

Decisions, Decisions

2nd Sunday of Lent – March 11/12, 2006

Sermon Background Study

Numbers 14:1-10a (NRSV)

Then all the congregation raised a loud cry, and the people wept that night. ²And 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! ³Why 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?” ⁴So they said to one another, “Let us choose a captain, and go back to Egypt.”

⁵Then Moses and Aaron fell on their faces before all the assembly of the congregation of the Israelites.

⁶And Joshua son of Nun and Caleb son of Jephunneh, who were among those who had spied out the land, tore their clothes ⁷and said to all the congregation of the Israelites, “The land that we went through as spies is an exceedingly good land. ⁸If 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. ⁹Only, 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.”

¹⁰But the whole congregation threatened to stone them.

We are defined by the choices we make. Some are big decisions, most are small. Today, we consider the story of the Israelites and their decision whether to trust God fully or to trust their own wisdom and abilities. Sadly, they made a bad decision.

Ready for responsibility

After leading the people out of slavery, God met the Hebrews at Mt. Sinai. God revealed himself to them there. He taught them what it meant to be the people of God, that they were to love God and love neighbor. God told them how to build a dwelling where God would be present with his people in a way that he was present with no other people. They were to be God’s “treasured possession.”

But, of course, being shaped into God’s people meant they were being shaped for responsibility. They were to be the ones through whom God would restore all of humanity to a right relationship with God. God led them from Mt. Sinai to the borders of Canaan so that the Israelites might move into the land that God had promised to Abraham centuries before. Yet despite all that had happened, the people seemed plagued by fears, doubts, and anxieties. Sometimes they went so far as to wish they were still back in Egypt. Far from being responsible people, ready to trust God in all things, time and again they quickly forgot about their escape from Pharaoh and even the

Learning for Discipleship

At St. Andrew, we have emphasized learning for discipleship through programs such as the Bible Academy. This year, we are reading *Thru the Bible*, a new experience for many of us. I’m sure that just the reading you’ve done so far has generated lots of questions. The St. Andrew Bible Academy can help.

In the Bible Academy, we offer a variety of classes ranging from small discussion-group classes to larger, more lecture-oriented classes. This spring we will offer a large array of classes. Some have been offered before, such as my *Introducing the New Testament* class. It is a great introductory class for those who are new to reading Scripture. Some of the classes are new, such as Laura Zuber’s class, *Connection and Direction*, which uses a biblically-based spiritual gifts assessment to help you discover your *Passion* (“where” you’re motivated to serve), your *Spiritual Gifts* (“what” you’re equipped to do), and your *Personal Style* (“how” you can best serve). Debbie Lyons and Janet Collinsworth are teaching a new introductory class on Jesus and the Holy Land.

We know that biblical illiteracy is a problem in the United Methodist Church and we are striving to help all of us to become more knowledgeable and confident in our understanding and use of the Bible. This is crucial because “United Methodists share with other Christians the conviction that Scripture is the primary source and criterion for Christian doctrine.”¹

Though a well-educated Oxford man, John Wesley considered himself to be a “man of one book,” the Bible. We are called to be a people of that book. In its pages, we learn of God’s hopes for us and expectations of us. In its pages, we confront the living Lord and learn of his love for us. In its pages, we learn how to live the sort of life that God intended for us. Indeed, William Willimon reminds us that “a congregation is Christian to the degree that it is confronted by and attempts to form its life in response to the Word of God.”²

1. from the *UMC Book of Discipline*, 2004

2. from Willimon’s book, *Shaped by the Bible*, Abingdon Press, 1990.

food God had rained down upon them from heaven (Exodus 16). They could see only the unknowns ahead and embrace only their own fears.

When the Israelites arrived at the borders of Canaan, at God's instruction they sent in a team of spies to check things out. Sensible enough. However, when the spies returned after forty days, they reported that though the land flowed with "milk and honey," the Canaanites were simply too strong and as big as

God's "Steadfast Love"

Before the Israelites depart Mt. Sinai, God reveals more of himself in a long list of adjectives (Exodus 34:6-7). One of the most striking is God's promise of "steadfast love for the thousandth generation." It is God's steadfast love that the people can and ought to trust when they reach the Promised land but do not. What does "steadfast love" really mean?

These two words translate the single Hebrew word, *hesed*, which is one of the most important words in the Old Testament. It is virtually a one-word summary of Israel's understanding of God. No English word can do it justice, not even two. It is one of those Hebrew words better translated with a paragraph.

Used more than 240 times in the Old Testament, especially in the Psalms, *hesed* conveys love, strength, trust, kindness, mercy, faithfulness, steadfastness, loyalty, truthfulness – all embodied in a covenantal relationship. Our word "devotion" perhaps best captures the nuances of *hesed*. God is devoted to his people. The older English translations most often rendered *hesed* as "lovingkindness," an archaic word but a good one.

Hesed is a covenantal word and could be used to talk about marital love. A marriage is a legal contract but much more. A marriage is a covenant between two people who are expected to demonstrate devotion and trust and lovingkindness in their relationship. Their devotion to each other is not just a sentiment; it is to be expressed in concrete actions of loving, protecting, and truthfulness. Under their covenant, each spouse is obligated to the other and finds great joy in those obligations. They are to abound in steadfast love for each other.

