

12 Then the LORD said to Moses, “Go up this mountain in the Abarim Range and see the land I have given the Israelites. 13 After you have seen it, you too will be gathered to your people, as your brother Aaron was, 14 for when the community rebelled at the waters in the Desert of Zin, both of you disobeyed my command to honor me as holy before their eyes.” (These were the waters of Meribah Kadesh, in the Desert of Zin.)

15 Moses said to the LORD, 16 “May the LORD, the God who gives breath to all living things, appoint someone over this community 17 to go out and come in before them, one who will lead them out and bring them in, so the LORD’s people will not be like sheep without a shepherd.”

18 So the LORD said to Moses, “Take Joshua son of Nun, a man in whom is the spirit of leadership,^[a] and lay your hand on him. 19 Have him stand before Eleazar the priest and the entire assembly and commission him in their presence. 20 Give him some of your authority so the whole Israelite community will obey him. 21 He is to stand before Eleazar the priest, who will obtain decisions for him by inquiring of the Urim before the LORD. At his command he and the entire community of the Israelites will go out, and at his command they will come in.”

22 Moses did as the LORD commanded him. He took Joshua and had him stand before Eleazar the priest and the whole assembly. 23 Then he laid his hands on him and commissioned him, as the LORD instructed through Moses.

I was standing on ground that Moses only got to see from a distance. At the time, the thought never really occurred to me, but just over a year ago I was standing on a hill at our archaeological dig-site in the Promised Land of Israel somewhere out near ancient Jericho, the first city destroyed when the walls miraculously fell down. As I was looking at the maps in preparation for today, I realized if I had been standing there 3,500 years before on a clear day, there’s at least a possibility that Moses, standing across the Jordan River on top of Mount Nebo, could’ve seen a little speck like me jumping up and down waving at him.

3,500 years after Moses climbed that mountain, I was on that hill in the Promised Land for a week in the blazing sun digging up broken pots that we hoped might be Israelite trash from ages gone by. So many years later, the land wasn’t exactly flowing with milk and honey, but this dirt was packed with Biblical significance. Somewhere around 4,000 years ago, God had made the original promise to give this beautiful and lush land to Abraham and his descendants. Then he made the same promise to Abraham’s son Isaac, and to Isaac’s son Jacob.

It seemed like the promise must have gotten forgotten about for 400 years while Jacob and his 12 sons and all their descendants had gone down to live in Egypt to escape a big famine. During this time the people actually became slaves in Egypt, but God hadn’t forgotten about his promise. It was all part of the plan. One day, God appeared in a burning bush to a man named Moses, who was shepherding his father-in-law’s flock. God called this man to be the first shepherd of his people and to bring them out of slavery in Egypt into the Promised Land at last.

At God’s command, Moses goes to Pharaoh and says, “Let my people go!” Pharaoh says, “No!” God says, “You can think that over during the next 10 plagues.” Pharaoh finally says, “Fine, get out here!” but then he double-crosses and tries to track the people down at the Red Sea. At God’s command, Moses the shepherd holds up his staff, parts the sea, and lets his people walk through the middle of a sea on dry ground. Then he sends the walls of water crashing down on Pharaoh’s army to demolish them for good.

So the people are off on their way to the Promised Land, but they grumble, grumble, grumble. God feeds them with miraculous manna and quail from heaven. And soon they grumble again. They come to the verge of the Promised Land the first time when God tells them to go ahead and take the land. But except for two guys, Joshua and Caleb, they’re all too afraid! They had lived through the age where God chose to display the most miraculous wonders in the history of the world on their behalf, and still they were afraid! So God said, “Have it your way, here’s 40 more years of wandering the wilderness to think about it.”

It’s at this point after these 40 years when the Israelites have once again reached the verge of the Promised Land where we pick up our text in the “oh-so” familiar chapter of Numbers 27. **“The LORD said to Moses, “Go up this mountain in the Abarim range and see the land I have given the Israelites. After you have seen it, you too will be gathered to your people as your brother Aaron was.”** (Numbers 27:12-13). Then God reminds Moses of why he was not going to set foot in the Promised Land even though he had led the people to it. It was a consequence for his actions, **“for when the community rebelled at the waters in the Desert of Zin, both of you [Moses and Aaron] disobeyed my command to honor me as holy before their eyes.”**

It was just one of those many times while the Israelites were wandering that they groaned and complained against Moses and Aaron. “Why did you bring us to this terrible place? There’s no water to drink!”

God gave Moses specific instructions for how to give the people water, **“Take the staff...and speak to the rock before their eyes and it will pour out water.”** (Nu. 20:8) But after so many years of grumbling, Moses’ patience had worn thin. He had had it with the people. He took up that shepherding staff and he made his ministry about himself, **“Listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock? Then Moses raised his arm and struck the rock twice with his staff. Water gushed out, and the community and their livestock drank.”** (Nu. 20:11).

It seems like such a small blip on the service record of the man God himself calls the humblest person on face of the earth. But Moses had taken God’s glory for himself. He had disobeyed God’s simple instructions. He had taken God’s gracious act of love in providing water for his people once again and he used it to smash those ungrateful rebels over the head with it.

God’s consequence was swift and stern, **“You will not bring this community into the land I have given them.”** (Nu. 20:12). But it teaches Moses and every one of God’s servants a valuable lesson: **pastoring God’s people is a privilege.** Serving as God’s shepherd is first and foremost about God’s compassion for his flock, and certainly not about the particular shepherd or his ego.

