

“Staring Down Your Giants”

Date; September 20, 2020

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Numbers 13:1-3, 17-20, 25-32; 14:7-9; Philippians 4:5-7

Occasion: Unafraid, series

Themes: Fear, courage, faith

The Bible is filled with stories of people whose fears got the best of them. One of the most fascinating is recorded in the book of Numbers, chapters 13 and 14. Let me set the stage for you. You will remember how God used Moses to liberate God’s people from hundreds of years of slavery in Egypt. Pharaoh’s army, arguably the most powerful of the time, had just been destroyed by God’s miraculous intervention.

Once liberated, Moses then cast a vision of a Promised Land for these former slaves, a land “flowing with milk and honey.” God promised to give it to his people. The land of Canaan, the Promised Land, lay north of Sinai, where the freed slaves now camped.

They were ready to take possession of God’s promise. There’s a lesson for us in what came next. Before entering the land, the Israelites sent 12 spies, who for 40 days explored the area and pondered how they would expel the nations that currently inhabited this land, promised by God to their ancestor Abraham, hundreds of years before.

Upon returning, two of the spies said, in effect, “It’s all there, just like God promised. And it’s awesome! God is with us – let’s go get it!” But then the other 10 spies spoke up. “We can’t go and take the land,” they said. “The city walls are strong, the people are even stronger. They look like giants of old, and we look like insects, mere grasshoppers compared to them!”

And with that, the same people who had witnessed God’s deliverance from the mighty Egyptians began to weep and suggest it was time to give

up. Some even argued they should go back to Egypt and return to a life of slavery! Can you believe that? In the end, the Israelites did *not* go back to slavery in Egypt. But they did remain camped in the desert in and around Kadesh Barnea – for the next 38 years!

It wasn't until the next generation arose that the children of Israel finally entered the Promised Land. Can you imagine, for 38 years they remain paralyzed by fear just a mile from the Promised Land?!

This is a great story – because it paints a picture of how fear works in us. We may start out with a vision of the Promised Land – our dream of what the future or the present is supposed to look like – but then we begin to think about the risks and the dangers involved. Soon, all we can see are the obstacles, risks and dangers. We freeze in our tracks. We may tell ourselves, “I could never do that. I don't have what it takes. What if I fail?”

But what if – just like the story of the Israelites – the obstacles in front of us only *appear* to be more powerful than they really are? Often times, the dangers and things we fear are not really as powerful as we imagine them to be. The obstacles, dangers and threats *seem* like giants, and we mere grasshoppers. In our minds we have blown them up in size.

So many of us live our entire lives paralyzed by fear, just a mile from the Promised Land. This can be true for organizations as well as individuals. How many churches stay stuck in the same old routine, because the challenges seem so great and the people feel so inadequate. “We've never done it like that before. Do we have enough money? Do we have anyone who can do that? I vote “no” because I think the project is too big.”

However, if you look at any successful person, however you define success, you will find someone who knew fear. They have faced their share

of giants. They've felt like turning back and giving up. So, what helped them to succeed where others failed? They stared down their giants. They faced their fears head-on. They believed, or at least hoped, the giants weren't really giants after all. They took a realistic view of the risks and the dangers involved and believed there was a *reasonable* chance they could overcome them.

When fear begins to control us, it's often because we have "catastrophized" our current situation. In other words, we are seeing things as worse than they really are, and we're assuming they will never get any better. Which, if you think about it, is a kind of *faith in reverse*: of all the possible outcomes and without knowing all of the facts, you are choosing to believe the *worst* and instead of the best.

This kind of reverse faith leads to pessimism, hopelessness and despair. For those Israelites camped in the desert, the alternative to faith was paralysis. They chose not to do anything because they feared the worst possible outcome. For 38 years they waited, a mile from the Promised Land.

Listen, 12 spies had been sent out to explore the land and bring back a report. Ten of them were terrified and frightened the people. But two of them, Caleb and Joshua, offered a different perspective. Listen to what they said after hearing the report of the other spies, (Number 14:7-9)

"The land we crossed through to explore is an exceptionally good land. If the Lord is pleased with us, he'll bring us into this land and give it to us. It's a land full of milk and honey. Only don't rebel against the Lord and be afraid of the people of the land. They are *our* prey. Their defense has deserted them, but the Lord is with us. So *don't* be afraid of them."

Did you catch that last line? “The Lord is with us. So don’t be afraid of them.” For the Israelites who had just seen God deliver them from the Egyptians, their confidence and trust in God should have changed their perspective on the giants in the land of Canaan. But their fear got the best of them. However, if they had trusted God, they would have looked at the Canaanites and understood that, when compared to the God who parted the Red Sea, the Canaanites were the ones who looked like grasshoppers!

Caleb and Joshua saw the situation from an entirely different vantage point than the other ten spies. They weren’t looking at how intimidating the so-called giants looked. They were acting in faith on God’s promises to be with them. God’s presence and power radically changed how they faced their fears.

That promise is repeated over and over again throughout the Bible to God’s people. Listen to what the prophet Isaiah said several hundred years after this event: “Don’t fear, because I am with you; don’t be afraid, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, I will surely help you; I will hold you with my righteous strong hand.” (Is. 41:10)

Here is the lesson for you and me. God knows we will face challenges and at times we will experience fear. And so God gives us a promise – that God is with us and will empower us to get through this challenge.

I told you last week, we would be offering different spiritual disciplines to help us overcome our fears. Let me offer this one today. I believe that what God said in other times, God intends for us to hear and believe today. I trust that what God said to his people in the past, God wants me to hear now.

So, we can take the promises of God and turn them into prayer. This is a spiritual discipline called “praying the scriptures.” We take the promises of God and turn them into a conversation with the Lord. For example, the passage from Isaiah I quoted a little bit ago, I might pray it like this:

“God, I hear you tell me not to be afraid. But I’ll be honest. I’ve got some fear about this situation. God, I hear your reminder that you are with me, always. Thank you, God for your faithful presence. Help me to trust and not be afraid. You are my God. Yes, Lord, you are my strength. Help me Lord; hold me and never let me go. Amen.”

The prayer draws its words from scripture. It’s a common practice that helps to bring us peace and to calm our fears. People have been doing this for generations. Maybe you could try praying this prayer, written by King David. Psalm 56:3-4:

“Whenever I am afraid, I put my trust in you, in God, whose word I praise. I trust in God; I won’t be afraid. What can mere flesh do to me?”

O, my friends, we can focus our imagination on all the things that *might* happen, and by inflating the threats or obstacles we face, we can turn them into giants.

Or, we can focus our imagination on the presence of God – through prayer, or singing hymns, or sharing our struggles with close friends – and by doing so we trust that we will sense God’s presence and power.

When we stare down our giants and face our fears, and put our trust in Almighty God – not in ourselves, but in *His* power – we can begin to live with courage and hope. Amen.

This sermon borrows heavily from the book: *Unafraid: Living with Courage and Hope in Uncertain Times*, by Adam Hamilton. New York: Convergent Books, 2018, pp. 19-39.