

Does the Center Hold?

Based on Numbers 2 | In the Wilderness: A Fall Series in Numbers (2)

"The Israelites are to camp around the tent of meeting some distance from it." — Numbers 2:2

SERMON SUMMARY

This second sermon in the fall Numbers series took up chapter 2 — the arrangement of the twelve tribes around the tabernacle. The series is spending three months on three weeks in the life of God's people, camped around Mount Sinai. Last week established that this book, though named "Numbers" (from the two censuses), might better be called the Book of Names — God's children don't have numbers, they have names — and that its Hebrew name Bemidbar ("in the wilderness") describes a people caught in between, between deliverance won and deliverance realized. That's a fitting word for us, too, who live between the cross and the consummation, often in our own wilderness.

An Egg, and the Second Law of Thermodynamics

The sermon opened with a physics lesson: an unboiled egg. It is highly organized — shell, membrane, white, yolk, all distinct — what scientists call low entropy. Drop it, and it becomes disordered: shell mixed into white mixed into yolk, membranes broken, a high-entropy mess. And crucially, it only goes one direction — a dropped egg never reassembles itself. This is the second law of thermodynamics: in a closed system, things move toward greater entropy, greater disorder. Leave a new truck in the wilderness for 10,000 years and you'll return to a pile of parts, not a new truck.

And this isn't only how the physical world works — it's how life works. To keep a house clean, a body healthy, or a car running, you must continually put in energy and effort. Stop, and the house grows messy, the body declines, the car quits. We live in a world that leans naturally toward disorder. So the sermon's driving question: in a world that moves toward disorder, how do we find true order that lasts?

The Text: Getting Organized Before Setting Out

Israel had arrived at Sinai eleven months earlier, where God gave the Ten Commandments, entered into covenant, and commanded the tabernacle — finished a month before Numbers opens. Now, before setting out for the promised land, they needed to do two things: be numbered (chapter 1) and be arranged (chapter 2). "The Israelites are to camp, each under their standard, holding to the banners of their family." Two verses give the command; thirty-two verses spell out exactly how — twelve tribes arranged by the four cardinal directions, three tribes to a side, each with a lead tribe and delineating flags.

Numbers 2:2 "The Israelites are to camp around the tent of meeting some distance from it, each of them under their standard and holding the banners of their family."

The arrangement is ordered by importance and orientation. East (toward the sunrise, where the ancient Israelites oriented themselves and where the tabernacle entrance opened) held the largest and leading tribes — Judah, Issachar, Zebulun — first out of the gate. South held Reuben, Simeon, and Gad. West held the tribes of Rachel's line — Ephraim, Manasseh, Benjamin. North, the far reaches, held Dan, Asher, and Naphtali, the sons of the concubines, last. In a world of chaos and disorder, God creates order. Why?

Four Reasons for the Order

1. Military.

This is a military moment — the census counted men able to serve in the army, and this is a military encampment. The repeated "standards" and "banners" are military terms (like Roman legion standards, or a modern company's insignia — how you know where to muster in battle). And the square arrangement around the four directions with the king in the middle is exactly how Rameses II — a contemporary of Moses by some reckonings — arranged his camp on campaign, according to the archaeological record.

2. Social.

These were slaves — people with no order or self-organization, always told what to do. They marched into the wilderness as a chaotic mass. At the end of Exodus 32, Moses saw the people "running wild" because Aaron had let them get out of control — camped in absolute disorder. Now God pushes back on that entropy, creating social cohesion: everyone knows how to march out, whom they follow, and where they belong.

3. Historical.

Notice the lead tribe on the east: Judah — which seems obvious to us, but is actually a surprise, because Judah was the fourth-born son. The firstborn, Reuben, had disqualified himself; the next two had slaughtered a town; and so leadership fell to Judah. Each position in the arrangement quietly tells a story of redemptive history — any Jew reading it would have known exactly why the tribes were placed as they were. It is not birth order or accident; it is redemptive history represented spatially.

4. Theological (the real reason).

The deepest reason is theological, and it shows two things. First, God is holy. The tribes camp around the tent of meeting but "some distance from it" — Joshua 3:4 specifies about a thousand yards, ten football fields. And the Levites are positioned like a human buffer between the twelve tribes and God's dwelling. The arrangement shows God is transcendent, holy, and not to be approached casually. Second — and this is the key organizing principle — God's central presence. The tabernacle where God dwells is the hub of the wheel; everything else takes its orientation from it and orbits it. As one scholar puts it, "The most fundamental reality expressed in Numbers 2 is that the camp of Israel was to be arranged around the central presence of the Lord." The centrality of God is the organizing principle of life — that is how you create order in a world that moves toward disorder.

