the foundation of it *all*. Our hearts are *built* to worship, and we *will* find something to worship! Whether it is a leader, a system, an ideology, possessions, a person we love, ourselves...we *will* worship; we *will* give honor.

There aren't too many occasions where Oswald Chambers can't fit. You've heard this one already, but it's just *too perfect* not to share again. This devotion is based on Isaiah 6:1, "In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord..." Chambers writes, "Our soul's history is frequently the history of the 'passing of the hero.' Over and over again God has to remove our friends in order to bring Himself in their place, and that is where we faint and fail and get discouraged. Take it personally: In the year that the one who stood to me for all that God was, died [or left] – I gave up everything? I became ill? I became disheartened? Or – I saw the Lord? ... It must be God first, God second, and God third, until the life is faced steadily with God and no one else is of any account whatever. 'In all the world there is none but thee, my God, there is none but thee.'"¹

God *removes* the hero. God removes Moses. And God removes you and me, so that God *alone* can be the hero.

"In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: With

¹ <https://utmost.org/classic/the-price-of-vision-classic/>

two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another: 'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.' At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. 'Woe to me!' I cried. 'I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty'" (Isa 6:1 – 5).

It is a *wonder* that God chooses *any* of us, yet he *does*. He chooses us for his purposes, and accomplishes through us what we never could have imagined, for *his* glory. For God *alone* is our Creator, Savior, and Sustainer. And he is our hope, "for he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Col 1:13). Glory be to God, in heaven and on earth! Amen!