

Trinity United Methodist Church

September 27, 2020

“Report of the Spies”

Pastor Dan Elmore

Scripture: Numbers 13:26-33 (NIV)

26 They came back to Moses and Aaron and the whole Israelite community at Kadesh in the Desert of Paran. There they reported to them and to the whole assembly and showed them the fruit of the land. **27** They gave Moses this account: “We went into the land to which you sent us, and it does flow with milk and honey! Here is its fruit. **28** But the people who live there are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large. We even saw descendants of Anak there. **29** The Amalekites live in the Negev; the Hittites, Jebusites and Amorites live in the hill country; and the Canaanites live near the sea and along the Jordan.” **30** Then Caleb silenced the people before Moses and said, “We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it.” **31** But the men who had gone up with him said, “We can’t attack those people; they are stronger than we are.” **32** And they spread among the Israelites a bad report about the land they had explored. They said, “The land we explored devours those living in it. All the people we saw there are of great size. **33** We saw the Nephilim there (the descendants of Anak come from the Nephilim). We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them.”

Sermon

Would you pray with me? Oh Lord, open our ears and our hearts. Let us hear what we need to hear and show us what we need to do to become more faithful disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. In His name we pray, amen.

So we continue journeying through the wilderness with the Israelites. Last week we learned that the wilderness is not always necessarily a bad experience. Wilderness is a time of transformation, a time of change, and there is loss involved in those things, but we’ve learned so far that the wilderness is a time of learning. The wilderness is a time of challenge. And last week we talked about how the wilderness is a time of dependence, where we’re challenged and we learn to depend on God in the ordinary so we can see God in the extraordinary.

If you remember, last week I pointed out that in the Israelites lack of trust in God to provide for their everyday needs such as something to drink and something to eat, in their lack of trust in the ordinary, it led to their inability to trust God in the extraordinary. If they can't trust God in small things, how can they trust God in big things? And we see that in today's reading.

In today's reading, they have come roughly a year and a half by this point in their journey out of Egypt, through the wilderness, heading toward the Promised Land. In the larger account of this section that we read today, they're on the cusp of the Promised Land, and God instructed them to send spies. Go ahead, do it. Test it out. Send spies from every tribe into the Promised Land, into Canaan, and see what it's like. Go up and down and criss-cross it. Bring back evidence of what you find there.

And so the twelve, indeed, went, one from each tribe, into Canaan, into the Promised Land. The evidence they brought back were clusters of grapes, one single grape cluster that was so large that it had to be carried by two people. We don't find those kind of grapes in the produce section these days, do we? It's a little hard to imagine, but that's how fertile the land was.

But. There's always a *but...*, isn't there? And as I like to say, some of these *buts* are bigger than others. This is a pretty big one. In verse 28: "But the people who live there are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large," these spies said. "We even saw descendants of Anak there. The Amalekites live in the Negev," and they list all these others. "And there's all these people that are *foreign* to us, and we can't go there."

So in this account, we find that the wilderness is also a time of doubt. Now, the thing about doubt is that doubt is often thought of, especially among people of faith, as the antithesis of faith. Doubt is often thought of as the opposite of faith. It's one of the reasons why, throughout church history, Doubting Thomas has always gotten a bad rap. If you study the life of the apostle Thomas, he went on to do extraordinary things, but how do we know him? As *Doubting Thomas*, right? Poor guy.

The opposite of faith is not doubt. The opposite of faith is apathy. Not caring to believe to begin with. So doubt itself is not bad. Doubt is an element of fear. It has an element of questioning. But both fear and questioning are how we learn. It's how we grow, especially how we learn to do things. We're scared at first, we might fall down, but we get up there and do it anyway, even as we have our doubts. It's by asking questions that we open ourselves to new possibilities and that we might continue to grow.

Sometimes when I think about my own journey in times of questioning my faith, questioning God, having my own doubts, I'm often drawn back to one of my favorite stories in Genesis of Jacob wrestling with the man at night, who most interpretations say

that Jacob wrestled with God. In that account, Jacob was on his way to be reunited with his brother, Esau. He had tricked Esau out of his birthright. Esau was the older brother, the older twin. Jacob had been a trickster his whole life, and it was now catching up with him. Here he was going to be reuniting with his brother. He sent all his livestock ahead. He sent all of his family ahead. “If the livestock don’t appease him, well, maybe my family can say something to him before he sees me and he wants to kill me.” So in the night before he crosses the river to go meet his brother, he wrestles. And in the wrestling—I know my own wrestling, it’s not just with God, it’s with myself. It’s with the circumstances. It’s with everything. And it’s a part of life.

And what causes doubt, I think, so many times is something that modern psychologists have identified as boiling down to our mindset. Do we operate out of a scarcity mindset, or do we operate out of an abundance mindset? And we see those two mindsets clearly illustrated in the text from Numbers, in the larger chapter especially. As these twelve spies have gone in, ten of them choose the scarcity mindset. “Oh, yeah, it’s a great place. But we can’t go there because of this, because of that, because of this, because of that. And we don’t have the ability to go there.” Only two out of the twelve, Caleb and Joshua, said, “No. We can do this. If God is with us, and because God is with us, we have all that we need to go in this direction that God is leading us.” They had a mindset of abundance, that they had all they needed. And what they might not have had would be provided for them along the way, some way, somehow.

