

“Be bold...”
Series: “In the beginning...”
Numbers 13:1-2, 17-20, 25-33; Matthew 10:26-31

After two years as a pastor in Russell, Kentucky with Jean working as a counselor, we desired to go where both of us could be the pastors of a church. So, we became the ministers of two congregations and a campus ministry in Newport, Kentucky. Both of our churches sat in downtown Newport, which has recently become a renovated city, but thirty years ago was better known for strip clubs and Mafia personalities.

But our two congregations carried a proud heritage. My church, which sat next to the manse, had been founded by German immigrants. In fact, until World War II, the words stenciled over the organ in gold letting, “Praise Unto the Lord,” were written in German. The church sat about 600, contained a pipe organ, magnificent wood ceiling, Tiffany windows in the fellowship area, and marble bathrooms.

Jean’s church, a few blocks over, was organized by English immigrants. It also contained a large pipe organ and extraordinary stained glass windows in its 600 seat sanctuary. It carried the added historical footnote that when he ran for President, Williams Jennings Bryan had preached there.

The difficulty was that every Sunday in those mammoth 600 seat sanctuaries, my church averaged thirty-four people and Jean’s averaged eighteen. Our salaries were supplemented by the denomination and what little money was received in the offering went to building maintenance. Theft was such a problem in the downtown area that our manse had dead bolt locks on the closets. Most of the church members had long since moved out into the suburbs.

So it did not take a theological, sociological, urban planning, or any other kind of degree to quickly discern that the churches’ only hope of survival was merging into one and seeking to minister to the community.

Young, eager, well intentional, and not very politically savvy, I suggested the two congregations begin discussing merger. Some agreed that this was the only logical course of action. Others noted it made sense. But in the end I discovered all the talk was really window dressing attempting to let their young pastors down easy. These church buildings were their childhood homes, and their vision stopped with maintaining their beloved bricks and mortar.

Ten months later Jean and I were gone to Pennsylvania, and I doubt they were saddened to see us or our radical ideas leave town. But it wasn’t long after that my congregation could no longer maintain the property and that beautiful, Tiffany windowed German church became a dinner theatre.

“The Lord said to Moses, ‘Send men to spy out the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelites; from each of their ancestral tribes you shall send a man, everyone a leader among them.’”

Moses has led the children of Israel out of slavery in Egypt. With plagues, a pillar of fire, the parting of the Red Sea, and daily manna, God has worked miracle after miracle to get the Israelites to this point. They have safely crossed the Sinai peninsula and now stand on the threshold of the Promised Land, the land of milk and honey, God’s gift of nationhood to God’s people.

And in preparation for their occupation, God tells Moses to select one man from each of their twelve tribes, the best and the brightest, to do a reconnaissance; check out this land God will give them. Sending them forward, Moses instructs the spies to see what the land is like, whether its inhabitants are strong or weak, how many of them there are and whether their cities are fortified. He instructs them, “Be bold, and bring back some of the fruit of the land.”

They take off and travel throughout what today we call Israel. It must be July or August, because they cut down a cluster of grapes which is so huge it takes two men to carry it on a pole.

When the twelve men return they cannot say enough good things about the bountiful land. “It does flow with milk and honey, and just look at this fruit. The people who live there are large and strong and their cities are fortified.”

Then Caleb speaks up, backed by another spy called Joshua, “Let us go up at once and occupy it, for we are well able to overcome it.” But the other ten respond less enthusiastically. “We are not able to go up against this people, for they are stronger than we.”

It goes downhill from there, each of the other ten noting how the land devours its inhabitants. And the people there are huge. In fact, they claim some of them are ancestors of the legendary Nephilim, semi-divine giants mentioned in Genesis 6:4. They summarize their response by saying, “...to ourselves we seemed like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them.”

Well, the fear is contagious. The people begin to weep, complaining to Moses and Aaron that they wished they had never left Egypt and it would be better to die there in the wilderness than for their wives and children to become the booty of the new land’s inhabitants.

Joshua and Caleb fight back, arguing that it is a good and fruitful land, and they need not fear because God is with them. As for its inhabitants, they exclaim, “...they are no more than bread for us; their protection is removed from them, and the Lord is with us; do not fear them.” But the people will not listen.

And though Moses convinces God not to strike down the Israelites for their refusal to have faith and obey, God decides that none of this faithless generation, except for Caleb and Joshua, will enter the Promised Land. Because of their unwillingness to believe God, they will wander in the wilderness for another forty years.

