

October 14, 2018

The National Presbyterian Church

## **The Story: Courage to Stand Alone**

Numbers 13:1-3, 17-21, 25-28, 30-33, 14:1-9

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In our Sermons this fall and through the winter we're looking at stories of the Bible as they develop chronologically, and we're doing so with the help of a book called "The Story." We come this morning to Chapter 6, and to some incidents described in the biblical Book of Numbers

**Last week** we saw how God provided "*rules for the game of life*" for his people in the form of the Ten Commandments. God has delivered them from slavery – an act of sheer grace, unearned favor, and now at Mt. Sinai in the desert God wants them to know the shape of the good life – the best life – both for individuals and communities. And the Ten Commandments, not only given to Moses and Israel long ago, but reinforced and amplified by Jesus himself, provide the framework for that life: back then, and NOW for us as well!

But having said that, the fact is that "possessing and knowing" the commandments is one thing; actually keeping the commandments – living by them and trusting in the God of the commandments, is another. And this becomes a central problem for the Israelites (as it is for us too). Our chapter in "The Story" puts it like this in its opening summary:

For more than a year, Israel camped at Mount Sinai.  
Every day they saw evidence of God's reality and power.  
They were saved from their idolatry, building the tabernacle and seeing God's presence fill it. After all this, one would think they would walk faithfully before the Lord. But sadly, that is not what happened.  
Following hard on the heels of their departure from Sinai, Israel descended into constant grumbling. They went back and forth between complaining about their circumstances and asking God to rescue them from their struggles.  
God was not very tolerant of their ungrateful rabble-rousing and constant complaints. Even worse (as they stood on the edge of the Promised Land) the people refused to step forward in faith and trust God would lead them. When the Lord called them to take the land through wars of conquests, they flatly refused.  
And as a result, an entire generation was condemned to death in the desert.

There's a lot said here, but two things emerge, both from our passage and from the surrounding passages not read today, and that I would like us to focus on this morning.

**First** (we'll come to it second!)

- God is not pleased *when we grumble* about life's problems
- God is not pleased *when we lack courage* to grasp and take hold of "the life God wants for us."

**Second** (we'll look at 1<sup>st</sup>)

Many things happen – both in the Book of Numbers from which we've just read and in some of the surrounding books of the Old Testament – which are among the hardest parts of the Bible to understand.

There are passages, for example, where God calls his people not only to inherit the Promised Land but to destroy the inhabitants: men, women, children, animals – the lot! (In Hebrew the word is “*cherem*” = *devote to destruction*).

**Let me share two brief words about these difficulties:**

The first word has to do with How we interpret the Bible. As Presbyterians, we believe that the whole of the Bible, both the Old Testament and the New Testament – has been given to us by God for our benefit. But what we don't believe is that every part of the Bible carries the same authority to be implemented in our lives as all the others. In particular, we give priority to the story of Jesus, who becomes “the lens” or the light through which we read the rest of the book.

So, on one occasion, for example (Matt. 13:24-30), Jesus tells a story about some people who want to bring down fire and brimstone (*just like the Old Testament*) on God's enemies – and wipe them out! And through the story, Jesus tells them bluntly to back off: as if to say, “This is not your responsibility; leave it for God, and for God's ultimate judgment.

Because when we as humans seek to be the arm of God to bring ultimate justice to the earth (not a “certain” justice, but “ultimate” justice), it almost always has a way of turning bad: of doing more harm than good

So Jesus is the lens or standard by which we live. And the main weapon he gives to us by which we are to be his agents of his justice in the world is to be LOVE, not violence or mass destruction. So there's no room in our passages for us to become “Christians Jihadists”!

So that's first thing: in the complicated passages, the lens or filter we use is Jesus.

**Though, in the second place, that doesn't resolve everything.** Because, even when our primary weapon is love, things can get complicated and messy –especially when we function not just as servants of Jesus, but as servants of the State, the nation we belong to.