It’s when our minds slip into the scarcity mindset and we focus on what we don’t have--the characteristics that we don’t have, the means that we don’t have—that the question of doubt can come up. The truth is that doubt can lead to scarcity or it can lead to abundance. It’s a choice. It’s a choice that when we choose abundance, when we choose faith in the midst of doubt, it often leads to even greater faith.

Most of us know who Mother Teresa is. It just popped into my head that some of our kids might grow up not knowing who Mother Teresa is. We need to be sure to teach them. Those of us who have been alive for some time certainly know who Mother Teresa is, and all of the press coverage she’s gotten over the years for her work in Calcutta, etc. She is now literally a saint in the Catholic church. But you might remember a number of years ago, after her death, a book of her diary writings was published. And one of the biggest bombshells that came out of that book was that, even as wonderful of a servant of God as Mother Teresa was, how much she struggled with doubt for most of her life. But yet she continued to choose abundance. She continued to serve in faith in the midst of the doubt, and that led to greater faith.

Just because we choose to believe in the midst of doubt, it’s not guaranteed, though. It comes down to a choice. And in the text for today, the people have a choice.

Whose take on the Promised Land will be believed, will be accepted, and will be acted upon?

For us, it's a continual choice day by day, sometimes even moment by moment. The key question is, do we let doubt hold us back, or do we let doubt drive us forward? *Do we let doubt hold us back, or do we let doubt drive us forward?*

In Numbers 14, the next chapter, we read about the people's choice. "Then the whole community began weeping aloud, and they cried all night. Their voices rose in a great chorus of protest against Moses and Aaron." There's that theme again. "If only we had died in Egypt! Or even here in the wilderness," this time they add. They complained, "Why is the Lord taking us to this country only to have us die in battle? Our wives and our little ones will be carried off as plunder. Wouldn't it be better for us to return to Egypt?" Then they plotted among themselves: "Let's choose a new leader and go back to Egypt." (This is the point in itinerancy where the people start looking for a new pastor.) That was their choice.

And their punishment, we read later on in the account, was that no one 20 or older would get to see the promise fulfilled. No one who had been old enough to witness the plagues in Egypt and the ways that God delivered them would be allowed to see the promise fulfilled as they would march into Canaan. All except Caleb and Joshua. Here they were, one and a half years into the journey, on the cusp of the promise and the Promised Land, and they chose to let doubt and the scarcity hold them back. One and a half years into this journey. How long was the journey total? Forty years, right? And we usually say that they "wandered" through the wilderness for 40 years. And whenever I thought about that, I pictured them literally moving about constantly for 40 years. But a closer study of the text reveals that we actually don't know what happened for 37 years after this account. The text is silent as to their whereabouts for 37 years. They might have been wandering around in circles. They might have been sitting still. But the point is that in this journey of the people of God, where we've heard about so many miracles and ways that God has provided through them and in spite of them and for them for 37 years, we hear almost *nothing* from the people of God. We do hear some things. We are reminded of the grumbling and complaining that's already happened. We're told again of when Moses struck the rock, when manna and quail were provided. And we're told that they—guess what—grumbled and complained even more.

What kind of legacy did those people leave us? That the only thing we know of them for 37 years after they chose to let doubt hold them back is more grumbling and complaining? What kind of legacy do we want to leave?

We all know people that have been thrust into wilderness experiences. Experiences of cancer and illness and the death of loved ones, especially a child. The

loss of a job, divorce, etc. And those people that might come to our mind in this moment that we know who are going and have gone through wilderness experiences, we likely also know their doubts, their questions that they have asked. And let's face it, we know our own as well. We know who chose to push through it, to trust in the midst of doubt. Whose doubt drove them forward through their wilderness into the promises of God that were awaiting them. And at the same time, we know who allowed doubt to hold them back and who really didn't do much more but grumble and complain.

Friends, we undoubtedly have doubts in this current multi-layered wilderness. So what's our choice? And remember that apathy is actually the absence of faith. We wrestle with our doubts, as Jacob wrestled at night. It's okay. It means that we're still engaged with God. It means that we still care. May God grant us grace. God does grant us the grace to choose differently. He doesn't punish us with one fell swoop: "That's it. You're going to be silent other than grumbling and complaining for 37 years. I'm done with you." Thankfully, through Jesus, God offers grace, so that if that has been our choice up to this point, to let our doubts hold us back, God gives us the grace to choose differently now. To choose differently, to choose the better way day by day, moment by moment.

And the best news of it is by our choosing to move forward in our doubts and behave accordingly, we are able to give testimony in these wilderness times to the faithfulness of our God in the ordinary and in the extraordinary. That's the kind of legacy I want us to leave.

Thanks be to God.

Closing Prayer