

The Mushites Get the Tent Pegs

Based on Numbers 3-4 | In the Wilderness: A Fall Series in Numbers (3)

"At the Lord's command through Moses, each was assigned his work and told what to carry." — Numbers 4:49

SERMON SUMMARY

This third sermon in the fall Numbers series moved into chapters 3 and 4 — the roles of the tribe of Levi. The series continues to mine an unfamiliar corner of Scripture: chapter 1 showed God numbering his people but recording their names one by one (God's kids don't have numbers, they have names); chapter 2 showed God arranging his people in order around his central presence in a world that drifts toward chaos. Now chapters 3-4 open a window — and it turns out to be a window into God's calling on our lives.

A Window Into Work No One Wants to Do

The sermon opened with Mike Rowe and his show *Dirty Jobs*, which gave viewers "a window into work that no one wants to do, done by people that no one knows" — small jobs done by small people. Numbers 3 and 4 offer a similar window, and through it, a window into God's calling on our lives.

The Missing Tribe: Why Levi Was Set Apart

The tribe of Levi appears about 70 times in Numbers — more than in any other book — yet it had been conspicuously missing. Jacob had twelve sons, but because Joseph's two sons (Ephraim and Manasseh) each became a tribe, there should be thirteen. There are only twelve, because Levi fell off the list: not counted in the census of chapter 1, and not arranged among the tribes in chapter 2. Why? Because the Levites had three roles unique to them.

- Human substitute. "I have taken the Levites from among the Israelites in place of the first male offspring of every Israelite woman" (3:12). The Levites stood in as a substitute for Israel's firstborn.
- Human insulator. They camped around the tabernacle "so that the wrath of God will not fall on the Israelite community" (1:53) — a human buffer between a holy God and his people.
- Human pack animal. They set up, took down, and carried the tabernacle and all its furnishings wherever it moved. This is why chapter 3 counts Levite males a month old and up, but chapter 4 counts only those able to do the heavy work — ages 30 to 50: old enough to grasp how holy the things are (chapter 3 opens with two who died because they didn't), and strong enough to carry how heavy they are.

| **Numbers 3:9** "Give the Levites to Aaron and his sons; they are the Israelites who are to be given wholly to him."

Degrees of Holiness — Place, Things, and People

To understand the "work of the tabernacle," the sermon explained that ancient Israel recognized degrees of holiness. Of place: concentric circles moving outward from the Most Holy Place (where God dwelt), to the Holy Place, the courtyard, the buffer of the Levites, the tribes, the wilderness, and the nations — most holy to least holy. Of things: the ark was so holy it had to be wrapped three times before moving; other objects only twice; still others once — color-coded by holiness. And of people — even within the one tribe of Levi, there were four ranked divisions.

The priests (Aaron and his sons) were the top of the ladder — camped on the east (the best side, toward the sunrise, where the tabernacle opened), doing the sacrifices and entering God's presence; anyone else who approached was put to death. Second were the Kohathites — camped south (facing east, the right hand, second-best), carrying the most important objects: the ark, the table, the lampstand, the altars. Third were the Gershonites — camped west (third-best), carrying the visible coverings and curtains. And last and least, the Merarites — camped north (the tail end, where no one wants to be), assigned the frames, crossbars, posts, bases, tent pegs, and ropes. Among the Merarites, the youngest clan, the Mushites, got the very bottom.

The sermon noted the striking disparity even in how many instructions each group received: the priests get a whole book (Leviticus); the Kohathites get 20 verses in chapter 4; the Gershonites get 8; the Merarite Mushites get just 4 — as if what they do barely matters. They are the ones who tear down the skeleton of the tabernacle after everyone important has moved on, and set it up before the important things and people arrive.

"Daddy, What Can I Do?"

The sermon painted an imagined scene on the north side of the camp: a Mushite father and his eager young son who loves God. "Daddy, when I grow up, can I go into the Holy of Holies and meet with God?" No, my son — that's the priests. "Can I offer the blood of the lamb at the altar?" No. "Can I at least light the candles and offer prayers?" No. "Can I help carry the ark? The altar? The candlesticks?" No, my son — those are the Kohathites. "Can I carry the fine linen, the ram-skin curtain, the goat-hair covering?" No — those are the Gershonites. Finally: "But Daddy, what CAN I do?" And the father reaches into a sack and pulls out a heavy piece of metal, its head worn by hammer blows and its tip worn by desert sand: "You, son, are a Mushite. The Mushites get the tent pegs."