Or, to put it another way, Presbyterians have never believed that the Bible, including Jesus, teaches pacifism (*perhaps the leading theologian in our tradition here is from the early and mid-twentieth century: Reinhold Niebuhr*). To be sure: “Peace” is the ultimate goal: the ending of war, the laying down of arms (which is the vision of Isaiah 9 and 11). But the right of the State to use force if necessary in order to enforce laws and promote justice is not questioned – by Jesus (who does not tell a soldier with great faith to lay down his arms) or the rest of the Bible (see Romans 13).

And sometimes as Christians – as many of you know by experience, we are to play our part in the state, serving both God, and nation – where the way of love (for nations that claim a Christian base) must always be the first option, but, sadly, may not be the last.

So the ethical dilemmas multiply – not just for people long ago in the Old Testament, but even for us today. And this is especially true in periods of history when evil is rampant, when we find ourselves in a brutal world; a dog-eat-dog world; a take-no-prisoners world; a life-is-cheap world – where the cancer of evil is beyond comprehension or reason. Like the world of the Nazis, or of ISIS, OR, as I believe, the dangerous and lawless world that Moses and his people were entering in our story today as they wandered through the desert on their way to the promised land, when

God took their accountability so seriously and when the utter destruction of others (though rarely, if ever, accomplished, by the way) was called for.

So, some of stories of Scripture – especially in the passages surrounding our reading are difficult, and need careful reflection. **But not all of them are this way.** In fact, some are pretty straightforward, down-to-earth, and clear, including the message from our Scripture today that the temptation for human beings to grumble and to allow fear and the opinion of others to dictate their actions is huge; and God is *not* pleased when we give in!

Or let me put it like this: in our story,

- the people of Israel have seen the hand of God delivering them from slavery, delivering them from a powerful enemy, the Egyptians, giving them a great leader in Moses, giving them a sublime law at Sinai, providing for their sustenance in the middle of nowhere
- and yet, when anything seems to go wrong just a little bit (boring food, not much water, a few delays here and there, and now – an uncertain future lying before them with significant obstacles in the way)

they grumble and whine and allow fear to win the day. And the fear spreads like wild-fire to others.

Let me read part of Numbers (13:1-4) again:

“We are not able to go up against this people,

- for they are stronger than we are.
- the land that we have gone through as spies is a land that devours its inhabitants.
- all the people we saw in it are of great size: we felt as if we were grasshoppers compared to them.”

Then all the congregation raised a loud cry, and the people wept that night. And all the Israelites complained against their leaders, Moses and Aaron;

the whole congregation said to them, “Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! Why is the Lord bringing us into this land to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become booty; would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?” So they said to one another, “Let us choose a captain, and go back . . .”

From their point of view, this was the only way to think, and be real. Except that two of their number disagreed, and didn’t join in: Joshua and Caleb –who spoke up, as if to say to all the people, “Wait a minute: there’s another way of looking at this. The cup’s not half empty, but half full.” In Numbers 13 again:

“The land that we went through as spies is an exceedingly good land.

If the Lord is pleased with us, *he will bring us* into this land, and give it to us, a land that flows with milk and honey. Only, do not rebel against the Lord, and do not fear the people of the land.

**There are two kinds of people in this world:**

- People for whom the cup is half full – who believe that setbacks are par from the course (even for the faithful).

And, then

- People for whom the cup is half empty – who murmur and grumble, and allow the negative to control them: never quite accepting that setbacks are part of life, or believing that seeking resolutions, not grumbling is God’s way

### **There are two kinds of people in the world**

- Those who stand up for what is right – no matter what others say  
And then
- Those who allow the mob, the opinions of others, to control them

### **There are two kinds of people in the world**

- The Caleb's and the Joshua's of the world
- and "the rest."

AND THE CHOICE IS OURS: which kind will we be?

