

The Story Series: Week 6
Moses: Part 3 Wandering
Rev. Craig M. Sturm Trinity Lutheran Church, Sherman, TX

Today is our third week looking at the life story of Moses. It's not that Moses is more important than the other people in the Old Testament (who just got one week!), it's just that so many key events happen within the life of Moses that it's impossible to cover them all in one week.

The part of *The Story* that we will talk about today covers the entire Old Testament book of Deuteronomy. But first let's catch everyone up as to where we've been so far. The Israelites (or God's people) have been set free from slavery in Egypt, and they are being led through the desert by a man named Moses. God is leading them, and providing for them, and pointing them in the direction of the Promised Land. God has assured them that it's going to be a wonderful new home – beyond their wildest dreams.

Last week we recalled how the Israelites stopped at Mt. Sinai and received the 10 Commandments, and soon after God said that it's time to get going again. So now we find the Israelites on the road again. I want to draw your attention to the map once again so that we can get our geographical bearing. The Israelites left Egypt, passed through the Red Sea and headed south to Mt. Sinai.

Then they started heading north once again up to the land of Canaan – the same place where Abraham's journey ended. It's interesting to note that the first leg of the journey from Egypt to Mt. Sinai took them three months. So it should only take the Israelites about 3 more months to get to the Promised Land. But something happens that makes the journey last much, much longer.

Have you ever taken a really long trip? Have you ever taken a long trip with a 5 year old in the backseat? "Are we there yet? Daddy, I thought you said this was going to be fun; this is boring!" We soon realize that getting there is not the fun part. Well, the Israelites are on this long trip that seems to be taking forever to get there, and so they start complaining. "It's hot out here. My legs are tired. There's nothing to eat." They begin to whine, "We should have just stayed in Egypt. Sure, we were slaves, but at least there we had beds and fresh fruits and vegetables. This manna stuff is just awful! When are we ever going to get there?"

God heard all of that complaining and God told the Israelites what my parents used to say: "Just five more minutes!" But God wasn't kidding. The Israelites were so close to the Promised Land. They were nearing the actual border, but because the land that God has promised them was currently enemy occupied, God tells them to send in 12 spies to scout things out. And so that's what they do – 12 spies (one person to represent each tribe of Israel) enter into the Promise Land. You can find that little adventure on the Bible map.

For 40 days, these 12 spies explore the land. And when they come back, they bring with them abundant fruits that they have gathered to show the people how rich and fertile the land is. But the spies don't all agree how to proceed. Ten spies say, "True, the land is awesome, but the walls of the city are tall and thick, and the people are like giants. There is no way we can take

over that city.” And the negativity of those 10 spies quickly spreads throughout the people. They begin to weep aloud and say, “If only we had died in Egypt! Why has the Lord brought us all this way just to have us die by the sword? Let’s choose a new leader,” they say, “someone who will lead us back to Egypt!”

But the two other spies – Joshua and Caleb – bring back a very different report. They say, “You’re right, the city is heavily fortified. And you’re right, the people are like giants. But haven’t you forgotten something? Haven’t you forgotten God’s promise that he will give us this land? Do you not remember that God is on our side? Do you not trust the God who has already done miracles in our midst? Where is your faith?”

So now God’s people have a choice. Do we trust God or not? Are we willing to put our faith in God? Do we follow the lead of the 10 spies, or do we follow God’s lead? Do we truly trust the promises God has made?

That’s a choice we all have to make, is it not? Are we going to listen to what God says, or will we go along with what society says? Are we willing to surrender our lives over to the will and ways of God, or will we allow our questions and doubts and unbelief to decide our destiny? Are we going to go along with the majority, or will we stand firm on the promises of God?

There is a truth that runs throughout the book of Deuteronomy: *unbelief leads to death; faith leads to life*. We see this truth playing itself out in the decision the Israelites make. Instead of standing firm on the promises of God, the majority wins. Fear wins out. Unbelief trumps faith. They chose their own way over the ways of God. They refuse to believe that God’s promises can be trusted. They even go so far as to want to kill the guys who choose to believe in God.

