

Numbers 13:17-20, 25-33; 14:1-11, 24 (NRSV)

¹⁷ Moses sent them to spy out the land of Canaan, and said to them, "Go up there into the Negeb, and go up into the hill country, ¹⁸ and see what the land is like, and whether the people who live in it are strong or weak, whether they are few or many, ¹⁹ and whether the land they live in is good or bad, and whether the towns that they live in are unwalled or fortified, ²⁰ and whether the land is rich or poor, and whether there are trees in it or not. Be bold, and bring some of the fruit of the land." Now it was the season of the first ripe grapes.

²⁵ At the end of forty days they returned from spying out the land. ²⁶ And they came to Moses and Aaron and to all the congregation of the Israelites in the wilderness of Paran, at Kadesh; they brought back word to them and to all the congregation, and showed them the fruit of the land. ²⁷ And they told him, "We came to the land to which you sent us; it flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. ²⁸ Yet the people who live in the land are strong, and the towns are fortified and very large; and besides, we saw the descendants of Anak there. ²⁹ The Amalekites live in the land of the Negeb; the Hittites, the Jebusites, and the Amorites live in the hill country; and the Canaanites live by the sea, and along the Jordan."

³⁰ But Caleb quieted the people before Moses, and said, "Let us go up at once and occupy it, for we are well able to overcome it." ³¹ Then the men who had gone up with him said, "We are not able to go up against this people, for they are stronger than we." ³² So they brought to the Israelites an unfavorable report of the land that they had spied out, saying, "The land that we have gone through as spies is a land that devours its inhabitants; and all the people that we saw in it are of great size. ³³ There we saw the Nephilim (the Anakites come from the Nephilim); and to ourselves we seemed like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them."

Then all the congregation raised a loud cry, and the people wept that night. ² And all the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron; the whole congregation said to them, "Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! ³ Why is the LORD bringing us into this land to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become booty; would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?" ⁴ So they said to one another, "Let us choose a captain, and go back to Egypt."

⁵ Then Moses and Aaron fell on their faces before all the assembly of the congregation of the Israelites. ⁶ And Joshua son of Nun and Caleb son of Jephunneh, who were among those who had spied out the land, tore their clothes ⁷ and said to all the congregation of the Israelites, "The land that we went through as spies is an exceedingly good land. ⁸ If the LORD is pleased with us, he will bring us into this land and give it to us, a land that flows with milk and honey. ⁹ Only, do not rebel against the LORD; and do not fear the people of the land, for they are no more than bread for us; their protection is removed from them, and the LORD is with us; do not fear them." ¹⁰ But the whole congregation threatened to stone them.

Then the glory of the LORD appeared at the tent of meeting to all the Israelites. ¹¹ And the LORD said to Moses, "How long will this people despise me? And how long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them? . . . ²⁴ But my servant Caleb, because he has a different spirit and has followed me wholeheartedly, I will bring into the land into which he went, and his descendants shall possess it."

Who do we trust with what matters most to us? How does our trust, and our distrust, shape our lives? Do fear and anxiety keep us from making a difference?

"Who ya gonna trust?" That's the question. From the beginning of the Bible to the end. From Abraham and the sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis to the four horsemen of the apocalypse in Revelation. Who will we trust when it comes to what is most important to us? Ourselves? Our friends? Our family? Our banker? Our doctor? Our soldiers and police? . . . Who?

Turning back

In the Bible classes I teach, I've learned that there is a fair bit of confusion surrounding the forty years that the Israelites spend wandering around the Sinai wilderness before entering the promised land. Everyone knows they wander, but many don't know when or why. Today's passage from the book of Numbers is the climax of the story about when and why. So here's the basics.

After leading Moses and the Israelites out of Egypt and across the Red Sea, God leads them to Mt. Sinai, the place of the burning bush, where Moses had first met God. It is the mountain of God. There, Moses ascends the mountain and brings down tablets on which

are written the Ten Commandments. Already, the people are rebellious, ready to turn away from God at the first sign of trouble. Yet, Moses pleads with God that God would remember the covenant he had made with Abraham (Genesis 12 & 15). God, being utterly faithful, renews his covenant with these people despite their weakness and distrust. God will do “an awesome thing” for them. God will “drive out the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites” (see Exodus 34). It is God who will ensure that the Israelites are able to conquer and inhabit the land that God had promised to Abraham.

