

**Holy Trinity Lutheran Church
Des Moines, WA
March 3, 2013**

Numbers 16:1-40

Lenten Thoughts on... Rebellion

- 1. *The account of Korah and his followers***
- 2. *Lenten lessons for our faith and life***

**Hymns: 385 – 302 – Distribution: 116, 124 –
Closing: 114 (6-7)**

All Scripture quotations from NIV 1984

Power struggles! They are common in our world today:

- Nations struggle for power. We watch on news channels as nations undergo riots and depose their governmental leaders.
- Our own Congress struggles for power. Opposite sides posture for power in their philosophies as to how to run our country.
- Labor and management struggle for power. Negotiations about benefits are held. Strikes are threatened.
- Power struggles can happen in a home. Spouses and family members lock horns in a struggle for control.
- Power struggles can even happen in a visible church, as members try to get the upper hand over others instead of serving them.

And power struggles can happen... in the desert. What? In the desert? **Yes, today we learn from an account in the Old Testament where a serious power struggle was occurring.** It is a sad story that we will recount today from Numbers 16. We will learn about a man named Korah and his followers. First, we will review the details of what happened in the wilderness

centuries ago. And then we will learn lessons for our faith and our Christian life as we worship God this Lent.

1. The account of Korah and his followers

We read the account in our first two Scripture readings this morning. Background information will be very helpful to us in understanding what exactly was happening in that power struggle. Looking back, the Israelites had left Egypt in a dramatic exodus. Moses had led them through the parted Red Sea and Pharaoh's army had been dashed to pieces behind them. Then the community of Israel had journeyed through the wilderness to Mt. Sinai, where they had paused for quite a while as Moses received the laws of God on the mountain. Then they had traveled northward all the way to the southern border of the Promised Land. Spies had been sent to check out Canaan and had returned with a negative report: "We can't take this land! The cities are too fortified and the people are too strong!"

Therefore, in Numbers 14 God declared that due to their lack of faith and their complaint against him they would wander the wilderness for 40 years. All people age 21 and older would die during that time, and their children would be the ones to enter the Promised Land. After God revealed that judgment, they had rushed into the Promised Land in their frustration – without God's blessing – to begin an attempt at conquest, and had been beaten back and defeated. They were now fulfilling their sentence of wandering aimlessly.

It is during this time that the incident of our text occurs. We had read, "*Korah son of Izhar, the son of Kohath, the son of Levi, and certain Reubenites—Dathan and Abiram... and On—became insolent and rose up against Moses. With them were 250 Israelite men, well-known community leaders who had been appointed members of the council. They came as a group to oppose Moses and Aaron and said to them, 'You have gone too far! The whole community is holy, every one of them, and the LORD is with*

them. Why then do you set yourselves above the LORD's assembly?' "

Thus the power struggle begins. Who are the participants? One of the leaders is Korah. You may have taken note of his family connections as we read those verses. His great-grandfather was Levi. The Levites had the privilege of being the overseers and workers with the tabernacle and worship for the nation. Moses and his brother Aaron were Levites. Within the tribe of Levi, Aaron had been designated by God as the first priest. His sons and their sons after him would be the only ones who would continue the priestly line of service. For the rest of the tribe of Levi, they would be the temple workers who maintained the tabernacle, transported it, and took care of all the worship details.

Being from the tribe of Levi, Korah was a tabernacle worker. He was also a cousin of Aaron. Can you see how this power struggle had developed? Cousin Moses got to be God's prophet and tell the people what to do. Korah was sick and tired of the glory Moses got and the "I-just-talked-to-God" look on his face. And Aaron got to parade around as the high priest in his special robes and outfit. But Korah was in the group that had to do the manual labor and carry the tabernacle parts around. And he was fed up with it. With Moses and Aaron being in their 80's at this time, it certainly seemed like a good time to raise a revolt!

This is why Moses said to Korah, *"Now listen, you Levites! Isn't it enough for you that the God of Israel has separated you from the rest of the Israelite community and brought you near himself to do the work at the LORD's tabernacle and to stand before the community and minister to them? He has brought you and all your fellow Levites near himself, but now you are trying to get the priesthood too. It is against the LORD that you and all your followers have banded together. Who is Aaron that you should grumble against him?"*

We also heard there were 250 leading men of the nation that Korah had gathered. These men were well known and also appointed men of the council of the nation. (This tells us

something about how serious this power struggle was!)

