**HEADING FOR THE PROMISED LAND – NUMBERS - FINAL MESSAGE**

**Readings Hebrews 3:12-19 Luke 18.8**

Most of us here will remember the Vietnam War in the 1970s. Smack in the middle of the country was the demilitarised zone (DMZ), a buffer zone between two countries, a no man’s land belonging to neither side. When Judy and I visited Vietnam a couple of years ago we visited this DMZ. It was a surreal experience to be there and to realise here was the boundary between two warring armies. Today it’s a tourist attraction where you can see the history and crawl through the tunnels that the war was renowned for.

So in matters of faith, many people occupy the ‘no man’s land’ between two worlds. The visible world we see and the invisible or spiritual world. Yes, we know there is a spiritual world, a future that awaits us and a dimension beyond the present, but too easily we find ourselves stuck here in this world taking exit ramps from God's purposes, being lured into living here so well as though there was no other world awaiting us.

Such is the story of the book of Numbers which we conclude today. We have seen the 7 exit ramps the people took, determined to foil God's plan to bring them into his promised land of plenty. There were 2.5 million people who left Egypt with high expectations of a short 11-day hike in the desert to their destination. In the end, only 2 of them would enter this land of promise. The rest would die on the journey in the desert. The people's take on this was that they were being harshly treated and poorly led by Moses. God’s take on it was that they were complaining rebels who could not handle freedom being captive, and who sought to slake every appetite possible. The book is a running commentary on life’s temptations for us when a clear purpose is not kept in focus.

In his book ‘Rumours of Another World’, Philip Yancey writes about living in this ‘DMZ - dual world’ environment. “We live in this world with little thought for the next. We neither withdraw from the world like the monastics did to stave off temptation, nor do we completely forget that there is a home beyond this one. We are caught between the two worlds living a life of quiet desperation in a kind of wilderness. We want what God promises us but somehow feel that to adopt a kingdom lifestyle will cost us too much”.

**The numbers don’t lie**. Of the 2.5 million that left Egypt only 2 made it into the promised land, that’s something like a .000002% success rate. It reminds me of something Jesus said in Luke 18:8 about faith and believing people. “When the Son of man comes will he find faith on earth?” And the context of the verse was the story of the widow who did not give up seeking her cause even though her prayers apparently went unanswered! Faith requires us to be persistent. But I wonder if you are tempted to think – Why is it so hard to believe? Why does this journey seem so long? Why do so few people join us on this road to life? Why do people take off ramps and lose their way on the journey?

Yes, we know that we take these off-ramps because of the downward pull of selfishness and sin, beneath the waterline areas in our lives that are yet to be defeated. But there is another powerful component that is aligned to our thinking. And in this closing message this morning, I want to propose to you what it might be:

The life of faith is challenging: **Because we** **believe in the impossible** **and the extraordinary**

The stories of the kingdom are full of examples of the surprising and amazing. We are fascinated with the unexplainable and powerful. When we connect to God through Jesus, by faith, we cannot do so without connecting to the powerful, the impossible, the extraordinary, and the miraculous. When Jesus announced the coming of the kingdom he did so with demonstrations of extraordinary power. Furthermore, he said that after he ascended to heaven, he would send the Holy Spirit and that greater things than he did we would do!

But look closer at the extraordinary and the miraculous Jesus did:

Most times when Jesus did a miracle he asked people to **do** something possible ***before*** the impossible occurred. He invited them to participate and partner with him in the coming of the kingdom.

* The Boy with his lunch: give it to me - and he broke and blessed it.
* Raising of Lazarus: open the door of the tomb – then unbind him.
* Miraculous catch of fish: put down your net on the other side.
* First miracle of the wine at the Wedding: find some containers for filling
* Communion: take bread and drink – and it becomes the grace of God to us.
* Healing of the man born blind at Siloam: "go wash in the pool!"
* Healing of the woman with the flow of blood: "if I can only touch him!"
* Even salvation is the same principle: you believe, he saves you!

And here’s what this teaches us. That God says before I can do the impossible ***you need to do the possible***. You do the possible, he does the impossible. It’s quite liberating because now you realise you don’t have to do the impossible. But God asks that you join with him and do what you can in faith to release his power.

So we on one hand are to be messengers of the extraordinary and the miraculous. Now if that is not enough try the second on for size.

Living by faith is challenging: **Because we** **live with the mundane and the broken**

Now here’s the hard part. And the reason why many, many people struggle with faith. Yes they desire to see the extraordinary and the miraculous, even when Jesus was here that’s what people want him to do, more and more miracles.