Thus, from Mt. Sinai, where the people are given God’s Law and formed into a covenant people, God leads them directly to the borders of Canaan, the promised land, bringing us to today’s passage from Numbers.

Being prudent, Moses sends spies into Canaan to check things out. When the spies return, they bring fear-inspiring tales of unconquerable giants. Two of the spies, Joshua and Caleb, are not fearful. They report that the land “flows with milk and honey.” They urge the Israelites not to fear these people, not to rebel against God. They say, “. . . their protection is removed from them, and the LORD is with us; do not fear them.” Tragically, the Israelites listen to their fears rather than to Joshua and Caleb, even threatening to stone the two men.

The Book of Numbers

The book of Numbers is the fourth book in the OT and is part of the Pentateuch, the five books, beginning with Genesis, that tradition attributed to Moses.

The book gets its name from two censuses of the Israelites in the wilderness. The first opens the book. The second is in chapter 26. We can best think of Numbers as having two parts, each one beginning with a census. The first part is about the rebellious generation that constantly whines and complains, including their refusal to enter Canaan. The second part (chapters 26-36) moves the focus to their children, the generation of hope.

The dominant theme of the book is God’s faithfulness. Despite the people’s weakness and rebellion, the purposes of God press forward. God simply never gives up. The book is like a microcosm of the entire Old Testament story. Despite the people’s inability to live up the covenant they freely made, the promise to love God and neighbor, God’s redemption of creation will not be thwarted. In the end, God must do himself, in the person of Jesus, what the Jews and the rest of us were and are unable to do for ourselves.

Rather than trusting God and entering this “exceedingly good land,” the Israelites, including Moses, choose the path of distrust and faithlessness.

God’s response is not surprising. God says to Moses: “How long will this people despise me? And how long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them?” Despite everything that God had done for them – freedom from slavery in Egypt, food (manna) in the wilderness, the giving of the Law at Mt. Sinai – despite all this, the people refuse to trust God. They let their fears hold them back.

God then tells Moses that because the people have refused to enter the land, they never will. They will have to wander around the Sinai wilderness until the distrustful generation dies off . . . hence, the forty years. God will have Joshua and Caleb, the trusting two, lead the next generation into Canaan.

So the people wander . . . and wander . . . and wander. Even Moses himself will not enter the promised land. The people of God will reap the consequences of their fears and distrust.

Making a difference

Sometimes it is a challenge to see what a particular biblical story might mean for our lives. But not today.

When God set out to put the world right, God chose Abraham and his wife Sarah. Their descendents would be God’s people and God would give them a land. Why? Not for their own sake, but *so that* all the families on earth would be blessed through them. *So that* all humanity would be redeemed and all creation with them.

The arrival of the Israelites, the covenant people of God, at the border of Canaan is not only about their return¹ but about their participation in God’s purposes. They are to be the ones through whom God will rescue creation. So when they chicken out and refuse to enter Canaan, they are abandoning their part in God’s plan. They take themselves out of the

¹The story of Joseph in the book of Genesis is the story of how Abraham’s descendents ended up in Egypt. The land that the Israelites are too fearful to enter was where Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had made their homes.

game, off the table. They will no longer make a difference. The world will have to wait for their children to do what their parents were afraid to do.

You and I are also among God's covenant people, as are all those who have faith in Jesus Christ. Just as the ancient Israelites who turned away from Canaan were to be God's agents, so are we. We are to make disciples, to feed and clothe, to bear witness in word and deed to the saving power of the risen Christ. Empowered by God's Spirit, we are to build for the kingdom of God. We are to make a difference.

How? As we United Methodists have all affirmed, we "faithfully participate in the ministries of the church by our prayers, our presence, our gifts, and our service, that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ." We are to hold back no part of ourselves. We are to trust God in all things. We can never accumulate enough money or stuff to satisfy our wants; we just discover new ones. No doctor can keep me from dying forever. I can't have an army or police force large enough to ensure my safety at all times and in all places. Even our friends and families disappoint us.