At this point, the Bible story tells us that the glory of the Lord shows up. It’s as if God pulls the car over and stops on the side of the road because his kids just won’t behave themselves. God has a heart-to-heart talk with Moses as to what God should do with such faithless people. God thinks about sending a great plague and wiping them all out, but Moses intercedes for them and pleads for God to show mercy once again. Because of who God is – a God of love and mercy – God chooses to forgive his people, but God still holds them accountable.

Because of Israel’s unbelief, God declares that none of them will be allowed to enter the Promised Land, except for Joshua and Caleb – the two spies who believed. God sentences his people to wander another 40 years in the wilderness – one year for each of the forty days the spies explored the Promised Land. Ultimately, the entire generation that left Egypt dies out in the wilderness all because they chose not to believe. Yes, God is a loving God, but God is also a righteous judge. Because God is holy, God will always do what is right and calls his holy people to do the same.

Repeat after me:

*Unbelief leads to death;
faith leads to life.*

The 11th chapter of Hebrews in the New Testament says, “It is impossible to please God without faith. Anyone who wants to come to God must *believe in his promises*. God rewards those who sincerely seek him.” Or consider the familiar words of John 3:1: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, so that *everyone who believes in him* will not perish, but have eternal life.” Without faith in the promises of God, we will perish. Everything stands or falls on the promises of God.

And here is where God’s story (that Upper Story) intersects with our story (the Lower Story). Just as God asks the Israelites to trust that he will do what he has promised – to clear out the enemies for them so that all they will have to do is to walk into that Promised Land in faith celebrating that Almighty God has won the victory – just as God asks the Israelites to trust him – so God asks us to trust that he has defeated our enemies of sin and death through Jesus Christ. That is the promise God has made to us! Do we believe that promise of God to be true? Has God truly done what he has promised?

To not have faith in the saving death of Jesus Christ leads to our own death, but to believe in his resurrection leads to our own eternal life. There’s that truth again. *Unbelief leads to death; faith leads to life*. To have faith in God allows us to be recipients of the promises of God. To believe means that we get to experience first-hand the fulfillment of God’s Grand Vision for our lives – namely, to spend all of eternity with Jesus in heaven, the Christian Promised Land.

The story of the Israelites wandering in the wilderness seems to go on and on in the Bible. It’s as if God doesn’t leave any detail out so that we can see all of the Israelites’ mistakes in hopes that we won’t make the same mistakes in our lives. We can recognize the bad decisions they make so that we can make better choices in our wilderness journey of faith. It’s like having an older brother who receives the wrath of Mom and Dad. The younger brother just sits back and takes lots of notes: “OK, don’t do that; definitely don’t ever do that.” As odd as it sounds, through the Israelites faithlessnes, we can better understand what real faith is. Faith is choosing to entrust our lives into God’s hands no matter what. Faith is choosing to listen for God’s voice amidst all the other voices. Faith is trusting that God will honor and bless those who choose to walk in his ways.

So how is your wilderness faith? How faithful are you in entrusting your life into the hands and promises of God? Do you remember in the gospels where Jesus feeds thousands of people with just a couple of loaves of bread and a few fish? After Jesus does that, some of the people come back to Jesus wanting seconds.

Jesus has compassion on them, but he also knows that their *spiritual* needs are much more important than their *physical* needs. So Jesus says to them in John 6, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry again. Whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” Jesus is teaching us that the only way we are going to make it through our wilderness journey is to have faith in him. Jesus will be our bread for the journey. He’s the water that will quench the thirst in our soul that nothing else can quench.

Unbelief leads to death; faith in Jesus Christ leads to life. Such is the undeniable truth of Scripture. Moses, in his final words to his people before his death, pleads with them to make the right choice – the choice of faith. His words still speak so eloquently to us this day: “Now listen! Today I am giving you a choice between life and death, between prosperity and disaster. For I command you this day to love the LORD your God and to keep his commands... by walking in his ways. If you do this, you will live and multiply, and the LORD your God will bless you and the land you are about to enter and occupy.”