We can see just how well Moses learned this lesson by how he accepts his consequence. The people were finally on the verge of the Promised Land again, so close he could probably smell the milk and honey. But he wouldn’t get to taste it. God had just finished telling him he could go up the mountain to see the land, but he would not get to set foot across the finish line. How do you think the five-year old inside of every one of you would have reacted? **“This is so unfair! They’re the ones to blame. They’re the grumblers! Are you kidding me, God? After 40 years of their griping and this is the thanks I get? You’re going to cut me out of the inheritance?!”**

By God’s grace, Moses had learned that his ministry and his privilege to lead was about his people, not himself. That’s exactly what his mind was on as his leadership came to its end. He simply accepts God’s decision and then *he asks God* to give them a new shepherd. **“May the LORD, the God who gives breath to all living things, appoint someone over this community to go out and come in before them, one who will lead them out and bring them in, so the Lord’s people will not be like sheep without a shepherd.”** (Nu. 27:16) Moses wasn’t complaining like we would have been about getting gipped out of the Promised Land; instead he was concerned for God’s people moving forward. It was time for his privilege of leading to end, and he couldn’t bear the thought of the dear flock wandering helplessly without a shepherd.

While I was standing there in the Promised Land on one of those hills Moses may have been looking at over, I got to witness the exact picture that Moses had on his mind. Nearby, down the hillside was flock of sheep or goats. With the flock, were two little native shepherd boys. They were brothers, one maybe 8 years old and the other probably 5. They were in charge of the whole flock roaming around the rocky hillside.

As the week went on, all of us American tourists started getting much less interested in digging and much more interested in these little shepherd boys who were gradually coming closer and closer, getting more interested in what us silly Americans were doing digging in the dirt. Soon they became like celebrities to us and who could blame these little boys for soaking in a little attention on the lonely hillside. It wasn’t long though before we were doing such a good job of distracting them that their sheep started getting away. Some were going this way; some were running that way around the hill. **“Hey, your sheep are getting away!”** Thankfully there were no bears or lions lurking around our dig site, but remember King David, the guy who killed Goliath, was once a shepherd boy in Israel and had to kill a bear or lion or two in his day. So if a lion did come along, one of those lone sheep far away from the shepherd would’ve been dead meat!

The flock needs a shepherd to keep them safe, to go out before them and bring them in. The flock needs a shepherd to lead them, guide them, care for them, and keep them safe. God had given his people an unbelievably faithful and humble shepherd in Moses, and in his grace he would not leave them helpless now. For they had a great task still ahead of them, conquering the Promised Land. So God provided the gracious gift of *a shepherd to lead the sheep into the Promised Land.*

“So the LORD said to Moses, ‘Take Joshua son of Nun, a man in whom is the Spirit, and lay your hand on him. Have him stand before Eleazar the priest and the entire assembly and commission him in their presence. Give him some of your authority so the whole Israelite community will obey him.’” (Nu. 27:18-20)

Now put yourself in Joshua’s shoes. Talk about a tough act to follow! Try filling the shoes of Moses the Prophet, the humblest man on the earth and yet the shepherd whom God knew face to face. How on earth is Joshua supposed to follow that? God provided for a smooth transition, because the privilege to lead the people is not about the man, but about the people he serves. So God instructs Moses to lay his hand on Joshua and give him authority before the eyes of the people so that they would will listen to him.

What a gracious gift of God this is too! You heard me right. Authority given to a shepherd is a gift of God’s compassion for his people. Imagine if everybody just had to duke it out among themselves who got to make the decisions. **“I’m doing this. No, we’re doing that!”** It’d be chaos, like 12 year-old boys fighting in a sandlot about how to get a signed baseball back. Instead, God gives his people leaders to lead them for their own good. **“Moses did as the Lord commanded him. He took Joshua and had him stand before Eleazar the priest and the whole assembly. Then he laid his hands on him and commissioned him, as the Lord instructed through Moses.”** (Numbers 27:22-23).

God gave Joshua as **a shepherd to lead the sheep to the promised land!** To lead them out to battle against the Canaanites and to bring them into their inheritance at last. And he’s been doing it ever since! In the

Gospel lesson, you saw Jesus going through all the towns and villages proclaiming the good news to the people and healing every disease. He had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd, and Jesus became their Good Shepherd. He laid down his life for the flock and he took it up once again to restore everyone who had gone astray. Not only did he serve as a shepherd, he also appointed the disciples to the privilege of serving and sent them out with authority to the lost sheep of Israel.

And to this day, Jesus that great Shepherd of the sheep continues to graciously bless his church with called servants, teachers, ministers, and pastors to shepherd his flock to the Promised Land of heaven. There's all kinds places for sheep to get separated and lost along the way, easy prey for the devil that roaring lion. They can wind up getting cut and torn by briars and thorns. They face disease and predators all around. But God wants his sheep safe with him forever. In his compassion and desire for his sheep, he gives shepherds for the flock.

Just down the road at Immanuel Greenville today, a shepherd is being installed in the same way Joshua was 3,500 years ago, by the laying on of hands. Maybe you remember seeing this when Pastor Wordell and I were installed in the last few years. If you've been around just a few years longer than that, you might remember Pastor Raasch and Zank being installed. Over the next month, this year's seminary graduating class will be installed and begin shepherding their flocks across the country. Pray for them, pray for your shepherds here at Mount Olive as we pray also for you, and ask the Lord of the harvest for more shepherds to lead the sheep now and in the future.

This is the relationship God designed to bring both shepherd and sheep home to him in the true promised land, just as he brought Moses home. A shepherd to lead tenderly, and the flock to listen to his voice until we all arrive safely in the Good Shepherd's arms forever. Amen.

Now may the God of Peace, who brought back from the death our Lord Jesus Christ, that great Shepherd of the Sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will and work in you what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.