

Who's Afraid of the Giants?

Numbers 13: 17-33

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This is not a sermon about football. Oh, I could talk about why the Patriots have nothing to fear from the New York Giants—and *almost* all of you would be happy with that. But that's not my real purpose this morning. Call it a bait and switch, but on this morning of our annual meeting I want to talk about why we as a church don't need to be afraid of the giants in the land the Lord has given us.

There are times in life—and in the life of a church—when we have to decide whether to go forward or turn back. We cannot see the future. We have reports from people who say they know a little about it, but there is never enough information. It is the nature of the future that there will be surprises and difficulties. Should we take a step forward into the unknown, into a new land, or should we stay with what we know, even if it is a desert?

In Numbers 13 the people of Israel face just such a moment. They are near the border of the land that God promised to Abraham and re-promised to them. They are so close they can literally taste it when its fruit is brought to them. But they are unsure whether they have what it takes to move forward.

Think of what these people have seen. If they doubted the existence of this God of Abraham, Isaac, and Moses, their doubts were removed when that God brought plagues on the Egyptians, brought Pharaoh to his knees, gave them freedom from centuries of slavery, and then did a climactic miracle by bringing them through a body of water which then drowned the pursuing army. They knew what God could do. And yet, when they faced the prospect of actually taking possession of the land that was given to them, something that could not be done without conflict, the majority were paralyzed by fear. Oh, we can't do that. We are too small. We are too poor. We are too old.

Let me lay down a warning here: it is dangerous to read this story in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I don't think we can read this story about the origins of the nation of Israel and apply it to the policies of the modern secular state of Israel, composed largely of Europeans who have taken ownership of land once occupied by various Arab groups. When our own nation was being settled by Europeans, we used stories like this one to say that it was God's will for us to drive out the native peoples and that God would give us victory in war over them. I can't imagine Jesus interpreting this story that way. He tells us to love the natives and the Palestinians. Roger Williams tried to love the natives, because he did not see the English settlement of the land as analogous to the settlement of ancient Israel—and because he saw Jesus' ethics as applying to us rather than the ethics of holy war. How we think about the creation of Israel as a nation in ancient times and whether violence was required to do that are difficult subjects, and I want to set them aside today. What I want us to think about are the attitudes of the people of Israel as they faced the future, and how those attitudes are reflected in the church.

Numbers 13 could have been the chapter that told of a great victory, the story of the nation of newly freed slaves moving into the fertile hill country of Canaan. But instead it is a chapter of what might have been, the story of people who were afraid of giants and felt very

small. It is the story of how, even with the tide of history at their back and the power of God in their sails, God's people gave up.

In Numbers, we are told that the Lord told Moses to send out 12 spies, but in Deuteronomy it says that the people came up with the idea. I'm inclined to believe the latter. Some scholars think the priestly editors of Numbers wanted to have God give the commands. It just seems unlikely to me that God would have appointed a committee to investigate the land that God was giving them. That's what Moses does. He names a committee that is balanced among the tribes because of political considerations.

The committee of 12 has their assignment: gather information about the people and their towns, and about the land itself and the crops. When they come back from the reconnaissance mission, the committee gives a divided report. The majority report starts by saying that the promised land is indeed bountiful; it really is flowing with milk and honey—by which they mean that it had goats and bees. They showed off a huge cluster of grapes, and pomegranates and figs. But then came the bad news, which was the climax of their report: the people we would have to defeat are strong and there are a lot of large fortified towns. Archeologists today say that during this period the hill country was actually very sparsely populated and there were very few towns with fortifications of any kind. It's not the Bible that's lying or exaggerating here; it's the 10 negative committee members.

