

Numbers 16:23-40  
Third Sunday in Lent  
March 7, 2010

**Numbers 16:23-40 (New International Version)**

<sup>23</sup> Then the LORD said to Moses, <sup>24</sup> "Say to the assembly, 'Move away from the tents of Korah, Dathan and Abiram.' "

<sup>25</sup> Moses got up and went to Dathan and Abiram, and the elders of Israel followed him. <sup>26</sup> He warned the assembly, "Move back from the tents of these wicked men! Do not touch anything belonging to them, or you will be swept away because of all their sins." <sup>27</sup> So they moved away from the tents of Korah, Dathan and Abiram. Dathan and Abiram had come out and were standing with their wives, children and little ones at the entrances to their tents.

<sup>28</sup> Then Moses said, "This is how you will know that the LORD has sent me to do all these things and that it was not my idea: <sup>29</sup> If these men die a natural death and experience only what usually happens to men, then the LORD has not sent me. <sup>30</sup> But 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 into the grave, <sup>[a]</sup> then you will know that these men have treated the LORD with contempt."

<sup>31</sup> As soon as he finished saying all this, the ground under them split apart <sup>32</sup> and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them, with their households and all Korah's men and all their possessions. <sup>33</sup> They went down alive into the grave, with everything they owned; the earth closed over them, and they perished and were gone from the community. <sup>34</sup> At their cries, all the Israelites around them fled, shouting, "The earth is going to swallow us too!"

<sup>35</sup> And fire came out from the LORD and consumed the 250 men who were offering the incense.

<sup>36</sup> The LORD said to Moses, <sup>37</sup> "Tell Eleazar son of Aaron, the priest, to take the censers out of the smoldering remains and scatter the coals some distance away, for the censers are holy- <sup>38</sup> the censers of the men who sinned at the cost of their lives. Hammer the censers into sheets to overlay the altar, for they were presented before the LORD and have become holy. Let them be a sign to the Israelites."

<sup>39</sup> So Eleazar the priest collected the bronze censers brought by those who had been burned up, and he had them hammered out to overlay the altar, <sup>40</sup> as the LORD directed him through Moses. This was to remind the Israelites that no one except a descendant of Aaron should come to burn incense before the LORD, or he would become like Korah and his followers.

In today's Second Lesson we heard the Apostle Paul refer to Old Testament events with the statements: "Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did...These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come." We can learn from the past. The First Lesson was from the past. Its strong and intense action makes us shudder. To understand it we need to take a step back and view the rebellion that arose.

I.

It started with a man named Korah, a member of the tribe of Levi. The Levites were the temple workers within the Israelite nation. That meant he had the privilege of handling holy objects. He was close to the ceremonies of worship and exposed to the Word. The family of Aaron within the tribe was the source of the priests who led the worship and offered the sacrifices.

Other men—Dathan, Abiram and On (although we lose track of On in the rest of the account)—teamed up with Korah. If you want to cause trouble, you can usually find someone who is all too willing to join you. There were more: “With them were 250 Israelite men, well-known community leaders who had been appointed members of the council.” So the uprising came from men who were respected in the nation and held positions of trust. Their background reminds us that anyone can be vulnerable to Satan’s workings. Someone in a high position may desire to be higher yet. Never presume that you are above doing wrong.

These disgruntled men brought the charge against Moses and Aaron, “You have gone too far! The whole community is holy, every one of them. Why then do you set yourselves above the Lord’s assembly?” When a person lashes out like that, something happened to prompt it. Let’s take a look.

The Israelites were on their journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. Although the Lord had given them great help, such as the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea, and manna and water to sustain them in the desert, they complained often. They were not model citizens of God’s nation. When they neared the land of Canaan that the Lord had promised them, they sent a dozen spies to check it out. The majority of the spies came back with reports of a land that was bountiful but also occupied. The cities were fortified. They felt like grasshoppers compared with giants as they viewed some of the residents. So the people voted no to moving in.

God was upset. After all, He had promised them the land. He told them, “If you don’t want to follow my leadership into the land, fine. You won’t enter it.” Everyone over the age of twenty (with the exception of Joshua and Caleb, the pair of spies who urged trusting God and entering the land) would die while they continued to wander in the wilderness. Then the people realized they had sinned and said, “Let’s go.” They were defeated soundly. They blamed Moses because he had refused to join them in disobeying God.

The group I mentioned before brought charges against Moses and his brother Aaron, the high priest. An element of their statement was correct: the community was holy. They were God’s people, set aside to be a holy nation for Him, and the ones through whom the world’s Savior would inhabit our planet. But they also had a selective or exaggerated memory. They described Egypt as a land flowing with milk and honey. Really it had been a place of slavery under rough conditions for them. They also forgot that God was the one who had appointed Moses. He didn’t push himself forward. Quite the opposite. Remember when God called Moses at the burning bush to lead His people? Moses came up with every excuse in the book why he wasn’t qualified and someone else should do the job. He did not lord it over the nation. He did not even take a donkey from anyone.

When Moses attempted to address the issue, Dathan and Abiram refused to come and meet. Their real quarrel was with God and they were disobedient to Him. All sin is rebellion against God. Watch out! Don’t get swallowed up by sin.

## II.

But they did, and more might follow so God addressed the situation. He was ready to destroy them all. He would show His decision. The rival group as well as Aaron was to take censers to the tabernacle the next day. I thought this point would be the place to roll down the screen and show you a picture, but the sources say we don’t know what they looked like. They were made of metal, bronze, which was copper with some tin mixed in, and formed into a container. Incense was burned inside.