A man told a story about he and his wife sitting at a table at his high school reunion, and he kept staring at a drunken lady swigging her drink as she sat alone at a nearby table.

His wife asked, “Do you know her?”

“Yes,” he sighed. “She’s my old girlfriend. I understand she took to drinking right after we split up those many years ago, and I hear she hasn’t been sober since.”

“My goodness!” said his wife, “who would think a person could go on celebrating that long?”

Whether it is ex-girlfriends or the situation in the Promised Land, or two downtown churches in Newport, Kentucky, the very same facts can be interpreted in two very different ways.

Now, the very first thing that strikes me about this narrative is that nobody, not one single person, disputes the facts. The spies' report is unanimous. The land is extraordinarily fruitful. "Just look at these grapes." Exactly as God described it, it is truly a land "flowing with milk and honey." And yes, there are strong people residing in fortified towns. Every spy agrees with this assessment.

The disagreement comes when a decision has to be made, a call to action that affects each of them. When Caleb says, "Let's go right now and occupy it," the report begins to be revised. The bountiful land becomes one that devours its people. The strong inhabitants become giants.

What interests me about this scene is that these twelve men were Israel's best and brightest. They were hand picked. God told Moses to choose the leaders of the tribes. And when they return they all agree on the facts, but not the vision. And notice the differing visions. One vision includes God, and one does not. The naysayers argue that the present inhabitants are strong, holed up in fortified cities, and make them feel like tiny grasshoppers.

Now, we think these ten spies are exaggerating, but we really don't know. Because Caleb and Joshua do not see this as relevant information. It is irrelevant whether the enemy is made up of giants or their cities are fortified. The only thing that matters is that God is with the Israelites.

When you and I look at life, we visualize exactly what others see. The landscape is littered with death, divorce, economic uncertainty, runny noses, college tuition, and struggling relationships. The facts are the same for everyone. But does our vision also include God?

When Robert Louis Stevenson, racked by tuberculosis, was nearing the end of his life, his wife came in one morning and said, "I suppose in spite of all your trouble, you will tell me again that it is a beautiful day." The great novelist answered, "Yes, my dear. I refuse to let that row of medicine bottles be the circumference of my horizon."

Does the circumference of your horizon, of your life, include God?

The twelve spies return. They concur that it is too dangerous to enter the Promised Land. The remaining two, Caleb and Joshua, counter that it is the perfect time. The difference is how they interpret the facts. Ten view them through the lens of fear. While Caleb and Joshua see them in the light of faith.

Whenever God calls, there are always reasons to hesitate, to fear. There are always giants in the cities and inferior crops in the fields. Reason and faith sometimes point in different directions.

The passage notes God's anger and how this faithless generation will not be permitted to enter the Promised Land. But I believe the story speaks to us about lost opportunity. By choosing to side with fear, the people lost the opportunity to go forward, to take the land God chose for them; missed the opportunity to partake of a future flowing with milk and honey; turned their backs on the best God had to offer them.

How often has each one of us allowed fear to rob us of the best God had waiting for us? How often with our time, our worship, our prayer life, our relationships, our money, have we held back from what we knew was God's way, but we were afraid? We understood that we should go forward, but to do so would risk it all, so we reinterpreted God's call, viewed it with fear instead of faith.

The Israelites had trudged through the barren and desolate Sinai. They stood on the cusp of finally entering the Promised Land, the land of milk and honey, that pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. And when they are ready to take that last step, they become reticent, unsure, afraid.

When it comes to making that choice to live for Christ, to employ our talents, time, money, family life, work, employment practices, childrearing in Christian service, do we draw back in fear because it just looks too hard, or step forward in faith?

The story is told that when David Livingstone was in Africa, a mission society once wrote saying that they had some good men to send to help him. They asked if there was a good road to the famous missionary's current location. He wrote back, "If you have men who will come only if they know there is a good road, I don't want them. I want men who will come even if there is no road."

The road to a Christian life is often bumpy, pothole filled, and downright scary. It is always tempting to turn around and seek another way. But in faith, we go forward, even when we cannot see the road down which God calls us.

"Be bold..."

Those were the instructions Moses gave to the spies. And they were bold right up to the time they had to pull the trigger, go or stay, choose fear or faith.

Each of us stands on the cusp of the Promised Land. God has been clear. Live like Jesus. Be generous, loving, forgiving, kind, put others first, let the mind of Christ be within you. But to do so interprets the facts of the world very differently than most of those who surround us.

This morning, as you and I gaze on the Promised Land of life in Christ, will you enter it with fear or faith?

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