Was that conversation harder on the father or the son — to be told your calling is not to meet with God or offer prayers or carry anything important? The sermon argued this window is accurate to real human feeling: in 1 Kings 13, when Jeroboam sets up his own shrine, all kinds of people rush to do priestly work — people wanted to move up. And in Numbers 16, Korah (a Kohathite, already high on the ladder) confronts Moses: "The whole community is holy... why do you set yourself above?" People did not like being lower on the totem pole. And of course they wouldn't — they were human beings like us, who knew the tenth commandment against coveting, who knew envy, shame, and the ache of feeling insignificant.

"I'm Just..."

Many of us know what it is to be a Mushite. The sermon noted the little word that shows up in so many self-descriptions: just. "I'm just a farmer. I'm just a welder. I'm just a teacher. I'm just a truck driver. I'm just a CNA. I'm just a secretary." Our world has a hierarchy of work, and at the top are the Queen Elizabeths, the Alexander Flemings, the Shohei Ohtanis, the Elon Musks — and we know that's not us. "I just work at a factory. I'm just a normal person." And it's not only our jobs but our lives: "I'm just a stay-at-home mom. I'm just a husband. I'm just a nobody — what I do, who I am, doesn't change this world."

Even the faith community has its hierarchy. The sermon cited author Jordan Raynor (keynoting a "Work in the Garden" conference at Dordt that week): "We elevate the work of Christians who are changing the world above the work of those who are simply sustaining and serving it. Prosecuting human traffickers matters but not selling insurance. Curing disease matters but not waiting tables. Teaching kids matters but not styling hair." The pastor confessed feeling it himself at a dinner before that talk — seated among a PhD center director, a young couple running a large dairy, and a bank CEO — finding himself thinking, "I'm just a pastor." And the deeper question rises: if God himself assigned my place, and it's not at the top but somewhere down below — am I even important to God? Does God care when the Mushites get the tent pegs?

First Truth: Our Dignity Is Tied to God's Call, Not Our Career

What does God want us to see through this window? First, that our dignity is tied to his call, not to our career — not what we do, but who has placed us there. "At the Lord's command through Moses, each was assigned his work and told what to carry" (4:49). The Mushites got their job not because Moses disliked them or because they lacked competence, but because of God's calling. God assigned it himself — and the work matters not because of what it is, but because of who gave it.

But even before God gives them a job, notice what he says about them: "Give the Levites to Aaron... they are the Israelites who are to be wholly given to him" — "the Levites are mine" (3:12). Before they did anything, God claimed them as his own. Not just the priests — the Mushites too. God is more concerned with who we become than what we do. The Mushites had value because God claimed them before he ever called them to carry tent pegs. What if what matters is not what you do, but whose you are? "The Levites are mine. The Mushites are mine," says the God of the universe.

Numbers 3:12 "I have taken the Levites from among the Israelites... The Levites are mine."

Second Truth: No Small Jobs When Done for a Big God

Second, God reveals that there are no small jobs when they're done for a big God. The Mushites carried the least important parts — the frames, crossbars, posts, tent pegs, and ropes. But think: if there were no Mushites, you'd have had an ark of the covenant buried under a heap of collapsed canvas. The Mushites raised the poles that held the tent up and drove the stakes that held it down. No Mushites, no tent — no tent, no sacrifice — no sacrifice, no atonement. Their role was indispensable.

As one scholar put it, "Every member of the people of God has a part to play... Each was indispensable to the smooth functioning of the whole; without the full mutual cooperation of the people, they would not reach the promised land." Another: "No service for the sovereign is small... all of it is honorable and vitally important because it is done for the divine King." And the New Testament confirms it. When the disciples argued for the best seats in the coming kingdom, Jesus set a child among them: "whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom" — maybe the Mushites are closest to the King. Paul: "God chose the foolish... the weak... the lowly and despised things... so that no one may boast" (1 Corinthians 1). And the body of Christ has many parts — "those parts that seem weaker are indispensable" (1 Corinthians 12): some serve in the temple, some carry the ark, some carry the tent pegs, but the same God is at work in all of them.

1 Corinthians 12:22 "On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable."

The Messiah Gets the Nails

God opens this window because he is about to do something with it. He sends his Son — born in the wrong place (Nazareth: "can anything good come from there?" — a podunk northern town, not central Jerusalem), from the wrong family (the carpenter's son, calloused hands worn by the friction of work), with the wrong company (sinners and tax collectors), and dying the wrong death (Isaiah 53: "he had no beauty or majesty... despised and rejected... a man of suffering... we held him in low esteem"). And yet it is precisely in that death of low esteem that God brings atonement for everyone. As the sermon put it: The Mushites get the tent pegs. The Messiah gets the nails.

