

Journey to the Promised Land – Trust
Numbers 13:1-3; 17-33
WVPC, January 21, 2024



The Israelites have finally arrived at Kadesh in the desert of Paran, which is at the north eastern party of the Sinai Peninsula. The Promised Land isn't far away. It seems like their trials in the desert should soon be over, right? Well, no. Here's what happens, as recorded in Numbers 13:1-3, 17-33. Hear now the Word of God as it comes to us from Numbers 13.

13 The Lord said to Moses, ²“Send some men to explore the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelites. From each ancestral tribe send one of its leaders.”

³So at the Lord's command Moses sent them out from the Desert of Paran. All of them were leaders of the Israelites.

¹⁷When Moses sent them to explore Canaan, he said, “Go up through the Negev and on into the hill country. ¹⁸See what the land is like and whether the people who live there are strong or weak, few or many. ¹⁹What kind of land do they live in? Is it good or bad? What kind of towns do they live in? Are they unwalled or fortified? ²⁰How is the soil? Is it fertile or poor? Are there trees in it or not? Do your best to bring back some of the fruit of the land.” (It was the season for the first ripe grapes.)

²¹So they went up and explored the land from the Desert of Zin as far as Rehob, toward Lebo Hamath. ²²They went up through the Negev and came to Hebron, where Ahiman, Sheshai and Talmai, the descendants of Anak, lived. (Hebron had been built seven years before Zoan in Egypt.) ²³When they reached the Valley of Eshkol,^[a] they cut off a branch bearing a single cluster of grapes. Two of them carried it on a pole between them, along with some pomegranates and figs. ²⁴That place was called the Valley of Eshkol because of the cluster of grapes the Israelites cut off there. ²⁵At the end of forty days they returned from exploring the land.

²⁶They 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.”

Here ends the reading of God’s Holy Word. “Thanks be to God.”

God’s instructions, conveyed via Moses, are quite reasonable, aren’t they? “Send some explorers, representing each of the 12 tribes, to go check out the land that I am giving you.” Sure. You wouldn’t move into a house without checking it out first, right? So that you know what the advantages and disadvantages are going to be?

So Moses tells the explorers to check out the land: the soil, the water, what kinds of fruits can be grown there. He also tells them to check out the inhabitants: their numbers, their strength, and their fortifications. All of this is good information to have, so they can make plans about how to enter the Promised Land and settle there.

The explorers follow their instructions. For twenty days they head northward, covering most of the current boundaries of the state of Israel. Then for twenty days they head back towards Paran. They collect samples of pomegranates and figs. They cut a branch with a cluster of grapes; and the grapes are so big that they have to carry the cluster on a pole between two men. That sounds great, doesn’t it? We heard last week about how tired of manna the people were, and how they wanted meat and fruit and vegetables. Well, they ought to like the pomegranates and figs and grapes in abundance! Right? What’s not to like in this promised land!

Well, the thing not to like is the existing inhabitants. There are various other people groups who live there, and they are in fortified cities. That includes groups of Hittites, Jebusites, Amorites and Canaanites. And, there are at least some people who appear to be the descendants of Anak, who were known for their height and great strength. Trying to conquer the Anakites must have seemed as impossible to the explorers, as if the Bellarmine Bells were to try to win against the 49ers!

The explorers don’t agree about whether the Israelites should even try to take possession of the land God had promised them. On the one hand, as promised, the land is fertile; there is fresh water available; and the people can grow their own food. On the other hand, the current inhabitants would be hard to defeat. Caleb and Joshua say, “Let’s go take possession of the land; God will be with us and will fight with us.” The other ten say, “No! We can’t attack those people. They’re

stronger than we are, and besides, the descendants of Anak are so much bigger than we are that we seem like grasshoppers to them.” Ten against 2; there’s no consensus among the explorers; the people lose their confidence, and they make the bad decision not to enter the Promised Land. We’ll hear more about the consequences of their bad decision in February.

What would we do in a situation where we don’t agree about the way forward? Would we just vote, and the majority wins? Well, there’s something really important that the Israelites left out when they were trying to decide what to do about the explorers’ reports. And that something is, what does God want?