In much the same way, God's *hesed* for his people is expressed in God's acts of mercy and salvation. In Psalm 25, the psalmist proclaims that God's steadfast love has been "from of old." As the psalm unfolds, it is clear that the psalmist has in mind the Exodus, God's deliverance of his people from Egypt. God's love for his people, for us, is seen in his actions. We proclaim a God-who-acts. The psalmist prays that he would know God's ways so he can, through his actions, be faithful to the covenant just as God has been faithful. After all, this is what covenant partners do. And this is what the Israelites fail to do when they reach the border of Canaan.

giants. In their fear, the people turned back, some even desiring to return to Egypt. Despite their experiences *with* God and their experience *of* God, their faith was weak. They trusted God too little. They weren't really sure that God would or could keep his promises. Indeed, their faith was not really placed in Yahweh, the God of Moses. Rather, their faith was in a god of their own making, a god much too small to trust with life and death. So, led astray by this tiny god of their own conception, the people would wander aimlessly for forty years until they had died, until their children were ready to trust, *fully* trust, the God-Who-Is and begin their conquest of Canaan.

Three decisions

In his year-long Bible study, *The Grand Sweep*, Ellsworth Kalas draws our attention to three decisions that the Israelites make after leaving Mt. Sinai for the Promised Land.

First, the Israelites make the decision to complain. Abraham Lincoln once observed that people are about as happy as they make up their minds to be. I think he was right. We can wake up each morning and decide whether we are going to have a positive outlook that day or a negative one. Yes, the Israelites were anxious and scared as they traveled through the Sinai wilderness, but they could have decided to swallow their grumbling and confidently embrace God's promises.

Second, the Israelites decided to criticize, directing their insecurities and anxieties at Moses. In Numbers 12, Aaron, Moses' brother, and Miriam, Moses' sister, oppose Moses. "What makes him so special," they think to themselves. But it was God who made Moses special and God's anger "burned hot against" Aaron and Miriam for their arrogance. Like complaining, criticizing hardly seems like a decision. Yet, we are defined by many such decisions we make every day. Will we hold our tongue or will we lash out? Will we criticize or will we support?

Third, the Israelites decided to retreat. This one is easier to understand as a decision. Would they trust God and enter Canaan despite the fears of their spies or would they rely on their own judgment and turn back? But the grumbling beget the criticizing and the criticizing beget the retreat. Our own lives are like this. Lots of wrong "little" decisions lead inexorably to a wrong "big" decision. Do we really think that we can deny God in the small stuff of our lives and yet trust God in the big stuff? Wise Christians know that the mature Christian life is a life led fully in God's presence, in the small decisions as well as the big ones.

Thru the Bible Daily Bible Readings

March 12 ~ 18

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help.

Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Numbers 22 -24; Psalm 34 Balaam and the donkey; Balaam's message from God</p>	<p>Day 2 Numbers 25-27; Psalm 35 Israelites worship the Canaanite god, Baal; the new generation is counted; Joshua takes the leadership</p>
<p>Day 3 A day for reflection and catching up</p>	<p>Day 4 Numbers 28-30; Psalm 36 Offerings and vows</p>
<p>Day 5 Numbers 31-33; Psalm 37:1-22 War against Midian; conquests and the history of the campaign</p>	<p>Day 6 Numbers 34-36; Psalm 37:23-40 boundaries and refuge</p>
<p>Day 7 Galatians 1-3; Psalm 38 Paul's anger and astonishment; there can be no other Gospel; Paul and the other apostles; Law, faith, the promise to Abraham, and the purpose of the Law</p>	

Sermon Notes

Spring Bible Academy begins the week of March 27

Registration is now available at www.standrewccl.org

The Spring Session classes are: *Paul: On a Mission from God* with Scott Engle (Mon. morn. & Tues. eve.), *Boundaries: When to say YES, When to say NO to take control of your life* with Rev. Linda Carmicle (Wed morn.), *Paul's Letters to Timothy* with Frankey Commer (Thurs. morn.), *The Shape of Living: Spiritual Directions for Everyday Life* with Rev. Doug Meyer (Thurs. lunch), *Connection and Direction: Discover Your Spiritual Gifts* with Laura Zuber (Mon. eve.), *Introducing the New Testament* with Scott Engle (Mon. eve.), and *Jesus: His life, His time, His land, His Hebrew Faith* with Debbie Lyons and Janet Collinsworth (Tues. eve).

March Book Recommendation

The Message – Remix . . . A Bible paraphrase by Eugene Peterson

I am supplementing my reading from the NRSV in the *Renovare Spiritual Formation Bible* with Eugene Peterson's *The Message*, a paraphrase of the Bible in contemporary language. I'm finding that Peterson helps me to make better sense of some of the more difficult (dare I say tedious) passages. The "Remix" is an inexpensive, hard-bound, compact edition of *The Message* with verse-numbered paragraphs.

Available at *Inspiration*, the St. Andrew bookstore.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

The Israelites feared what lay across the borders of the Promised Land. Those fears and others led them to make one bad decision after another. A good starting place today would be to consider the fears that we face. What do you find most fearful in your life? Terrorists? Cancer? Financial problems? Job loss? Pressures on your children? When you consider these fears, do you find any themes? Perhaps your fears seem more "mundane." What effect do these fears have on your day-to-day life? How do you deal with fear and anxiety? Why do you think that anxiety medications are among the most-prescribed in our country, the most prosperous on the planet.

How is it that the little decisions we make each day shape the larger life-decisions we face? The decision-making seems easier when the stakes are not so high. Yet, are the smaller choices like training wheels that teach us how to make smarter choices on the big stuff? If the Israelites had trusted God to provide what they needed in the wilderness, would they have trusted God when they reached Canaan?

Finally, you might re-read the textbox on God's hesed, his steadfast love. How would you describe God's steadfast love to someone who does not know God? Have you experienced God's steadfast love in your own life. You might share some stories of times when it seemed to you that God was particularly devoted to you and your welfare. What are some biblical stories that illustrate God's steadfast love?