Moses understood their envy of Aaron and his priesthood, so he devised a plan. Moses' idea is that their group should get censers filled with incense, light them, and bring them to present to the LORD at the tabernacle the next day. Do you see how this would show true disdain for the LORD's word? That was work that was only to be done by the priests. If they wanted to serve that way, Moses said, bring your prayer censers and offer incense!

More on that later. We also have to take note of Dathan, Abiram, and On. These were major leaders as well in this power struggle. These men were not Levites, but Reubenites. Their forefather Reuben had been the oldest son of Jacob.

We read that after talking to Korah, Moses summoned Dathan and Abiram. But they said, *"We will not come! Isn't it enough that you have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey to kill us in the wilderness? And now you also want to lord it over us! Moreover, you haven't brought us into a land flowing with milk and honey or given us an inheritance of fields and vineyards. Will you gouge out the eyes of these men? No, we will not come!"*

Just think about what they were saying!

- They refused to appear the next day to settle this matter. Not only did they defy God's appointed leaders and God himself, they would not appear to resolve the conflict.
- They mocked Moses by using his own words: *"Isn't it enough..."*
- They directly slammed God's promise of a land of milk and honey, the metaphor that God had made for the Promised Land. They said Moses had led them from the land of milk and honey to a land that was not milk and honey. (Moses, you don't know what you're doing!)
- They implied Moses had taken his authority too far and "lorded it over" them and the rest of the people.

- They accused him of blinding people to his leadership and incompetence.

This was a direct and serious threat!

What was reality? Had Moses done such things? Remember his call at the burning bush? Had he arrogantly claimed power at that time? Rather, didn't he hesitantly accept God's command? Remember how he even made excuses for why he should not go to confront Pharaoh?

And what about Mt. Sinai? Had he arrogantly usurped power to go up the mountain to face God and receive his laws? Rather, hadn't the people trembled in fear and said, "You go up there yourself and then tell us what God wants"? Tragically these leaders and councilmen had been given honorable positions by God and they were not satisfied with them, due to their envy.

Therefore, a showdown begins the next day at the tabernacle. Korah and the 250 men appear. The 250 have censers to attempt to be priests and offer incense to God. The people of the nation are behind them. We hear that the LORD appeared immediately and told Moses and Aaron to get away, because he was going to destroy the whole community. But Moses and Aaron prayed to God, asking that he would not destroy the whole community because of the sins of Korah. In an amazing answer, God does not destroy the community, but he said, *"Move away from the tents of Korah, Dathan and Abiram."*

Moses walked to the tents of Dathan and Abiram, who had refused to appear before the LORD that day. Their families came out to stand in opposition to Moses and confront him. Moses then clearly warned all the people to get away from them and their tents. He said, *"If the LORD brings about something totally new, and the earth opens its mouth and swallows them, with everything that belongs to them, and they go down alive to the grave, then you will know that these men have treated the LORD with contempt."* There was no doubt as to what the people should know in the outcome of this power struggle!

"As soon as he finished saying all this, the ground under them split apart and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them with their households and all Korah's men and all their possessions. They went down alive into the grave, with everything they owned; the earth closed over them, and they perished and were gone." Verse 35 continues, *"And fire came out from the LORD and consumed the 250 men who were offering the incense."*

They had chosen their home.

2. Lenten lessons to learn for our faith and life

What can we learn from this account, one of the most dramatic in Scripture? What can we learn from this power struggle?

A number of things! First, this Lent we must acknowledge the fact that our sin has been nothing less than rebellion against our God. Me? A rebel? Like this?

Think about it for a moment. You know God's commandments. Many of you have even memorized them in the past; and if you haven't, you know the gist of how they go. Yet how many days haven't you broken God's commandments despite this?

The word "transgress" from which we get the word transgressions and the word "trespass" from which we get the word trespasses both have essentially the same meaning: To step across a line and go where you are not supposed to. How many times have you knowingly and rebelliously done this with God's law?

- You saw the speed limit sign, but put your foot down and blew right by it.
- You know how you are supposed to forgive your neighbor, but you just can't bring yourself to forgive a person you do not get along with.
- You know how husbands and wives are to love each other unconditionally, but you and your spouse fight regularly and hold grudges.
- You know what language Christians are to use, but you continue to let those loose words fly from your lips anyway.

- You know the office policies where you work, but you think some of the company rules are dumb and don't feel like complying.

You have trespassed and rebelled against better knowledge, and have fallen into the sins of Korah. To rebellious sinners, the book of Hebrews says, *"If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God"* (10:26,27).