Numbers 2:17 "Then the tent of meeting and the camp of the Levites will set out in the middle of the camps. They will set out in the same order as they encamp, each in their own place under their standard."

God at the Center — Then and For Centuries After

This principle wasn't unique to Numbers 2. At the heart of nearly every medieval and modern European city stood the cathedral — the seat of worship. In Paris, a star in the courtyard of Notre-Dame marks "Point Zero," from which all the roads of France are measured; the worship space was the physical and social center of gravity. When settlers built towns in America, they laid them out in orderly squares against the chaos of the frontier — New Haven, Connecticut in the 1600s had nine squares with the meeting house and church at the very center. New England commons still show the church at the heart of the green.

And it was social, not just architectural: "In God We Trust" on the money, public schoolchildren beginning the day in prayer, readers teaching literacy from King James passages for over a century. For many, it was personal and familial — the sermon recalled his own upbringing: praying before and after every meal and reading the Bible, parents writing the church and tuition checks first as the organizing principle around which every other want and need orbited, and a week framed by Sunday beginning and ending in worship — a day that reset everything. God at the center.

Does the Center Still Hold?

But does the center hold today? The sermon suggested we are experiencing entropy. Architecturally, the church is no longer central: in New York, Trinity Church once towered over lower Manhattan; now it is a small church dwarfed by the towers of Wall Street — pushed to the periphery of importance. And the data confirm the shift. Gallup found one of the world's largest drops in U.S. religiosity: in 2015, two-thirds said faith was very important to their lives; now it's less than half.

Even among Christians, a Barna study ("Faith's Shrinking Influence: What 25 Years of Data Reveals") found that in 2000, nearly three-quarters of Christians strongly agreed faith was central to their lives — today closer to half. Notably, Christian identity dropped only 12 points and monthly attendance only 7 points in the same span. In short: many still claim the label and attend, but far fewer are orienting their lives around their beliefs. Faith is still on the list — it's just not number one. It's somewhere down the list, on the edges, not the thing we orbit.

And the result of living without a center is entropy — cultures, nations, families, and churches losing connection and control. Oz Guinness calls this the "cut-flower civilization": flowers from a florist look beautiful, but cut from their roots they inevitably wither, drop their petals, and rot. "The roots of Christian culture have been cut, and the flowers are beginning to die on all sides." We've stopped feeding in the new energy of living faith, so the vestiges remain but are slowly rotting — a world increasingly marked by disorder: public unrest, broken families, conflict even in churches, drifting toward greater chaos.

What God Would Say to Us in the Wilderness

So what would God say to us, camped in the wilderness of our own disordered age? Likely what he said back then. First, he is a God of order. Genesis 1 shows God not only as Creator but as Arranger — separating light from dark, waters above from below, sea from dry land, then filling each. "For God is not a God of disorder but of peace" (1 Corinthians 14:33).

Second, and deeper, he is a God who is central to everything. "Camp around the tent of meeting" means: do your living and dying, your raising of children, your waking and sleeping, all oriented toward me at the center, where I meet you in worship. That is what brings order out of chaos.

| **1 Corinthians 14:33** "For God is not a God of disorder but of peace."

The Redemptive Story: God Moving to the Center

And there's a redemptive story hidden in the geography. Eleven months earlier at Sinai, where was God? Up on the mountain (Exodus 19) — wrapped in smoke and fire, unapproachable, seen only by Moses, everyone else kept at a distance. Later (Exodus 33), Moses pitched the tent of meeting outside the camp — God had come down the mountain but was still outside. Now, eleven months later, the tent of meeting sits in the middle of the camp. God has moved into the neighborhood.

That is the trajectory of all Scripture. In Ezekiel 37, God promises a new covenant of peace: "I will put my sanctuary among them forever. My dwelling place will be with them. I will be their God, and they will be my people... then the nations will know that I the Lord make Israel holy, when my sanctuary is among them forever." And it finds fulfillment in John 1:14 — "the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us," where the Greek for "made his dwelling" is literally "tabernacled." Jesus moved into the sanctuary at the very center of our living and dying — a God present, orienting our lives, creating order out of disorder through worship and fellowship in his presence.

| **John 1:14** "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling [tabernacled] among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son."