Isaiah 53:3 "He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain... he was despised, and we held him in low esteem."

Moldy Mary and Bill Van Polen

Two closing stories showed God delighting to use small things. First, penicillin: Alexander Fleming discovered it but his mold produced it so inefficiently he nearly abandoned it. During World War II, when more soldiers died of infection than bullets, a Peoria, Illinois lab raced to mass-produce it — the men gathering specimens from around the world. But it was a lab tech named Mary Hunt ("Moldy Mary") who, at a local supermarket, salvaged a moldy cantaloupe whose white haze produced penicillin at 200 times Fleming's rate — the culture that changed the world. Penicillin has since saved an estimated 200 million lives, "and it all started with a moldy cantaloupe and a woman who wouldn't take no for an answer." God uses the little people.

Second, closer to home: Bill Van Polen, a younger farm son (the older brother gets the farm) who did blue-collar carpentry and mid-life opened a business cleaning portable toilets. A humble man who always said, "I just clean toilets." But Bill worked with the youth group, taught catechism, and — when the pastor as a high-school freshman first preached at a youth service — it was Bill who encouraged him and gave him the tightest bear hug he'd ever felt. Bill "just cleaned toilets." The Mushites just get the tent pegs. But Bill knew Jesus, and Jesus worked through him. The Mushites get the tent pegs. The Van Polens get the porta-potties. The Messiah took the nails. And whatever we do this week, God gets the glory.

Key Takeaway

The Mushites got the tent pegs — the lowest job in the lowest clan, camped where no one wanted to be. And many of us live with the word "just": just a farmer, just a mom, just a nobody. But God opens this window to show two things: our dignity is tied to his call, not our career ("the Mushites are mine" before they ever carried a peg), and there are no small jobs when done for a big God (no tent pegs, no tent, no atonement). The Mushites get the tent pegs. The Messiah gets the nails.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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

1

The sermon imagined the Mushite son asking "Daddy, what CAN I do?" and being told "the Mushites get the tent pegs." When in your life have you felt like a Mushite — handed the small, unseen job while others got the important roles? What was that like?

2

The sermon noted the little word "just" — "I'm just a farmer," "I'm just a mom," "I'm just a nobody." Where does that word show up in how you describe yourself and your work? Where does the sense of being "just" something come from for you?

3

Even the faith community has a hierarchy — "curing disease matters but not waiting tables." Do you catch yourself ranking work (yours or others') as more or less important to God? Where does that ranking break down in light of this passage?

4

The deepest question the sermon named wasn't "am I important FOR God?" but "am I important TO God?" — since God himself assigned our place, sometimes low on the ladder. Have you ever wrestled with that question? How did (or does) it feel?

5

"The Levites are mine" — God claimed them before he ever gave them a job. The sermon said what matters is not what you do but whose you are. How would truly believing "I am God's" — before and apart from any role — change how you carry your own "tent pegs"?

6

No Mushites, no tent; no tent, no atonement — their small job was indispensable. What "small" or unseen work do you do that actually holds important things together? Can you see it as indispensable rather than insignificant?

7

"The Mushites get the tent pegs; the Messiah gets the nails." Jesus came in the wrong place, the wrong family, the wrong death — and brought atonement precisely through low esteem. How does it change your view of your own lowly places to know that God worked salvation through the lowest place of all?

LIVING IT OUT

Your dignity isn't in your rank but in God's call and claim. This week's invitation is to carry your tent pegs as one who is God's — and to honor others carrying theirs.

In Your Inner Life

- Read Numbers 3-4 this week, and then sit with the one line that changes everything: "the Levites are mine" (3:12). Hear God say it over you — "you are mine" — before and apart from anything you do. If you've been living under the word "just," let this be the deeper word.
- Do an honest examination this week: where does your sense of worth actually come from — your role, your rank, your usefulness, or God's claim on you? Name the places you've tied your dignity to your career rather than his call, and hand them to God.
- Meditate on "the Mushites get the tent pegs; the Messiah gets the nails." Sit with the truth that God brought salvation through the lowest place. Let that reframe the low places in your own life as places God can and does work.

In Your Closest Relationships

- Think of someone close to you who quietly says "I'm just a..." — who does unseen, unglamorous work at home, at their job, or in your family. This week, tell them specifically why their work matters and that they are seen — and honor the "tent pegs" they carry.
- The imagined Mushite father had to help his eager son find dignity in a small role. If you're raising or influencing young people, help them root their worth in whose they are, not what they'll achieve. Have one conversation this week that plants that truth.
- Watch for envy or the ache of feeling lower on the ladder in your own relationships this week (the sermon named coveting, envy, and shame honestly). When it rises, name it before God and choose gratitude for your calling instead of resentment at someone else's.