Fortunately, there are many characters in history who fall on the good side of this divide, who neither grumble, nor go along with the crowd: and we can learn a lot from them.

*Of all the people I've met who could choose to grumble – but didn't*, my friend (I'll call her) Sarah, is the one who comes to mind first.

- Her husband in his sleep, fell from a hotel balcony in Paris, and was confined to a wheel chair the rest of his life.
- Her older son was an alcoholic
- Her younger son fell from the scaffold at a construction site and had serious brain damage.

So here she was, in this inescapable situation: morning, noon, and night. But what I remember is her feistiness, her faith, and her smile, her encouragement, and the gifts she made time to make – for the church and for me and my children

*And as for those who've stood up for what is right against the crowd?* – well there are many to learn from there too: from Dietrich Bonhoeffer in the church in Germany in WWII; to Nelson Mandela in South Africa; or Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr in the United States.

Though the simplest story I remember about resisting the crowd (seeming friends) in order to do what was right, is one of the many told about President Lincoln. He was in his early twenties, and at that time – was a captain in the militia during a skirmish called the Black Hawk War. An eye witness, friend of Lincoln's, William ("Slick Bill") Greene – tells the story like this

One day, "an old Indian came to camp and delivered himself up, showing us an old paper written by (General) Lewis Cass, stating that the Indian was a good and true man.

Many of the men in the militia (believing that the paper was a forgery) said, *'we have come out to fight the Indians and by God we intend to do so.'*

Mr. Lincoln, however, stood up, and got between the Indian and the outraged men, saying: *'Men this must not be done; he must not be shot and killed by us.'*

Some of the men said to Mr. Lincoln – 'This is cowardly on your part Lincoln – This man is a spy.'

But Lincoln held his ground, standing between the Indian and the vengeance of the outraged soldiers... and challenging them by saying, *'If any man thinks I am a coward let him test it, Choose your weapons,'*

AND Greene concludes:

"This soon put to silence quickly all the charges of cowardice in Lincoln."  
(see Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis, ed., Herndon's Informants, Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998, 18-19).

To be sure, the role of religion and faith in Lincoln's life is notoriously difficult to discern – so we've no clue how much this courage had to do with his faith and trust in God.

**BUT in our own passage in Numbers 13 and 14** the motivation for the actions of the two heroes, Caleb and Joshua, *is not hard to discern at all*:

*It wasn't that* they ignored the problems of life, or weren't attune to the opinions of others. *It was just that* above all else, they saw and believed in another side to the coin.

- They saw GOD: for them God was real. And while God was clearly a judge not to be messed with – a god who took their choices seriously – God was also “the Good and Gracious God” of the Exodus, who was always “FOR” them; passionate about delivering people from all kinds of slavery, and quite capable of giving them the strength and wisdom needed to accomplish his will.

And so they held their ground. They didn't grumble or murmur, but stood firm against the crowd for what was right: **JUST AS GOD'S SERVANTS, YOU AND ME INCLUDED, ARE ALWAYS CALLED TO DO.**

**Says God to Moses (Exodus 14:13, 14)**

“Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today<sup>14</sup>The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.”

**Says God to Joshua (Deuteronomy 31:6)**

Be strong and bold; have no fear or dread of them, because it is the Lord your God who goes with you; he will not fail you or forsake you.”

**Says the Psalmist to God in prayer (Psalm 27:1-4)**

The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?

The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?

When I am afraid, I put my trust in you what can flesh do to me?

**Says God through (Isaiah 41:10)**

Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God;

I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.

**Says God through the Apostle Paul**

**In Romans 8:15** – For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption.

Or in Philippians 4:13 –I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

Or in 2 Timothy 1:7 – God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-control.

**OR just as Jesus says to all of us:** FEAR NOT, little flock, It is the Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom (Luke 12:32)

TRUST THIS GOOD NEWS, based on the knowledge of the goodness of God in a truly difficult world and find God's best life for your life.

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