But people truly struggle to own their fallen-ness. Yes, we can believe in the impossible but we don’t live well with the mundane and the broken. On the journey through the barren wilderness, it was the mundane where the people struggled. They got bored with the ordinary and resorted to finding ways to stimulate their lives without God and faith. Being disappointed with Moses and Aaron they had a perfect excuse for turning back or taking off-ramps. And what they were in fact saying was ‘God you are not enough’.

Yes they could dance with the best of them when the Red Sea parted, and when the water came from the rock, and when the meat fell from the sky. But they found the tedium of camping too much, and their broken-ness surfaced.

These two are in constant tension with each other. One part of us wants to see the supernatural and miraculous but often it seems far removed from our real worlds of work, home, kids, mortgages, and covid19. One part of us wants to live with victory and triumph over the giants in our worlds that daily taunt us and then we find ourselves picking up pieces of our brokenness when we fail or disappoint ourselves or those around us.

**And it’s easier to just separate these two worlds** because like oil and water they do not mix well. The spiritual we confine to Church and Sundays and when we are with people of faith and the rest of the time our faith doesn’t work too well. We live in this demilitarised zone like the middle of Vietnam, a no man’s land where neither side wins nor controls.

Sometimes we are more onto one side of this tension, for a period we get excited about faith and see God do something exciting and powerful and we think – we have broken through to some new level, we have made it at last. But it's not long before the real us catches up from below the waterline and we are once again faced with the reality of how broken we are and how much saving and rebuilding we still need.

Now I want to say here, that this struggle is not a new one. You need to get used to it, because you’re going to have it while you’re breathing. So what we need to do is to figure out a way to hold these tensions in our lives.

I have heard something that really helped me with this tension. God wants us to be **spiritually natural and naturally spiritual.** These are in fact not opposites from each other but dimensions of life that each wants to immerse into itself in the other. I bring the kingdom of God into my very natural mundane life and I live out its principles there and I bring my natural life of home, family, mortgages, work, and hobbies into the spiritual arena of life and seek to see if God is doing something there. They are not opposites, they are what real people do with real life and a real alive God. The miracles Jesus did are when the supernatural burst into the natural.

Now it's people who cannot marry these two together who abandon faith and take exit ramps, they give up on faith because it doesn’t work, God doesn’t answer the way they want. And they resort to the off-ramp “ if it’s going to be, then it’s up to me!”

We have looked at seven off-ramps, and there are many more in there too. You can create custom made ones in your life too. But here’s the question today;

* When the Son of man comes looking for you – will he find you **believing?**
* Will he find you holding together the spiritual and the natural?
* Will he find you being real about your own brokenness and his power to save?
* Will he find you doing the possible so he can do the impossible?
* Will he find you observing the extraordinary and being captured and amazed?
* When the Son of man comes looking for you – will he find you **persisting?**
* When your prayers are not answered the way you want and when you want?
* When giants confront you and obstacles threaten you?
* When disappointment or betrayal occurs will you still hold on?
* When the Son of man comes looking for you – will he find you **trusting?**
* When tragedy or sickness, frailty or disease threatens you?
* When there is a lack of supply and the cupboard is bare?
* When a financial crisis hits our bank accounts?

You see all of these are about managing the tension of these two worlds?

The natural and spiritual, **they belong together**.

When God wanted to save the world he did not create a magical prayer from heaven that when prayed would save everybody. He came down and walked on dusty dirty roads and met real people whose lives were broken and gave them hope. The Bible is full of stories of people of faith living here on terra firma. The gospel good news came and was acted out and lived here – we are called to be people of faith.

People who do the possible so the impossible and extraordinary can happen.

Who live with ourselves and see our real inner lives being changed and rebuilt.

Who hold both these inside very fragile bodies that God lives inside by His Spirit. Let me ask you this question then. Which is the greater miracle? The healing of someone’s body from a physical condition or the rebuilding of someone’s spirit and soul from the inside out?

Being a follower of Jesus is not like a team talk in the changing rooms where we get all hyped up to go out and do the business on the field. If that was the case then all we would do would be talk about the first point, the impossible, the miracles and the extraordinary, and sadly some churches are like that. But we talk also about the second point – the reality that you carry yourself into this journey, sometimes fearful, sometimes quiet frail – but when we marry both these together we become naturally spiritual and spiritually natural…and that church family is where God can do the impossible and the extraordinary through people like you and me.

***We now have this shining in our hearts but we ourselves are fragile clay jars containing this great treasure. This makes it clear that our great power is from God, not from ourselves.*** 2 Corinthians 4:7