All I needed to know I learned...

How would you complete this phrase? As most of us would probably readily admit, growing-up is not easy. Life gets messy and complicated and we need a vision and guidelines, as well as healthy relationships to help us live into our potential. So it is with the People of God as Israel begins to grow into their identity. This week and Chapter 6 of The Story focuses on what living into our identity is about, especially in terms of living into our Covenant with God. With “wandering,” the 6th Chapter of The Story, we finish our exploration of the first five books of the Old Testament – what is referred to as The Pentateuch (Greek for “five scrolls”). Perhaps the best words to describe this period of Israel’s development it is adolescence – if you thought your teen years were tough – oy vey! Perhaps there’s more to learn from our experience as well as this part of history than we may have thought.

I will be your God and you will be my people. The life I will establish for you is that I will be with you – you will have a land and posterity. This promise is enduring and relational – it is the Covenant that God freely establishes. But what does it mean for us, as God’s People, to truly live into this Covenant? What is the basis of the Covenantal relationship? What is needed to live fully into this Covenant? How do we grow-up and mature into our relationship with God? These are some of the issues at stake at this point in The Story with Chapter Six: Wandering. Knowing the fuller story, we find ourselves wishing to make answer clearer with what we know comes later in The Story with the Gospel and a revised Covenant. But we’re still at an early point in The Story and we can’t rush ahead, as tempting as it may be. There’s still much we can lean by looking at these early questions, the struggles as well as the journey itself.

We skip over the entire Book of Leviticus and find this part of The Story woven from chunks of the final books of The Pentateuch, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Along the way, one can see that Leviticus is really a pause in the narrative, an extended set of instructions, very detailed instructions, seen as what is needed in order to be God’s People – how to live in a “holy way” and yet, as Eugene Peterson put it, “in a culture that doesn’t have the faintest idea what “holy” is. The reason for all the laws, the codes for our life and conduct is to show explicitly just how an attempt to reduce or control God into something of our convenience or desire simply will not work in this Covenantal relationship. So here are the details of how we can/must fit into God’s vision and not the other way around.

Indeed Numbers and Deuteronomy can be seen as a fuller explanation and commentary of how our relationship with God is not about us demanding of God to give us what we want and according to our terms; but just the opposite: God providing the ways that we can/must live into God’s vision. This vision calls for everything we are about to be included; it is to be a full relationship, not a qualified one selecting only certain parts. These final books that make up The Pentateuch explicitly deals with the complexity and messiness of life, thus all that involve living that complex and messy life “holy” with God. Leviticus and Numbers make clear that we need help and these books not only discuss how, but why. Clearly we need organization, but also to be shaped and formed as to how to relate not only with God but each other as members of a community. Deuteronomy is perhaps the longest “sermon” as to why this is all necessary and what is at stake and this part of the narrative is written as if it comes from Moses himself.
Summary:
For more than a year, Israel camped at Mount Sinai. Every day they saw evidence of God’s reality and power. They were saved from their idolatry, building the tabernacle and seeing God’s presence fill it. After all this, one would think they could walk faithfully before the Lord, but that is not what happened.

Following hard on the heels of their departure from Sinai, Israel descended into constant grumbling. They went back and forth between complaining about their circumstances and asking God to help them and rescue them from their struggles. God was not very tolerant of their ungrateful rabble-rousing and constant complaints.

Even worse, after finally reaching the Promised Land the people refused to step forward in faith and trust that God would lead them. When the Lord called them to take the land through wars of conquest, they flatly refused. As a result an entire generation was condemned to death in the desert. During the desert years, God shaped and formed a man named Joshua into a capable successor to Moses.

After forty years of wandering, as Israel approached their inheritance a second time, Moses, the great lawgiver, gave his farewell address, holding out the choice between life and death, blessings and curses. What is revealed in all these ups and downs? God is the glorious, faithful, covenant-keeping Savior of his chosen people.

Reflection:
So what keeps going terribly wrong? Is it willful disobedience? A lack of trust? Abject fear? God’s plan was clear and encompassing of their whole life. Simplistically, God speaks, the people listen. God delivers, the people provide. God provides, the people trust. Well, maybe not.

God is shown to always be holding up His end of the bargain: He always provides, always delivers, always keeps His promises. It turns out the people were equally consistent: They always forgot, always questioned, always rebelled. Their lack-of-faith list was long. When daily bread fell from heaven, they craved a taste of Egypt. Even Moses’ siblings, Miriam and Aaron, grew jealous and undermined their brother’s leadership.

Then they reached Kadesh and the perimeter of promise became a pinnacle of rebellion. Moses sent twelve leaders to spy out the Promised Land of Canaan. Ten of the twelve said the cities were too strong, the people too big, and God was too small. Only two, Caleb and Joshua, trusted God. They encouraged Israel to go and take what God had given them, but the people complained and failed to believe.

As one reads along with this part of Israel’s history, one can be led to consider: What enables failure? Is it simply unbelief? Is it, again, a lack of trust? Fear? In this part of The Story, Israel seemingly spends the next forty years wandering aimlessly in the wilderness. A whole generation would die out before they set foot on the other side of the land of promise. Only Caleb and Joshua would outlive them all to eventually cross over into their inheritance.

Moses commissions Joshua as Israel’s new leader before giving his farewell address. He reminds them of all that the LORD had done. He tells them again about their special role as His chosen nation and how they can be blessed if they would simply love and into the Covenant.

Chapter 6 – Wandering is ‘woven’ from sections of Numbers & Deuteronomy (excluding Leviticus completely)

Numbers 10–14; 20–21; 25; 27
Deuteronomy 1–2; 4; 6; 8–9; 29–32; 34

God’s Story – YOUR story!
Not asking you to reveal any embarrassing stories yourself, how would you describe the typical teen years and early 20’s? Do you think there are connections to be made of that to Israel here?

How do you think God might help us “recalculate” our life and direction today when we feel off track or are wandering? What role does grace play?

What are some things (or ways we) can get in the way of responding to God’s direction (or redirect)?

Does you image of God change from this part of the story? Why or why not?