Two Closing Movements: An Audit and a Table

First, an audit. Barna may not have called you, but ask yourself honestly: is faith the central organizing principle of my life, or somewhere on the edge? Look at your entertainment choices, your time, your money — what's number one on the list, and what's number thirty-four? Ask: Lord, are you at the center? Is some of the chaos in my life and family there because I've been floating along with entropy, having lost my anchor in God?

Second, worship — which is why God gathers his people every Sunday. As one scholar put it, "worship is a reorientation of our souls toward the center of the camp" — a reminder that God is at the heart of everything we do and are, the one for whom and by whom we exist. And so the sermon led directly to the Lord's Table: communion is God's people gathered by the Spirit around the bread and the cup, where (as Reformed believers hold) Jesus is especially present with his gathered people to reorient their hearts. We gather around the table of the King, at the very center of life — a God who sent his Son to die and be raised for us.

Key Takeaway

The world — and every life, family, and church in it — drifts naturally toward entropy and disorder. The only way to find lasting order is to arrange everything around a center: the central presence of God. Israel camped around the tabernacle; we are called to orient our living and dying around the God who, in Jesus, "tabernacled" among us. When faith slips from the center to the edges of the list, entropy follows. Worship is how our souls get reoriented back to the center of the camp.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Take your time. Listen well to each other. There are no wrong answers — only honest ones.

1

The sermon used the dropped egg and the second law of thermodynamics: without continual energy, everything drifts toward disorder. Where in your life right now do you most feel that drift toward entropy — in your home, your health, your habits, your soul?

2

God arranged the whole camp around the tabernacle — his central presence — as the organizing principle of everything. What is actually the organizing center of your life right now, if you're honest? What does everything else in your life orbit around?

3

The sermon noted that the tribes camped "some distance" from God — a thousand yards — showing his holiness. How do you hold together the truth that God is holy and transcendent (not approached casually) with the truth that he came to dwell at the very center of the camp?

4

The Barna data showed that while many still claim the Christian label and attend church, far fewer are "orienting their lives around their beliefs" — faith is on the list, just not number one. Is that true of you? Where does faith actually rank on your list?

5

Oz Guinness called ours a "cut-flower civilization" — beautiful vestiges cut from their roots, slowly withering. Where do you see that in the culture? Where do you see it — honestly — in your own spiritual life when the "new energy of living faith" isn't being fed in?

6

The sermon traced God moving from the mountaintop (unapproachable) to outside the camp to the center of the camp — and finally to "tabernacling" among us in Jesus. What does it mean to you that God's whole trajectory is toward moving into the center of your life?

7

The sermon called worship "a reorientation of our souls toward the center of the camp." When has worship actually reoriented you — pulled you back to center after drifting? What helps that reorientation happen for you, and what gets in the way?

A Word to Carry

Everything left to itself drifts toward disorder — the egg, the truck, the house, the soul, the culture. Lasting order comes only from a center, and the center is the present God. He moved from the mountaintop all the way to "tabernacling" among us in Jesus — he wants to be at the center of your living and your dying. Arrange your life around him, and let worship reorient your soul back to the center of the camp.

LIVING IT OUT

The world drifts toward disorder; order comes only from a center. This week's invitation is to put God back at the center — and to let worship reorient you.

In Your Inner Life

- Do the audit the sermon called for this week. Honestly list where your time, money, and attention actually go — and ask: is God at the center, or somewhere down at number thirty-four? Don't condemn yourself; just tell God the truth and ask him to help you move him back to the center.
- Read Numbers 2 alongside John 1:14 this week. Trace the movement of God from the mountaintop to the center of the camp to "tabernacling" among us. Let it reshape how you picture God's nearness — not distant, but wanting to dwell at your center.
- Entropy sets in when we stop feeding in new energy. Identify one "input of living faith" you've let lapse — daily Scripture, prayer, Sabbath — and restart it this week as a deliberate push against the drift toward disorder in your soul.

In Your Closest Relationships

- The sermon recalled families whose rhythms — mealtime prayers, Bible reading, the tuition check written first, Sunday framing the week — kept God at the center. What ordering rhythm could you (re)establish in your household this week to put God visibly at the center of your family's living?
- Where is there chaos or disorder in a close relationship right now? Ask honestly whether part of it flows from having lost a shared center. Take one step this week toward reorienting that relationship around God — praying together, worshiping together, a shared practice of faith.
- The camp was arranged so everyone knew where they belonged and whom they followed. Is there someone in your life — a child, a friend — drifting without a center? Come alongside them this week, not to fix them, but to help point them back toward the God at the center.

