

## Giants and Grasshoppers

Numbers 13:1-14:10

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If ever a biblical story sounded Presbyterian, it's this one. Pastor Moses recruits a dozen elders to serve on a task force. He spells out their mission with strict clarity: "Spy out the land of Canaan." The strategy is right out of a textbook on organizational development: "Go up there and get the facts. Are the people weak or strong? Are they few or many? Is the soil good or bad? Are the towns camps or strongholds? Are the hills wooded or barren? Are the crops abundant or few? And, while you're at it, bring back a few samples to taste and measure."

With typical Presbyterian vigor, the task force completes its job in less than six weeks, and they bring back both good news and bad news. "First, the good news: the land flows with milk and honey. It took two of us to carry back a single cluster of grapes. And now the bad news: if you think the grapes are big, wait till you see the sons of Anak, the long-necked ones. There are giants in the land, and they live in heavily fortified cities."

Then, not unlike Presbyterians, the task force splits, ten to two, and they bring in a minority and a majority report. The minority report is full of faith. It says, in effect, "Yes, there are problems ahead, battles to be fought, cities to be conquered, a price to pay." Caleb and Joshua (the authors of the minority report) are not blind to the military prowess of Canaan. But, they say, "Let us go up at once and occupy it, for we are well able to overcome it." (13:30) By contrast, the majority report is full of fear. "Yes," the other ten reply, "the land is beautiful and it would be wonderful to live there. But there is no way we can conquer the giants in the land; we seemed like grasshoppers in comparison."

And the majority report prevailed. Fear so gripped the people that they tried to impeach Moses: "Let us choose a captain, and go back to Egypt." (14:4) They even blamed God: "Why is the Lord bringing us into this land to fall by the sword?" (14:3) These are the people whom God emancipated only a few months earlier. These are the people who, without launching a single arrow, witnessed God defeat the Egyptian cavalry at the Red Sea. These are the people whom God fed with manna and refreshed with water out of solid rock, yet in spite of all that God had done for them, they took one look at the giants and cried out for the good old days in Egypt's slave quarters.

The giants are still out there. Yours may be the pressure of balancing the checkbook when there isn't enough money to go around. Or the demands of a single mother caring for a family while working full-time. Or the obligation to care for an aging parent while trying to serve your own family. Or the threat of job loss or transfer. Or the fear of debilitating illness, or a falling out with a good friend, or a pending lawsuit. If we could canvass this congregation right now we might be smothered under the burdens you carry. They are giants and they cripple us with fear.

And fear always distorts our vision. Not by exaggerating the size of the giants: that would be difficult to do. No, fear underestimates our ability to deal with the giants: "To ourselves we seemed like grasshoppers," said the Israeli spies when they saw the giants in the land. They deliberately devalued themselves, as if to say, "We're not big enough, or strong enough, or smart enough, or powerful enough to take on those sons of Anak."

And we do the same. What we fear is not so much the problems out there but our potential in here, because if we take our God-given potential seriously, we must come out of the corner where we huddle in fear. We must come down off the fence which we straddle with indecision. We must stand up and face the giants if we take seriously the gifts God has implanted within us.

Jesus once told a stroke victim, "Friend, your sins are forgiven you." (Luke 5:20) Well, that's very comforting to hear, but it didn't require the paralytic to do anything. Then Jesus said, "Stand up and take your bed and go to your home." Now that required courage. What if, when he attempted to stand, he collapsed and broke an arm or a hip? Far easier to adopt a strategy of failure than risk even greater failure by taking on the giant of his paralysis. Far easier to stay prone and have others take care of him than to get up and get on with life.

But that's not Caleb and Joshua, because they are in touch with the God who calls us into the future. "If the Lord is pleased with us," they tell the people, "he will bring us into this land and give it to us." Well, how much more must the Lord do to prove that he was pleased with them? It's as if they were saying, "Because the Lord IS pleased with us, he WILL bring us into this land." To Caleb and Joshua, God is not only behind and above and within us, but especially out ahead of us, beckoning us forward to a better land. With God, the future is always open. You and I are not shackled to past failures or chained to present circumstances, however binding they may seem at the moment. We have a future, every one of us, because God is out ahead of us, clearing the obstacles and marking the way.

A little over fifty years ago a teenager named Jack was bussing tables in a Pasadena restaurant when he struck up a friendship with a younger boy selling papers out on the corner. When winter brought temperatures down to the forties, Jack noticed that his young friend had no coat or sweater. When he asked why, he learned that the boy's widowed mother was too poor to buy one. So Jack talked his parents into buying a coat for his friend, and before long the younger boy came to live in Jack's home. Jack and his family were Christians, and the young boy soon committed his life to Christ as well. With their encouragement he went on to college and then to graduate school where he earned a Ph.D. He joined the faculty of a Christian college, and in time, Dr. Tom Andrews rose to become dean of the college. Fifty years ago Tom was a shivering newsboy with few prospects and no future, a mere grasshopper facing a giant called poverty. What defeated his giant? Certainly Jack McClane, my wife's older brother, and her parents who took him into their home. But even more, it was Tom's belief that God believed in him, that God had given him gifts he could develop,

intelligence he could foster, and a future he could claim.

And who knows what might happen if you and I put our future in God's hands? Caleb testifies, "If the Lord is pleased with us (and Jesus demonstrates convincingly that the Lord is pleased with us) he will open new doors and bring us into promised lands." Giants there may be, but with such a God at our side, and with such a God standing at all the future intersections we must pass, we are not grasshoppers. We are capable, competent, and fit, and the future is beckoning. So, in the words of Caleb, "Let us go up at once and occupy it, for we are well able to overcome it."