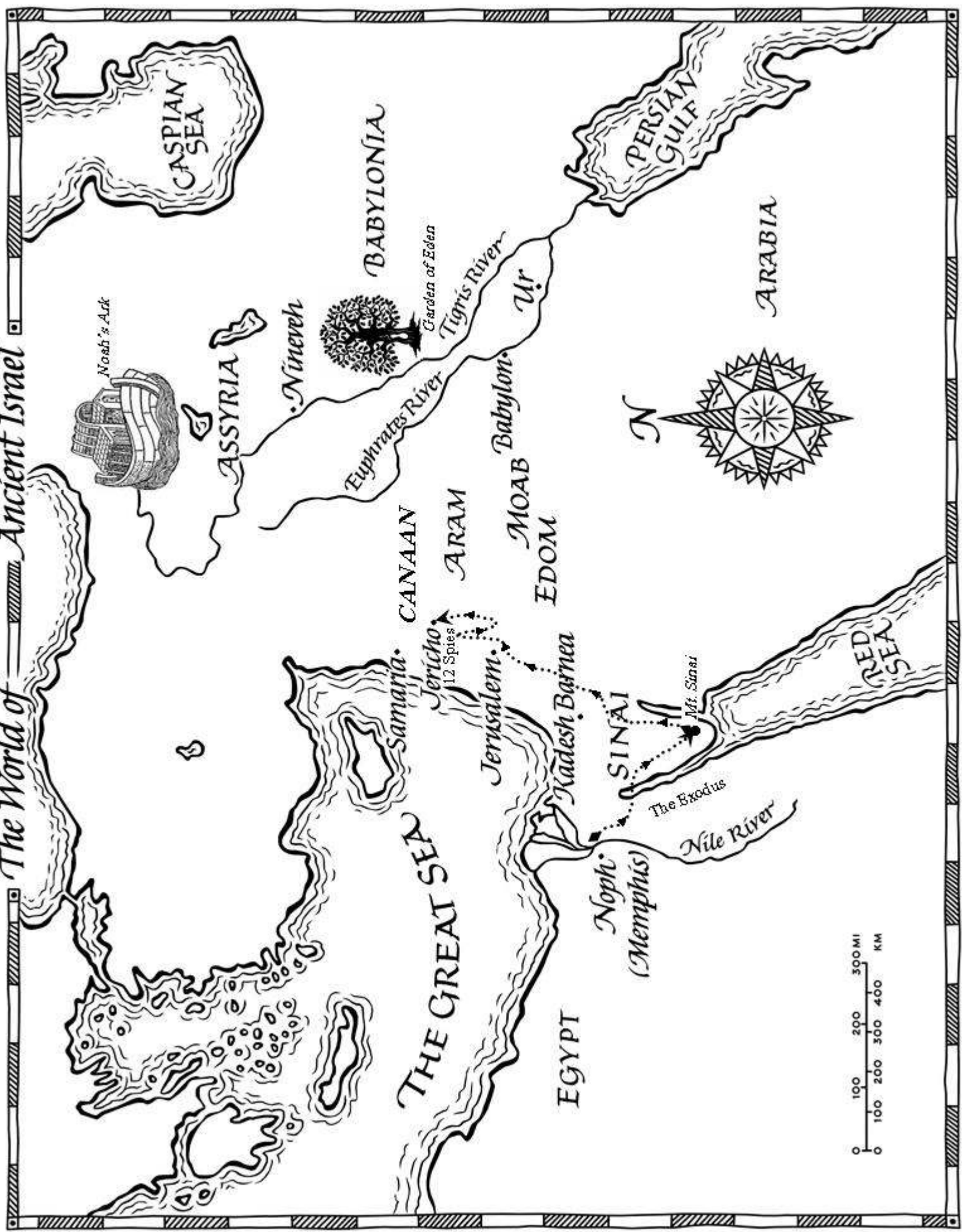
Moses goes on, “But if your heart turns away and you refuse to listen, and if you are drawn away to serve and worship other gods, then I warn you now that you will certainly be destroyed. You will not live a long, good life in the land you are crossing the Jordan to occupy.

Today I have given you the choice between life and death, between blessings and curses. Now I call on heaven and earth to witness the choice you make. Oh, that you would choose life, so that you and your descendants might live! You can make this choice by loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and committing yourself firmly to him. This is the key to your life. And if you love and obey the LORD, you will live long in the land the LORD has promised to you.”

Moses is pleading with his people (and us!) to claim what God has promised, and to put our full trust in God. Today, let us choose life, so that we may live long in that heavenly place God has prepared for us.

Let it be so! Amen.

The World of Ancient Israel



0 100 200 300 MI
0 100 200 300 400 KM