

Vision Through Barriers

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

5th in an eight-part series

February 5, 2017

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Numbers 13:25–14:4 (CEB)

²⁵They returned from exploring the land after forty days. ²⁶They went directly to Moses, Aaron, and the entire Israelite community in the Paran desert at Kadesh. They brought back a report to them and to the entire community and showed them the land's fruit. ²⁷Then they gave their report: "We entered the land to which you sent us. It's actually full of milk and honey, and this is its fruit. ²⁸There are, however, powerful people who live in the land. The cities have huge fortifications. And we even saw the descendants of the Anakites there. ²⁹The Amalekites live in the land of the arid southern plain; the Hittites, Jebusites, and Amorites live in the mountains; and the Canaanites live by the sea and along the Jordan."

³⁰Now Caleb calmed the people before Moses and said, "We must go up and take possession of it, because we are more than able to do it."

³¹But the men who went up with him said, "We can't go up against the people because they are stronger than we." ³²They started a rumor about the land that they had explored, telling the Israelites, "The land that we crossed over to explore is a land that devours its residents. All the people we saw in it are huge men. ³³We saw there the Nephilim (the descendants of Anak come from the Nephilim). We saw ourselves as grasshoppers, and that's how we appeared to them."

The entire community raised their voice and the people wept that night. ²All the Israelites criticized Moses and Aaron. The entire community said to them, "If only we had died in the land of Egypt or if only we had died in this desert! ³Why is the LORD bringing us to this land to fall by the sword? Our wives and our children will be taken by force. Wouldn't it be better for us to return to Egypt?" ⁴So they said to each other, "Let's pick a leader and let's go back to Egypt."

Courage in Christ. That's what it takes to see a vision all the way through.

Sometimes being a Christian takes courage. We strive to discern God's will for our lives, our church, even our nation. We consult friends, embed ourselves in the Scriptures, and yet, it is so often like peering through a fog. We want to grasp God's vision and understand our place in it, but it can be so hard. What really is the way ahead? Yes, we know are to love God and others, but that just isn't always enough information . . . what actually *is* the loving thing to do, we ask.

We are about to undertake a large effort, a master plan that will push us harder than ever before. Why? Because God had told us to make disciples, to be his witnesses, to feed the hungry and clothe the naked. But it takes courage and strength and discipline, but even more, it takes faith. It takes putting our trust in God and our communal understanding of his will.

But courage can be really hard! It is far too easy to see only barriers and problems and reasons to hold back, to shy away, to leave the hard work for other souls . . . perhaps braver souls.

Our story today is a case in point.

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. So here's the scoop.

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

(Exodus 3). 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 “It’s a land that is full of milk and honey.” They urge the Israelites not to fear these people, not to rebel against God. They say, “. . . their defense had deserted them, but the LORD is with us. Don’t be afraid of them.” Tragically, the Israelites listen to their fears rather than to Joshua and Caleb, even threatening to stone the two men. Rather than trusting God and entering this “exceptionally good land,” the Israelites, including Moses, choose the path of distrust and faithlessness.

The Book of Numbers

The book of Numbers is the fourth book in the Old Testament 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.

God’s response is not surprising. God says to Moses: “How long will this people disrespect me? And how long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have performed 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 – in the long run

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 give in to their fears and refuse to enter Canaan, they are abandoning their part in God's plan. They take themselves out of the game, off the table. They will no longer make a difference; instead they will wander aimlessly for forty years. 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. . . . that's what our Master Plan is all about.

So there it is. Will we press forward or will we wander aimlessly? Will we trust God or give in to fear? Will we rely on the Holy Spirit, God's empowering presence in our church and in our lives? Will we use the incredible gifts that God has given us for his purposes or merely for ours?

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, but especially when we are beginning large undertakings and making long-range decisions about the future of St. Andrew.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. There are some sad stories in the Bible; today's is one of the saddest. God had led his people out of Egypt to Mt. Sinai where he had given them the Law and showed them how to build a dwelling place for him. Then, he had led them directly to the Promised Land – where they chickened out. Yes, rather than trusting God they wanted to turn away and run back to Egypt. But not quite all of them. Two, Joshua and Caleb, had the courage to go with God. They urged the people to trust God. Though their pleas fell on deaf ears, still, these two men could see past the obstacles ahead and were ready to trust God. Why do you think it is so hard for us to trust God? Is it because we are not confident about God's true desires and purposes? Or do we turn away simply because we like our own way better?
2. Talk about some times when you felt God was really challenging you. Did it take courage to press on, to trust God? What did it feel like to trust God rather than yourself? How did you find courage? How did you see past the problem, the tragedy, or the obstacle? Have you known people who turned away from God in the hard times? How would you help us all to be more like Joshua and Caleb?
3. At one point in the story, Caleb says to Moses, "we must go up and take possession of it, because we are more than able to do it." It isn't that Caleb is leaving God out of it, but he also is not saying something "Let go and let God." Caleb is ready to work *with* God to take possession of the Promised Land. Have you ever felt like you needed to "let go and let God," or something to that effect? Perhaps we all have at one or another, because we know how weak and wrong-headed we can be. But God's way is to work with us, not in spite of us? How can we ensure that we are

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

working *with* God in accomplishing the Master Plan for St. Andrew? How can we keep ourselves on track, avoiding the pitfalls of pride or foolishness?

Daily Bible Readings

Monday, Genesis 12:10-20 Fearing that he will be killed, Abraham passes his wife off as his sister (a half-truth that is a lie . . . she is his half-sister).

Tuesday, Genesis 20 Abraham does it again!

Wednesday, Exodus 3:1-4:17 Moses is afraid to do as God tells him, but he does . . . eventually.

Thursday, 1 Samuel 17 Saul and his men fear Goliath and are humiliated, opening the door for young David.

Friday, 1 Kings 19 After God's great victory over the priests of Baal, Elijah so fears Jezebel that he runs far away and nearly gives up.

Saturday, Jonah 1-4 Jonah is so fearful of what God has told him to do that he runs away and meets profound disaster. God has to bring him back kicking and screaming to his work.

Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own.

This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Monday Evening Class

We are studying the book of Genesis

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying the Gospel of Luke

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

Scott's 10:50 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Our current series: *Simply Good News: Reading the gospels with N. T. Wright*