Making a difference begins with trusting God, the one who will never abandon us, even when we feel like it. Just because I ignore someone standing behind me doesn't mean they're not there. God, and only God, is always here. Pray that you might trust God well.

READING WITH HEART & MIND, APRIL 29 – MAY 5

Sunday, Acts 5:1-16 What a remarkable story. What is the sin committed by Ananias? Was it holding money back or lying about it? What sin does his wife commit? Little wonder that "great fear seized the whole church." What message is there for us in this story?

Monday, Acts 5:17-42 What purpose is served by the apostles' many healings? Why do the Jewish leaders decide to arrest the apostles? What do they hope to gain? What do you think of Gamaliel's advice to the Sanhedrin? What is the reaction of the apostles to their close call?

Tuesday, Acts 6 Why does the church need delegation of responsibilities? What activities do the apostles' hand off to others? How much is this like the way we organize our churches now? Why is Stephen seized?

Wednesday, Acts 7:1 – 8:3 What is Stephens' defense of himself? Is it a defense? Why does he tell the story of Israel to answer the charges against him? The man named Saul who holds the coats and zealously persecutes the Christians will become the apostle Paul after his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus.

Thursday, Acts 8:4-25 What is the significance of the Gospel's spread into Samaria? What does Simon the Sorcerer not understand about the Gospel? What does this story convey to you about the gift the Holy Spirit?

Friday, Acts 8:26-40 Who sends Philip to Gaza? Who tells him what to say? Like so much of the book of Acts, the "protagonist" in this story is God, present in the person of the Holy Spirit. What do you make of Philip's sudden trip? What do you imagine the eunuch experienced when Philip was whisked away?

Saturday, Acts 9:1-31 This is one of the great stories of Scripture. Trace the story of Saul from his encounter with Jesus to his preaching the Good News in the synagogue. It will be fifteen years before Paul begins his first missionary journey (Acts 13-14).

Sermon Notes

Scott's class, *Something More*, meets in Wesley Hall at 9:30 every Sunday.

If you are not a part of a Sunday morning class, we hope that you'll visit our class. It is open to adults of all ages. Whether you are new to St. Andrew or just visiting, the class is a great way to begin getting connected. If you have questions, you are welcome to call Scott Engle at 214-291-8009 or e-mail him at sengle@standrewacademy.org.

A Special Bible Academy Workshop – May 5 and 12

Higher Choices – Tools to Connect with God

Begin now to build a successful life that honors God, and takes you on a wonderful journey of loving, laughing, growing, creating, and experiencing all of God's blessings. Higher Choices™ are the wisest, best choices for you to be consistent with God's will for you and the life God's enabling you to co-create. Learn practical tools for self-discovery and action. We'll discuss priorities and time management, vision, authenticity, balance, simplicity, mental and physical fitness, prayer, and more.

Taught by Laura Zuber. Lunch provided.

To register on-line go to www.standrewacademy.org

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Today is Ignition Sunday, a time when the many ministries of St. Andrew offer countless ways to get involved, to participate in the life of this church and to live out the commitment of our prayers, presence, gifts, and service to the making of disciples of Jesus Christ.

How does the story of the rebellious Israelite generation and their refusal to enter Canaan inform our own commitments? Why is trusting God in all things, big and small, so important to making a real difference in the kingdom of God? Could it be that taking risks is essential to making a difference? Do you think it is? Why might this be so? What are some examples from your own life? The Bible is filled with them.

If we only participate where we are comfortable and give only our excess time and money, how can we expect to accomplish what God hopes we would accomplish? We wouldn't take that approach in the workplace and hope to accomplish big things. Not even in our families. Who wants a parent or a child that only gives time or attention when there is some to spare? It is about making time and giving generously.

Finally, how can we come to trust God more, to trust God without reservation? I can see my bank statement. I can see my doctor, my wife, my sons. How can I come to trust in the unseen? Read Hebrews 11. Every time you come to the word "faith," substitute "trust," for there is no better synonym for "faith."