

### **Sermon 3/15: Numbers 14: 1-10, 26-35**

To be honest, I've been more than a little afraid this week, and I'm guessing I'm not alone. Because of that fear I don't think I've ever had so much sympathy for the people of Israel in the Book of Numbers as I have had this week. In the past I've read this account and laughed at them for refusing to trust God to lead them into the promised land, after he had already led them out of slavery in Egypt, through the Red Sea and miraculously given them water and food in the desert. I laughed at how they were so afraid of the future, that they just stayed where they were not moving forward for 40 years, too scared to face the challenges before them.

I'm not laughing so much anymore, as I face a future that makes me frightened because I don't know how this COVID-19 situation will play out. I'm now looking at the future and looking at giant challenges, and I don't want to step into that future. And it is interesting that, in the midst of my fear, I've noticed something in this passage I never had before. I noticed that when Joshua and Caleb, the only two scouts in favor of going into the promised, rebuff the other scouts who want turn tail and run, they don't dispute their assertions that the challenges are formidable, that the people are strong, tall and mighty, their cities large and incredibly well fortified. They don't refute their assertions that the challenges are gigantic, for indeed archeological evidence shows that the walls surrounding Canaanite cities were often 30-50 feet high and 15ft thick! No, they don't refute the fact that the challenges are big, but what they proclaim to the people is that we should remember that our God is greater than those challenges. They say that the people should not be measuring the height of the walls against themselves, but against the power of their God. They remind the people that the land is good, just as God has promised, and that God has promised to give them this good land, and he is greater than any foe they might face.

They preach a message that acknowledges how great the obstacles are, but one that also seeks to remind the people that they are God's people and that their God is greater than any obstacle. Sadly, the other scouts (the ones who want to turn back) sow a different message among the people, a message that only focuses on the obstacles out there and ignores the fundamental fact that they are no ordinary people dependent on their own strength, but rather they are God's people dependent on his strength. The message of these scouts who want to abandon the promised land leads the people to forget who they are, to grumble against Moses and God, to impute evil motives to God himself, to wish they would just die in the wilderness, and then in their panic they rebel against Moses and God, deciding to appoint new leaders to take them back to Egypt. In their panic, they do what panicked people often do (like the person in the horror movie that decides the creepy shed in the best place to hide); they make really bad and foolish decisions. In this case they decide they are better off trusting the Egyptians to keep them safe, you know the ones who enslaved them, killed their baby boys and were last seen trying to kill them with an army of chariots, rather than trusting in the God who had proved himself faithful time and time again. In their fear they forgot who their God was, and they forgot who they were as God's people, and as a result all those over 20 years of age (besides Joshua and Caleb) never entered the promised land.

As I think of Israel forgetting who they are, I think of a movie that some of us just watched, The Lion King. In the movie the young lion Simba should be the king after his father Mufasa dies, but he is too full of shame and fear to take the throne, so he runs away and lives for years away from his responsibilities, until the ghost of his father comes to him and says: "Remember who you are, you are my son and the one true king." The Israelites forgot who they were in the midst of the

desert and gave into fear. Let us not do the same. They forgot they were God's people called to trust in Almighty God. Let us never forget that we are God's people, and that our God is greater than whatever we might fear, and let us remember that as God's people we are those called to love one another at all times. And that means out of our love for one another we do things like stay home when we are sick and practice good hand hygiene to protect the most vulnerable among us. We also out of our love for one another call those who are isolated and lonely because of concerns about the virus. Out of love we also think about those effected economically by the closure of Colgate and how our church can help them.

If we remember that we are a people who trust in God in the face of obstacles we will be fine. If we forget who we are, we will end up like the Israelites and bring upon ourselves the very evils that we fear. If we panic like them (for instance by buying 168 rolls of toilet paper for ourselves) we will look like fools. However, let us also remember that the positive path preached by Caleb and Joshua was not one of pretending the obstacles and the fear weren't there, but one of knowing that these obstacle could be overcome if the people just remembered who they were as God's people and how great there God was.

So, what I am advocating is not that we put our heads in the sand and think that what is happening is no big deal, but rather (like Joshua and Caleb) we should acknowledge that there are challenges before us, but still have great hope within us because we know who we are and who God is. We do not want to be fools and panic, but we also don't want to be fools by pretending the challenges aren't there. As I say this I think of my two dogs, Charlee and Tessie. They look very similar, but Charlee is a Plott Hound (bred to hunt while boar and bear), while Tessie is a terrier (bred to kill vermin, i.e. mice, rats and the like). I've

noticed that they have two very different approaches to life. Tessie will run and jump toward anything that moves and any sound she hears. She even jumped up into the air one time when she heard an airplane coming into town for family weekend. I suppose this throw caution to the wind approach works fine when you are hunting little vermin that are much weaker than you. However, Charlee, who was bred to go on a hunt for boar and bear, has a rather different approach. When she hears a sound or sees some movement she looks and tries to figure out what it is first. She is more cautious and circumspect, which is probably a good idea when what you are tracking is a bear and not a mouse.

I think we need to be honest that what we are dealing with right now is a bear from a physical health standpoint, from a psychological anxiety inducing standpoint, from an economic standpoint, I could go on. So, we need to be cautious and serious in our approach. However, we can also be confident that if we do not forget who we are as God's people, and if we remember that we are people called to love and called to trust in our God who is bigger than any bear, then we will not just make it through a frightening future, but we will be the very ones reflecting the light of God's hope into what will be a difficult time for many.

It's OK to be scared and worried, it's foolish not to have some trepidation when a bear is around. Even Joshua, as brave as he was in today's reading by standing up and proclaiming the truth before a large group of people who wanted to do the opposite of what he was saying, even he had to be reminded many times elsewhere (by Moses and by God) to be strong and courageous. You don't need to be told that over and over again if you aren't struggling with fear. We will probably all struggle with fear and worry in the coming days, but let us all remember that in the face of times of fear and worry that we are called to be those who share the love of God with others, and that our God is

greater even than such a time as this. In this spirit let us choose to step out with God into the new land of the future, as we turn to him in a word of prayer.

Let us Pray: Heavenly Father, we pray that you would help us to step out into an uncertain, changeable and often frightening future in faith. Help us to remember that you are greater than any challenges we might face in the future, and help us to heed your call to be your people sharing your love and hope both now and into the future. And we pray for this in the name of him who holds the future in his hands, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.