That next day everyone was there with the two sides. The Lord was ready to annihilate the whole nation. Moses and Aaron interceded for the people. Not all of them should die for a few, led by one, they pleaded. Imagine that: being unjustly accused and yet intervening for your accusers! I would have to admit I couldn’t do that. It was really evidence that the charges were false. It also reminds me that the reverse action would have been a solution. The story is told of a member who was upset with his pastor and went to a neighboring pastor with his complaint. That wise man suggested, “Why

don't you try praying for him?" As he did, two things happened. God answered the prayers and strengthened the weaknesses of his pastor and the member himself became filled with concern and grew supportive of his shepherd.

Back to the text. God had Moses separate the larger assembly from the tents of the rebels. He didn't want them caught in the crossfire nor identified with them. You need to watch who you hang around with. They can influence you as well as bring guilt by association.

If the lives of the challengers continued as normal, that would be a sign that God approved of them. He left no lingering question. "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." Imagine the terror of the experience. Recently there have been earthquakes in the news. Stories from people involved reveal the fear and emotional scars that resulted. Here it was more than the ground shaking underfoot. There was a gaping hole. The people fell in. No wonder there was a great cry and commotion. However, we don't hear any words of repentance.

At the same time, God had showed His presence at the tabernacle with the appearance of the glory of the Lord, a special sight of smoke and fire. "And fire came out from the Lord and consumed the 250 men who were offering the incense." All the others He exterminated. They were reduced to ashes, gone, with only the censers remaining.

The message hit home. God had made it clear. He had defended His representatives. This would be the place to tell you to obey me with fear and trembling and utmost respect, right? I'm not going to do that. There is a bigger lesson we want to see. In today's Gospel Jesus mentioned tragedies that were current events, not unlike have been happening in our times. He called them warnings to us to repent. We need to repent of all sins, not only of challenging our leaders. When we hear of catastrophes we are moved to repent of any sins on our record, and we have plenty of them. It could be a feeling of superiority toward those who are suffering, as if we deemed them beneath us. It could be the sin of complaint and dissatisfaction with what God has given us. Few of us have Jewish blood, yet we exhibit a strong kinship when it comes to complaining. Or we are bullheaded and go our own ways, doing what we want, not His will. Maybe we are filled with greed. We have been dishonest. Lust may have aroused us. We've shown cruelty to others. Whatever you see in the mirror of God's law, confess to Him. Don't get swallowed up by sin but repent and live.

### III.

God also taught the nation with more actions. Nothing was left but the censers. As enemies were defeated, God often indicated their articles belonged to Him. Although these had been used improperly, they had been used for the Lord. They were sacred. God had Eleazar, the son of Aaron, collect the censers and hammer them into sheets that were then used to overlay the altar. Every time the Israelites saw the covered altar they were reminded of the trouble that resulted when these men had opposed God. Never again would those items be used improperly.

It reminds me of a childhood experience. Remember Show and Tell? One day when I was in first grade a classmate brought a plastic gumball machine. You put a penny in the slot, pushed over the lever, and out came a gumball, just like the bigger units in the department store. I thought that was a neat gift and asked for one the following Christmas. I was delighted to receive it and wanted to take mine to school for Show and Tell that January. My parents said OK but also instructed, "Don't be using it in school." Of course, I agreed, but how can kids keep their hands off an inviting attraction? Besides, I would make a few pennies if they made it work. Wouldn't you know, when about the second friend put in his penny, the lever jammed. As we tried to make it work, the handle broke off. Now what? Well, it was winter and icy out, so as I walked down the lane from the bus that afternoon, I made sure to find some ice to slide on and proceed to fall. Then I could come crying into the house that I fell and behold, my gumball machine was broken. My parents didn't yell at me or spank me, and I think Dad even said something about trying to fix it, but it never happened. When they moved out of the farm house forty-five years later, there was that gumball machine still in the corner of my room, still broken, never used again, a silent reminder of childhood disobedience and dishonesty, a lesson that, as you can see, I still remember.

There was also mercy given to the Israelites. It may not seem so visible. You might be saying, "OK, I got it. Don't get swallowed up by sin. We need to repent. Come clean before God. He sees everything, so there is no point in trying to hide your wrongs. But where's the gospel?" Think about it. Where was the metal covering placed? On the altar. What was the altar used for? Sacrifices. That's where the mercy was present. A hunk of metal can't do anything about sin, nor can slain animals. But Jesus did. He shed His blood for our forgiveness. That's what all those Old Testament sacrifices pictured. In Jesus all our rebellion and disobedience are removed. That's why we confess our sins. Repentance receives mercy. Jesus won peace for us.

It's a good thing He did. Immediately after today's text we hear, "The next day the whole Israelite community grumbled against Moses and Aaron." You've got to be kidding! Absolutely not. It still happens. We receive astounding forgiveness from our Savior. Then we go forth from God's house and our encounter with the gospel, maybe even visibly in the Lord's Supper, or we are reconciled with a family member in forgiveness shared, and we turn right around and do the same dumb thing all over. And God forgives us again. Unbelievable!

There's another reminder related to this text. Eleven psalms were written either by or for the sons of Korah. They date from a later time. His family survived and descendants labored in the service of the Lord, unlike the families of Dathan and Abiram whom the earth swallowed. God doesn't punish us if we turn from evil ways. In fact, He forgives and reuses us same sinners in His service. Talk about grace! That's His undeserved love in action.

God is just and punishes both sin and sinners. But His mercy is greater. He forgives sin and sinners. **DON'T GET SWALLOWED UP BY SIN:** repent and live. Live thankfully and joyfully every day. Live forever in heaven. Now and eternally serve your Lord.