But they go on to say they even saw giants there—in Hebrew the Nephilim—who were descendents of Anak. Giants? These Nephilim are mentioned once in Genesis with an obscure statement that the sons of god slept with human women and gave birth to Nephilim—which came to be thought of as giants. Did angels mate with humans? If you go to the internet, you won't believe how many crazy references you will find to Nephilim, mostly along the lines of extraterrestrials coming down and mating with humans and giving birth to these oversize spawns. Look, the Bible does not talk about extraterrestrials, period. And I think we can understand that reference to the Nephilim in Genesis as a fragment of early legendary material that got preserved with no explanation. Do I think that there were once giants in the land? Not really. Sure, there was the occasional freak of nature like Goliath, but a race of superhumans? No. One commentator describes the report of the 10 negative scouts this way: "Determined to depress, they characterized Canaan as a Jurassic Park inhabited by humansauruses who made them look like grasshoppers" [Roy Gane, "Caleb's Finest Hour," http://dialogue.adventist.org/articles/13_3_gane_e.htm]

When they first gave the negative report, there was an uproar among the people. Caleb was the only positive-thinking scout with credibility. Joshua was already Moses' second-in-command and of course would give the kind of report Moses wanted. But Caleb quieted the crowd and said, "Let's go at once to take the land. We can certainly conquer it!"

The majority of 10 said, "No way! They are too strong!" They even spread this rumor: "The land will devour anyone who goes to live there." Yikes! And get this: "All the people there were huge. And we even saw giants." Next to them we felt like grasshoppers—and that's what we looked like to them! The response of the whole community in chapter 14 was immediate. They began weeping aloud and they cried all night. They began a great public protest. "We would have been better off dead in Egypt! Why is Yahweh taking us to this terrible place only to have us killed and our wives and children taken captive? Let's replace Moses as our leader and go back to Egypt!" The Lord is so fed up with the people that he is about to destroy them right then and there until Moses intercedes for them. In the end, the Lord lets them live, but he says that these people will never get to enter the promised land; it will have to wait for the next generation.

This is a sad story but not all that unusual. Having been a pastor for a long time now, I'd say having two people side with the pastor to move ahead with a major change and ten people dragging their feet is about average. And I'd say that as a rule, church people are predisposed to believe the message "We can't do it!" And here's the reason. Whenever we talk about the future, which is always unknown to us, we talk as if God is not there, as if we have to make everything happen by ourselves. Think about what the group of ten scouts saw: They saw themselves as grasshoppers; they saw the enemy as giants; and they didn't see God at all.

One preacher calls these people "Vision Vandals." Whenever there is something worth doing, there will be someone to say "It cannot be done." Some people seemed to be wired for caution from childhood. The world, for them, is a scary place. And the fact is that people who are scared of the world tend to gravitate to church. We have to work to set them free of their fears. In the Bible—especially in the gospels—the opposite of faith is fear. "Why are you afraid, you of little faith?" The French hero of World War I, Ferdinand Foch, in writing about unpredictability as the nature of battle, said "There are no hopeless situation; there are only men who have grown hopeless about them."

My son Nathan asked me to read a recent book by one of his favorite humor writers, David Rakoff—who is hilarious, by the way. The title of the book is *Half Empty*. The lead essay is on the power of negative thinking, because the author, a Woody Allenish nebbish, has thought that way all his life. Nathan latched onto the label proposed by a psychologist at Wellesley that some people are "defensive pessimists"—and she says that's a good thing. Their default way of thinking about anything coming up is "this will be a disaster." But their strategy has three steps: (1) have low expectations, (2) envision the worst-case scenario, and (3) come up with a whole menu of remedies for every possible misstep along the way. As Don Marquis put it in 1927, "An optimist is a guy that has never had much experience."

I'm afraid the truth is that we are born with a certain set-point for happiness; there are happy babies and cranky babies. And children go through certain traumas of abuse or separation or failure to connect that make them skeptical in a profound way. Some of us are wired to be risk-takers and some are wired to be cautious. And maybe the ratio is 2 to 10, as the book of Numbers suggests.

But where does faith come into this? I speak as a chronic optimist and risk-taker, so maybe you take what I say with a grain of salt. But it seems to me that faith is not seeing that "I can do all things" but seeing that "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." Not "all things are possible" but "with God, all things are possible." An optimist who thinks everything is going to go his way because he is the smartest person in the room is just as messed up as the pessimist who thinks everything is going to go wrong because he is a lowly worm. The question in Numbers 13 is not "Who are the macho guys, full of self-confidence?" The question is "Where is God in all of this?"

