

## Where History is Being Made

Numbers 13:1-3, 17-20, 25-33; 14:1

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost, (Oct. 14) 2018

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I recommend James and Deborah Fallows' heartening recent book, *Our Towns: A 100,000 Mile Journey into the Heart of America*, in which they tell of flying a small propeller-driven plane at low altitude across America visiting small and medium sized towns. They wanted to explore America "away from the big, hyper-publicized cities" looking for "places that had faced adversity of some sort... and had looked for ways to respond." They visited 25 towns, each visit lasting about two weeks and they made shorter visits to an additional two dozen. James tended to research the economic life of each town and Deborah tended to head in the direction of the schools, asking questions about education.

The last chapter of the book the Fallows list 10 and ½ signs a town will succeed: (1) Divisive national politics seem distant. (2) You can pick out the local patriots – those who make the town go. (3) Public/private partnerships are real. (4) People know their town's story. (5) They have a downtown – probably the quickest single marker of the condition of the town. (6) They're near a research university – a powerful start-up incubator. (7) Or, they have and care about a community college. (8) They have excellent schools. (9) They make themselves open – open to new people and new ideas. (10) They have big plans. And the ½ - The town has a craft brewery. Fallows listed this at the last partly because of humor but partly because it is a sign of business innovation, entrepreneurship, and also because craft breweries are a significant place for a community to hang out. The more places where people hang out together the healthier and stronger the town.

Writing about the Fallows' book in a February 2017 article, *New York Times* columnist David Brooks said, "James and Deborah Fallows have always moved to where history is being made." He recounts that they were in Japan in the 1980's when Japan looked like the economic future of the world and in Washington, DC in the 90's writing about the aftermath of the Persian Gulf War and later the repercussions faced after 9/11. In the 2000's they were in China writing about its reemergence, which prompts Brooks to ask "what I call the Fallows Question... If you could move to the place on earth where history is most importantly being made right now, where would you go?"

So, according to Brooks, following the Fallows, where is history being made? The answer is small town America. You would go to places like Nacogdoches. Indeed, you would go to Nacogdoches.

Nacogdoches? Naca-nowhere? Who wants to go there?

After twenty-nine years of being a pastor here, I've run into a lot of the "Naca-nowhere" mentality. It's the habit of thought that says things like, "History happens somewhere else but not here," and, "We can't do that," or, "The way it used to be is good enough," and, "I don't need anyone else and I don't care about anyone else."

Which brings us to our Scripture lesson this morning from Numbers 13 – perhaps the ultimate "we can't do it" story in the Bible. About two years before this story today, Moses led the children of God out of slavery in Egypt. They headed south and eventually made to Mt. Sinai where they received the 10

commandments. They stayed about a year at Sinai and then ventured northeast toward the Promised Land God. Meanwhile God sent them manna each day, except the Sabbath and also sent them meat, in the form of quail.

It took them about another year to get up to Kadesh Barnea, opposite the southern tip of Canaan. They looked over across the valley to the promised future God had for them. Right there. They could see it. These ex-slaves could not believe their own eyes. A place of their own, where they could settle down, raise their kids without fear of a taskmaster coming along and beating them, separating them from one another, no fear of working in the brickyards the rest of their lives. If they never saw another brick that would be too soon.

But Canaan was not empty. It had big cities and who knew what the people were like or if the land was any good or not. So Moses put together a reconnaissance and intelligence team. A representative from each tribe was chosen. Twelve spies, intrepid, smart, crafty, able to blend in and not be noticed while at the same time they were to notice everything. So the twelve spies crossed over into Canaan during the night and were gone forty days.

When they returned they were carrying grapes so large that it took two of them to carry one cluster. They reported, “There is good news and there is bad news. The good news is it is true; the land is truly flowing with milk and honey. But the bad news is that the people over there are big and mean and strong. They live in fortified cities and they’re giants. In fact, they’re so gigantic it was if we were grasshoppers.”

When the spies said that, all the people winced and even whimpered. They murmured among themselves. “We can’t do it. We can’t defeat them. We’re better off if we just stay where we are. The status quo is the only way we know. It’s good enough.” Some even wanted to return to Egypt. Everyone agreed that the future looked too intimidating. Someone spoke up, a former Secretary of Defense, “There are *known knowns*; there are things we know we know. We also know there are *known unknowns*; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also *unknown unknowns* — the ones we don’t know we don’t know” (quote of former Sec. of Defense Donald Rumsfeld).

Everyone scratched their heads over that, “Well, what is known is that they are giants and we’re mere grasshoppers. So we’re not going over.”

But the two youth members of the reconnaissance and intelligence committee gave a minority report. “We know they’re giants over there. That’s true. And we know that we seem like grasshoppers in comparison. Yes, that’s true too. But there is a factor you all are ignoring. The Living God. God has called us to go into that future. God has promised to give it to us. Let’s trust God and let’s go over and claim the future.”

Frederick Douglass, the great abolitionist was discouraged. While speaking in Boston in the late 1850’s, he expressed frustration and said he did not know if African Americans would ever be free from slavery. It all just seemed so overwhelming. Sojourner Truth was in the audience. She was a friend of Frederick Douglass but when she heard him give in to despair, she stood. Eye-witnesses reported that her strong and powerful voice rang out, “Frederick, is God dead?”

That's what young Caleb and Joshua were saying to the people, "Is God dead?"