Let's sharpen the focus a bit. Korah's rebellion was against God's own appointed leaders. They were God's authorities. God still has leaders and representatives in the Church today. You have called workers over you in our congregation: Pastors, a principal, and teachers. You also have elected various men to lead our congregation on a Church Council and many boards and committees. Might you be tempted toward the sins of Korah?

- For example, we don't have a traveling nation of 2½ million people, but with a congregation of over 500 people different decisions or ways of doing things can certainly occur. Decisions and direction must be decided. Changes occur. When it happens that something doesn't go exactly the way you wanted in our congregation that does not involve doctrine, what is your reaction? Is it to rebel? Is it to hold on to some resentment against the leaders of the congregation? It's no secret that some churches of the past have been torn apart because of a Korah-like rebellion.
- And what about our school? School decisions can certainly be a thorny world. Parents, what is your attitude toward the authorities God has placed over us in our school when change occurs or a decision is made that is not one we would have voted for? Can the sins of Korah occur?

- And if bitterness or rebellion isn't directly expressed against the leaders in a church or Christian school, what about the temptation to foster division behind the scenes?
- A warning is in place for students of their teachers today also. Do you treat your teachers in the classroom with respect? Do you do your work diligently? Or is your attitude and your mouth exhibiting the sins of Korah many days?

For the times you examine your heart and find the sins of Korah lurking there, you need to repent. You need to confess those sins to your holy God and take them to the cross. For there, you will learn a lesson, which mirrors the final lesson from the account of Korah. It is the lesson of amazing grace. That's right, we also see amazing grace in this account. Does it seem hard to find? Look again!

We see Moses giving the rebels time to consider, even a whole night to sleep on their decision to rebel. We see Moses' prayer for the community when God wanted to destroy them all. We see it in the warning to "move away from the tents" of those whom God was going to judge. We see it in the zeal that God had for his plan, a plan that would raise up a prophet like Moses from the nation, who would be the Messiah and Savior of the world. That's what the whole history of the nation of Israel was leading toward! **God's zeal for his plan of salvation would not be thwarted by any rebellion against him!**

There are two other details of grace that stand out even more. One is the result of what happened to the censers that were used by the would-be priests. God had Eliezar, the son of Aaron who would serve as the next high priest, pick all of them up so they could be used – not as censers, but as a hammered-out cover for the altar of burnt offering! That altar would be a mixture of law and gospel that would clearly be seen by all the people as sacrifices were offered. The warning against rebellion would be clear, and the sacrifices that were offered on the altar would be clear pictures of the grace of God that would forgive sins.

After all, there would come a day when Jesus Christ would be opposed, confronted, and arrested. As God's representative, how come the ground didn't open up to swallow those who rebelled against him and rose up to murder him? Because in the arrest, trial, and murder of Christ, God the Father would work out your salvation. Jesus would pay for your sins of rebellion against God. To do that, he would be consumed by the fire and wrath of God and he would be swallowed by the earth in the tomb that would hold him for three days. **It was God's will to save you through that!**

A final detail of grace is seen in the sons of Korah. Are you familiar with the sons of Korah? If you think back to what we read in this account, you didn't hear that Korah's family followed him in his rebellion. In fact, Numbers 26 later tells us specifically that they did not follow! Later in the Old Testament we hear in 1 Chronicles 9 that the gatekeepers of the Temple were *"Shallum and his fellow gatekeepers from his family (the Korahites). (They) were responsible for guarding the thresholds of the tent just as their ancestors had been."* **God allowed the sons of Korah to continue serving!**

Not only that, but if you've read the Psalms lately, you'll notice that some of them have headings stating that they were written by the "sons of Korah." We have references in the Old Testament that the sons of Korah were also leading musicians for the worship of the LORD at the Temple. They wrote words in the Psalms such as:

- *"God is our Refuge and Strength, and ever-present help in trouble." (46:1)*
- *"Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere; I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked." (Psalm 84)*
- *"You forgave the iniquity of your people and covered all their sins. You set aside all your wrath and turned from your fierce anger." (Psalm 85)*

How could they write such things? Through faith in the coming Messiah. What grace that God allowed them to continue in their lives of service to him and did wonderful things through them!

So today, we learn lessons in an account of a power struggle. A sad account of sin and its consequences. A story that warns us. And yet it is a story of God's grace and love to sinners who believe in him. This Lent, may we take these lessons to heart. And may we continually give thanks that God has had mercy and grace on rebellious sinners and won their salvation in his Son, Jesus Christ! Amen.