

“Joshua and Caleb”

Numbers 13:25–14:4

It takes courage to live as God’s people, one people

What do we do when we face challenges, big challenges, in life? Do we shrink away, forgetting that God is with in all things? Or do we press on, confident that, in the end, all will be well?

Turning back

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.

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. But, as at Mt. Sinai, Moses intervenes on the people’s behalf and persuades God to go forward with these rebellious people. Dennis Olson writes:

A second theme in the spy story is the forgiveness of God through the intercession of Moses. Moses’ appeal to God’s “steadfast love” (Hebrew *hesed*) was an appeal to God’s steadfast loyalty and commitment to the promises God made to Israel (Sakenfeld, “The Problem of Divine Forgiveness in Numbers 14”). In the process, Moses denied himself and the possible glory of becoming a great nation. Instead, Moses used his uniquely intimate relationship with God to pray for forgiveness for the people (14:12–19). Similarly, the apostle Paul in Romans 8 assures his readers that nothing in all creation “will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:39). And the basis for that assurance of God’s *hesed* or steadfast love is in the intercession of Jesus “who died, yes, who was



raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us" (Rom. 8:34). Like Moses, Jesus denied himself and his own glory for the sake of others through his suffering and death (Phil. 2:1–11).¹

However, all will not be as it was. 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. For forty years! 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 descendants 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 return² 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?

Three decisions

In his year-long Bible study, *The Grand Sweep*, Ellsworth Kalas draws our attention to three decisions that the Israelites make after leaving Mt. Sinai for the Promised Land.

First, the Israelites make the decision to complain. Abraham Lincoln once observed that people are about as happy as they make up their minds to be. I think he was right. We can wake up each morning and decide whether we are going to have a positive outlook that day or a negative one. Yes, the Israelites were anxious and scared as they traveled through the Sinai wilderness, but they could have decided to swallow their grumbling and confidently embrace God's promises.

Second, the Israelites decided to criticize, directing their insecurities and anxieties at Moses. In Numbers 12, Aaron, Moses' brother, and Miriam, Moses' sister, oppose Moses. "What makes him so special," they think to themselves. But it was God who made Moses special and God's anger "burned hot against" Aaron and Miriam for their arrogance. Like complaining, criticizing hardly seems like a decision. Yet, we are defined by many such decisions we make every day. Will we hold our tongue or will we lash out? Will we criticize or will we support?

Third, the Israelites decided to retreat. This one is easier to understand as a decision. Would they trust God and enter Canaan despite the fears of their spies or would they rely on their own judgment and turn back? But

¹ Dennis T. Olson, *Numbers, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1996), 87.

² The 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.

the grumbling beget the criticizing and the criticizing beget the retreat. Our own lives are like this. Lots of wrong “little” decisions lead inexorably to a wrong “big” decision. *Do we really think that we can deny God in the small stuff of our lives and yet trust God in the big stuff?* Wise Christians know that the mature Christian life is a life led fully in God’s presence, in the small decisions as well as the big ones.

They faced decisions; we face decisions. The decisions—the choices—we make every day sum up our lives, hopefully lives that are filled with the awareness of God’s presence.

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.

Of course, 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.