In Your Daily Life and Work

- Order requires continual energy and effort — a house, a body, a car, a soul. Pick one area of your daily life that has drifted toward disorder because you stopped putting in effort, and invest fresh energy there this week as an act of faithful stewardship.
- The tribes each stepped out of their tents and looked toward the same center. This week, build in a small daily practice that reorients your ordinary work toward God — a prayer before you begin, a moment of remembering whose you are — so that even your workday orbits the center.
- Notice this week where the culture's "cut-flower" disorder shows up around you — and rather than just lamenting it, ask how you can be a small source of order rooted in God: a calm presence, a faithful rhythm, a reminder of the center for those adrift.

In Your Faith Community

- The sermon said God gathers us in worship precisely to reorient our souls to the center. Come to worship this week not out of duty or habit but expecting to be reoriented. Prepare your heart beforehand, and pay attention to how the gathering pulls you back to center.
- The sermon led into communion — God's people gathered around the table of the King at the center of life. The next time you receive the Lord's Supper, come consciously as someone being re-centered on the present Christ. Let the table be the hub your week orbits.
- The church has moved from the center of the culture to the periphery — from towering over the town to being dwarfed by Wall Street. Rather than mourning lost influence, ask how your congregation can be a genuine center of order and presence for a disordered community. Take one step to help.

SERVICE CHALLENGE

God brings order to a chaotic world by dwelling at the center. This week, be a source of God-centered order for someone whose world feels like chaos.

This Week's Challenge: Bring Order to Someone's Chaos

God organized a chaotic mass of ex-slaves around his presence. This week, be a steady, God-centered presence for one person whose life feels like it's coming apart at the seams.

Step 1 — Name Someone in Chaos.

Think of one person whose life feels disordered right now — overwhelmed, unraveling, drifting, or in crisis. Someone who could use a steadying, ordering presence. Write their name down.

Step 2 — Show Up as a Steady Presence.

Go to them — calm, unhurried, present. You don't have to fix everything; sometimes the greatest gift in chaos is a steady person who shows up and stays. Be that for them this week.

Step 3 — Help With One Concrete Thing.

Order takes energy and effort. Offer to help with one concrete piece of their disorder — a task, a meal, a plan, an hour of your time. Put real energy into pushing back their entropy in a tangible way.

Step 4 — Point Them to the Center.

Gently help them find the center that holds — the present God who "tabernacled" among us. If the moment allows, pray with them, and remind them that lasting order comes from orienting life around him, not from getting everything under control themselves.

Step 5 — Come Back and Share.

If you're in a small group or Sunday school class, come ready to share what you did and what you noticed. A church centered on God's presence becomes a place of order for a world drifting toward chaos.

Optional Extended Challenge

- Read Genesis 1 this week with fresh eyes, watching for God as "Arranger" — separating and then filling, bringing order out of formless chaos. Then read Numbers 2 again. How does seeing God's ordering work in creation deepen what he's doing in the camp?
- Trace God's "tabernacling" journey through Scripture this week: Exodus 19 (the mountaintop), Exodus 33 (outside the camp), Numbers 2 (the center of the camp), Ezekiel 37:26-28 (the promise), and John 1:14 (the Word made flesh). Sit with how God keeps moving closer to the center of his people's lives.
- Do the egg experiment (or just picture it) and let it preach: consider one area of order in your life that you've been taking for granted, and one that has drifted. Write down one deliberate "input of energy" you'll make this week to push back against entropy in your walk with God.

Closing Prayer Guide

Whether you're using this in a group or on your own, close by praying through these four things:

- Give thanks — for a God of order and peace, not disorder; for a God who moved from the mountaintop to the center of the camp; and for Jesus, who tabernacled among us at the very heart of our living and dying.
- Confess honestly — the ways faith has slipped from the center of our lives to the edges of the list; the entropy we've allowed by ceasing to feed in the energy of living faith.
- Ask God to be your center — to reorder the chaos of your life, family, and soul around his presence, and to make worship a true reorientation of your heart back to the center of the camp.
- Pray for the person you named in the service challenge — and for a world adrift, that God would draw many back to the center that holds.

"The centrality of God is the organizing principle of life. That is how you create order in a world that moves toward disorder."

— From This Week's Sermon