Well, the people voted with the majority report. They decided to take the safe choice and just hunker down and do things like they had always done. It might not be good, it might not be right, but at least it's safe.

I think the people deeply believed they were nothing more than grasshoppers. For generation after generation Pharaoh had taught them, told them, trained them to think of themselves as nothing more than slaves. Pharaoh said slavery was the way the Egyptian gods had set up the world. Brickyards, slavery, poverty, were just in the Israelite DNA. And if you've lived that for generations, a mere two years of freedom is not going to change it. So when they spies came back with the fear-filled report, the people were eager to believe them. It just confirmed to them who they were.

Bob Zellner is another hero of mine. He is white and was a college student in Montgomery, AL in 1957 and decided to write a paper on Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. His professor told him not to do it but he did anyway. When he came out of the church after interviewing Dr. King, he was surrounded by police and arrested.

It was a turning point for Bob. He said that while he was inside the church he had met Rosa Parks who said to him, "You can't study a problem forever. When you see something that's wrong, at some point you have to do something about it." Well, Bob considered those words as the call of God and got involved. He joined the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and eventually became the last

white member to leave the organization in 1965 when it became all black. Now, in his 80's Bob Zellner is still involved.

Bob says that those of us who make up the white majority (like the majority of the reconnaissance and intelligence committee of Moses) suffer from the “shriveled heart syndrome.” Our hearts are shriveled, diminished – or to use Biblical language, we suffer from a hardness of the heart. Zellner says that if we keep on generation after generation ignoring the suffering of our fellow human beings then our hearts become shriveled (see Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, *Reconstructing the Gospel: Finding Freedom from Slaveholder Religion*, p. 159-162).

Trauma studies teach us that long-term trauma including being a bystander to suffering, ignoring injustice, ignoring poverty, ignoring hunger and violence can lead to our inability to function in close, intimate relationships. We ignore and look away long enough and after awhile we are unable to help even if we want. We lose the capacity for empathy and even lose the sense that we need empathy. We become more easily afraid. It becomes easier to do nothing rather than do something. It's easier to stay in our social media silos than it is to get involved in our community.

The great thirteenth century theologian St. Thomas Aquinas said that fear is a contraction of the heart. When we are afraid, we withdraw into ourselves to conserve what strength and energy we have. Aquinas used the Greek term *systole*, from which we get our English word *systolic*, which refers to the contracting of the heart muscle as it pumps blood. Fear causes a contracting of the heart. We withdraw inward, build walls, hunker down, and as Aquinas said, “We extend

ourselves to fewer things” (see Scott Bader-Saye *Following Jesus in a Culture of Fear*, p. 28).

Which is exactly what the people of Israel did. They hunkered down for the next forty years. Their hearts shriveled, contracted. They wandered in the wilderness but what we know is that they set up a kind of base camp there at Kadesh Barnea and would go in and out of there. For forty years they were within sight of where they were called to be but refused to go. God said that the generation who refused to go over to the Promised Land would need to die out from their heart troubles, and those who were youth and children would be the ones to grow up into the generation who would go over.

William Sloane Coffin said, “There is no smaller package in all the world than that of a person [sic] all wrapped up in himself or herself.” Well, the same holds true of a town and of a church. We can shrivel our hearts, contract into ourselves, and refuse the future, ignore others and ignore God.

We live in a time and a region of the country that is full of fear. Our local public schools have a bond election coming up Nov. 6 to build new school facilities and improve old ones. There is this old fear-filled “Naca-nowhere” mentality, another version of the grasshopper mentality, that says we do not need the bond, we do not need new school facilities, and many who say, “Well I’m okay with the milk part, but I don’t believe in honey,” so I’m voting against the whole thing.

I know that I’m preaching to the choir here at Austin Heights. For fifty years you have demonstrated courage and faith and refused to withdraw into yourselves

because of fear. You have always been highly involved in local public education – everything from teaching to administration to serving on the school board. We believe in public education. We believe strongly that all of the children in this town are “our” children.

Meanwhile, there are forces in this state, strong forces that want to see public education fail, just like they want to see public hospitals fail. So they refuse Medicaid expansion for the state, federal money already appropriated to help people in poverty and which would dramatically help fund our local public hospital. And likewise, they would like to privatize all of our schools. Let the public schools fail, don’t fund them, let them shrivel on the vine, and then have big corporations take over. The Texas public school economy is worth \$30 billion a year. That’s a lot of money these corporations would like to get their hands on.

The only counter to these privatizers and moneymakers is for us to be involved. Volunteer, show up, and vote and encourage others to vote.

More than that, this story from the book of Numbers is a reminder of the many ways we may prefer not to listen to God and not trust God and not trust each other. We know that not every cause is the call of God and not every cause does God call us to specifically join. And I know we’re tired.

But!

Austin Heights – We do not give up and we do not give in! We do not give into racism and white supremacy. We are learning more and more how to speak up and speak out on misogyny. We don’t give up on working on LGBTQ concerns.

We do not give up on working for climate justice and caring for God's creation. We do not give up on mercy and love and grace, justice and peace. We do not give up raising our children in these ways because we believe they are God's way. And we do not give up because if we cannot get into the Promised Land, our children will.

Sojourner Truth reminds us, "Austin Heights, is God dead?"

No, God is alive! The Living God calls us to join in making history.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.