God has promised the people of Israel a future. He has given them this land. It is theirs for the taking. As it turns out, they don't really have to fight much—God scares people away, makes the wall fall down, uses trumpets and broken vases instead of cannon. When the people are afraid and cautious and do not want to attempt to take the land, Yahweh asks Moses a question: "How long will these people treat me with contempt?" When we assume that God is unable or unwilling to keep his promises, we are treating him with contempt. When we make our decisions about the future of the church as if God could be counted on to do nothing—as if everything depended on our own efforts—we are treating God with contempt.

As a church we live as a settlement of the kingdom of God within the land that God has given to us to occupy. With all the connotations that “occupy” has taken on in the past year, it’s interesting that in the NRSV and several translations, Caleb’s hopeful speech is, “Let us go up at once and occupy it, for we are well able to overcome it.” God wants us to occupy Block Island for the kingdom of God, so that the reality of the Jesus life and God’s restored humanity spread everywhere. But we are constantly faced with negative reports. There are giants we are afraid of.

The first giant, I’d say, is Money, with a capital M, the other god Jesus told us we would have to choose *not* to serve if we want to serve him. Whatever it is that God leads us to dream of, whatever needs we see that need to be met, the first response is usually “We can’t afford it.” It never occurs to us that this is treating God with contempt; it is saying “God cannot afford it. God does not have adequate resources to do his work here.” Sometimes it’s not even true that we can’t afford it on our own; we are just so fearful about the future that we are unwilling to risk our reserves. Most of the time the only reason the church can’t afford it is that we individually are so fearful about our personal finances that we are afraid to give money to God that we think we might need for ourselves.

When it comes to money, I am not a cockeyed optimist. I’ve been waving a yellow flag for months about the church’s finances, and I’ve worked hard with the Executive Board to develop a realistic budget. It will require that we do more fundraisers; Eleanor Garrett has already started organizing the Block Island Quilt project; Cindy Pappas is working on a Strawberry Shortcake event; others are looking at reprinting the 1962 cookbook and holding a Shore Dinner. Everybody’s going to have to work. But it’s not going to work if we are a bunch of Eeyores saying “This is never gonna work...”

We’ve also cut spending as much as we can in good conscience. Maybe more. The good news is that we balanced the budget after going about \$50,000 in the red last year. One of our members noticed that we were \$851 shy of having a balanced budget, so that member wrote an extra check to the church for \$851! To allow our church to thrive, we are going to have to make sacrifices as well as trusting God to supply our needs. I’m sure some are giving more than me, but I’m giving 10% of my income plus I’m giving *all* of my cost of living increase to the church. If you receive one for 2012, would you consider giving *your* cost of living increase to the church?

If Money is the first giant we face—and the one we focus on in the annual meeting—the other giant is Them. Them, the people out there. They are not interested in church. They think we are so conservative and on the side of discrimination. They think we don’t believe in science and thinking. They think church is only for old people. How do we face that giant?

Of course we start by loving like Jesus. Loving like crazy. Giving ourselves away, giving the church building away, but more than that giving our time and attention and caring away. Inviting them to the coffeehouse. Reaching out to the lowliest. Speaking up for what is right and true and beautiful even when people call you a snake. Letting people know about Harbor Church in the press and on the web.

But we don’t face this giant alone. We can’t do it on our own. We have to believe that God can change the hearts of people or we can do nothing at all. When we look at the resistance to Christianity on this island, we can’t just come up with strategies. We have to pray. We have to trust God. We have to believe, ourselves, that God can draw people to himself, that if we lift Jesus up he will as promised draw all people to himself. And we do not give in to that hopelessness that says that it cannot be done. We are not afraid of the world, and we are not

afraid of failure, because our trust is in the God who set us free and made us his people and has brought us this far.

*My heart has no desire to stay
Where doubts arise and fears dismay;
Though some may dwell where these abound,
My hope, my aim is higher ground.*