Was God present with the Israelites? Yes! Obviously! They had the Ark of the Covenant right there with them, with the tablets of the 10 Commandments inside. They had seen God come down in a cloud and speak with Moses, and take some of the power of the Holy Spirit that was on Moses, and put it on the 70 elders, which we heard about last week.

So the Israelites get this mixed report, with Caleb and Joshua saying, “We can do this,” and the other ten saying, “No, it’s too dangerous”, and spreading a bad report. Did they at any point come to God and ask him what he wanted them to do? No, they did not. God had proven to them that he was indeed present in their midst. He had proven it over and over again. And God had made very clear, through Moses, that it’s perfectly fine to tell him about whatever we’re afraid of, or upset about. So the people knew that they could come to God and ask what their next move should be. Why didn’t they? Why didn’t they say something like, “Lord, the land sounds wonderful; but we aren’t strong enough to fight against its inhabitants. What should we do?”

The Bible doesn’t specifically say why the Israelites didn’t come to God and pray about their fear. But it’s clear that they don’t trust God. After all this time with God. After all God has done for them, in delivering them from slavery, in leading them to Sinai, in teaching them how to live with him in their midst, and in leading them to Paran and up to the very border of the Promised Land – after all of that, they still don’t trust in God. They trust in the reports of the 10 who brought bad news; and then fear takes hold of them. And once fear has taken hold of them, they don’t have any room left in their hearts for trusting God.

We can learn from their mistake. Sometimes, when we have a difference of opinion, we can let majority rule. Like for instance, setting the date for the annual church meeting. Now, annual meetings are good things, because they give everyone a chance to ask questions about finances or anything else on their minds. (Our upcoming annual meeting is on February 25th, BTW.) But annual meetings aren’t critical for the survival of this church, right? So choosing the date by majority rule is efficient and appropriate.

But other times, majority rule, all by itself, isn’t appropriate for the situation. When we’re making decisions that affect who we are as individuals, or as a church, or what our path for the future might be, what we need to do is to come to God and ask him what we should do. We need to put everything before God in prayer. We need to trust that God hears us, and do our best to discern

what God is telling us. We need to talk about how we think God is leading us, and why. We belong to God, after all, so we can trust that he hears us and knows what will be best for us to do.

Like for instance, in 2022 we were trying to figure out what God wanted for us as a church. Should we plan to close our doors after July 2025? Should we just keep on doing what we'd been doing? Or should we try doing something none of us had ever done before – supporting a new church plant that would eventually become the church here at Miller and Bollinger? Remember that? We didn't just start with a yes-or-no majority vote. No. Pastor Morgan, the Transition Team, and the Session spent many hours in prayer and doing their best to discern where God is leading this church. Then they called congregational meetings to pray together, and discuss our options together. They emphasized their trust in God, and didn't dwell on possible fears for the future. Then and only then, did they ask the members to express their opinion in a straw poll.

Most of the churches that I've served over more than 30 years have also had to deal with very difficult decisions. These would be the kinds of decisions where majority-rule isn't good enough. These would be the kinds of decisions where you have to turn to God, and trust him, and do your best to discern what it is that God wants. For example:

- The small country church with the family feud going on between two of the elders that God miraculously healed – but only after one of the elders and her family had quit, and the whole church was in turmoil
- The large suburban church, where the senior pastor had been forced to resign after having affairs with elders and congregants in his church office;
- The mid-size country church, where issues about when and where the American flag should be displayed led to some difficult discussions in Session

All of us have points in our lives where we have to come to God and ask him what he wants us to do. First we decide that we are going to trust God. Then we pray, and we lay our fears and our concerns out before him. Then we ask God for help in setting aside our fear so that we can hear him more clearly. Then we do the best we can to discern what God wants us to do. Then, we do it, and we entrust the future to God. So let's try it now. Do you have a difficult decision to make? Then let's bring them to God. Let's pray.

- Lord our God, by your Holy Spirit, help us to lay our concern and our fear before you, just as Jesus did when he walked this earth.
- By your Holy Spirit, help us to hear you, just as Jesus did when he walked this earth.
- By your Holy Spirit, help us to discern your leading. What do you want us to do?
- By the power of your Holy Spirit, may we trust you as Jesus did, and do what you would have us do. For it is in the name of Jesus Christ that we pray. Amen.