In Your Daily Life and Work

- Whatever your work this week — however small or unseen — do it consciously "for the divine King," remembering that no service for the sovereign is small. Pick one ordinary, thankless task and deliberately offer it to God as honorable work.
- The Mushites' small job held up everything important. Look for the "indispensable but invisible" contribution you make in your work or home this week — the thing that would fall apart without you — and let it reframe how you see your role.
- Resist the culture's ranking of work this week. When you catch yourself thinking "I'm just a..." or looking down on someone else's "lesser" job, remember Bill Van Polen cleaning toilets and Moldy Mary's cantaloupe — and how God used them. Speak dignity over your own work and others'.

In Your Faith Community

- The sermon said the church has its own hierarchy of "important" service. This week, notice and thank someone in your congregation who does the unseen "tent-peg" work — setup, cleanup, nursery, parking, maintenance — that holds everything together. Tell them it matters.
- 1 Corinthians 12 says "the parts that seem weaker are indispensable." Consider where you serve (or could serve) in your church, and reject the idea that only visible, up-front roles count. Offer your "tent-peg" gift, and value it as God does.
- Bill Van Polen, who "just cleaned toilets," shaped a future pastor through encouragement and a bear hug. Whose life could you build into this week in some small, unheralded way? You never know what God will do through a Mushite's faithful, humble investment.

A Word to Carry

You may feel like you "just" carry the tent pegs — the small, unseen, unimportant job while others do what seems to matter. But God claimed you as his own before he ever gave you a task, and no service done for the great King is small. No tent pegs, no tent; no tent, no atonement. Your worth isn't in your rank. It's in this: you are his.

SERVICE CHALLENGE

God dignifies the small and unseen. This week, honor a "Mushite" — someone doing the humble work no one notices.

This Week's Challenge: Honor a Tent-Peg Carrier

The Mushites did indispensable work that no one noticed. This week, notice and honor someone whose humble, unseen work holds things together — and remind them they matter to God.

Step 1 — Name a Mushite.

Think of one person who does humble, unseen, "tent-peg" work — at your church, workplace, home, or community — the kind of person who might say "I'm just a..." and whom others overlook. Write their name down.

Step 2 — Tell Them Specifically Why It Matters.

Go to them and name the specific difference their work makes — the way it holds important things together. Don't be vague; help them see that without their "tent pegs," the whole tent would collapse.

Step 3 — Remind Them Whose They Are.

Go beyond the work to the deeper truth: they are not defined by their role but claimed by God. "The Mushites are mine." Help them see their dignity is tied to God's call and claim, not their rank.

Step 4 — Serve Alongside or For Them.

Take it further: pick up a "tent-peg" task yourself this week — join them in the humble work, or do it on their behalf. Nothing honors unseen service like joining it. Pray with them if the moment allows.

Step 5 — Come Back and Share.

If you're in a small group or Sunday school class, come ready to share who you honored and what you noticed. A church that honors its tent-peg carriers reflects the God who claims the lowliest as his own.

Optional Extended Challenge

- Read 1 Corinthians 12:12-27 this week — Paul's picture of the body of Christ, where "the parts that seem weaker are indispensable." Ask honestly which "part" you are, and whether you've been despising your own role or someone else's. Let Paul recalibrate your view.
- Read Numbers 16 (Korah's rebellion) alongside chapters 3-4. Notice how Korah — already high on the ladder — still coveted more. Where does that same restlessness live in you? What would contentment in God's calling look like this week?
- Trace the "wrong place, wrong family, wrong death" thread through the Gospels this week — Nazareth (John 1:46), "isn't this the carpenter's son?" (Matthew 13:55), and Isaiah 53. Let the lowliness of Jesus reframe every low place you're tempted to despise in your own life.

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 who knows us and calls each of us to our place; for the truth that there is no small work when done for a great King; and for Jesus, who took the lowest place — the nails — to bring us home.
- Confess honestly — the ways we've measured our worth (and others') by rank and career; the coveting, envy, and shame that come from wanting to climb the ladder.
- Receive your calling and your claim — thank God both for the work he's given you to do and, more deeply, for claiming you as his own before you did anything. "You are mine."
- Pray for the tent-peg carriers — for the one you'll honor this week, and for all who serve unseen, that they would know their dignity is secure in God's call and claim.

"The Mushites get the tent pegs. The Van Polens get the porta-potties. The Messiah took the nails. And whatever we do this week, God gets the glory."

— From This Week's Sermon