

Journey to the Promised Land: Fear
Numbers 14:1-23, 29-33
West Valley Presbyterian Church, February 4, 2024

When we last looked at Numbers, two weeks ago, in Chapter 13, the Israelites had sent explorers to check out the Promised Land, at God's command. When the explorers returned, they gave mixed reports. They all agreed on what they saw: that the land was wonderful for raising crops, and also, that there were other groups of people living there who were big and strong and lived in fortified cities. But their recommendations were different. Two of the explorers, Caleb and Joshua, said, "We can trust God to work things out for us, let's go settle in the land God has promised us." But the other ten said, "We can't possibly defeat the people who already live there; they are stronger than we are." Rather than turn to God and ask him what to do, the people allowed themselves to be overcome with fear. And that fear had consequences. Those consequences are what today's reading is about.

So hear now the word of God as it comes to us from Numbers 14:1-3, 29-33.

SLIDES 2-??

That night all the members of the community raised their voices and wept aloud. ² All the Israelites grumbled against Moses and Aaron, and the whole assembly said to them, "If only we had died in Egypt! Or in this wilderness! ³ Why is the LORD bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be taken as plunder. Wouldn't it be better for us to go back to Egypt?" ⁴ And they said to each other, "We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt."

Then Moses and Aaron fell facedown in front of the whole Israelite assembly gathered there. ⁶ Joshua son of Nun and Caleb son of Jephunneh, who were among those who had explored the land, tore their clothes ⁷ and said to the entire Israelite assembly, "The land we passed through and explored is exceedingly good. ⁸ If the LORD is pleased with us, he will lead us into that land, a land flowing with milk and honey, and will give it to us. ⁹ Only do not rebel against the LORD. And do not be afraid of the people of the land, because we will devour them. Their protection is gone, but the LORD is with us. Do not be afraid of them."

¹⁰ But the whole assembly talked about stoning them. Then the glory of the LORD appeared at the tent of meeting to all the Israelites. ¹¹ The LORD said to Moses, "How long will these people treat me with contempt? How long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the signs I have performed among them? ¹² I will strike them down with a plague and destroy them, but I will make you into a nation greater and stronger than they."

¹³ Moses said to the LORD, "Then the Egyptians will hear about it! By your power you brought these people up from among them. ¹⁴ And they will tell the inhabitants of this land about it. They have already heard that you, LORD, are with these people and that you, LORD, have been seen face to

face, that your cloud stays over them, and that you go before them in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. ¹⁵ If you put all these people to death, leaving none alive, the nations who have heard this report about you will say, ¹⁶ ‘The LORD was not able to bring these people into the land he promised them on oath, so he slaughtered them in the wilderness.’

¹⁷ “Now may the Lord’s strength be displayed, just as you have declared: ¹⁸ ‘The LORD is slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.’ ¹⁹ In accordance with your great love, forgive the sin of these people, just as you have pardoned them from the time they left Egypt until now.”

²⁰ The LORD replied, “I have forgiven them, as you asked. ²¹ Nevertheless, as surely as I live and as surely as the glory of the LORD fills the whole earth, ²² not one of those who saw my glory and the signs I performed in Egypt and in the wilderness but who disobeyed me and tested me ten times — ²³ not one of them will ever see the land I promised on oath to their ancestors. No one who has treated me with contempt will ever see it.

²⁹ In this wilderness your bodies will fall—every one of you twenty years old or more who was counted in the census and who has grumbled against me. ³⁰ Not one of you will enter the land I swore with uplifted hand to make your home, except Caleb son of Jephunneh and Joshua son of Nun. ³¹ As for your children that you said would be taken as plunder, I will bring them in to enjoy the land you have rejected. ³² But as for you, your bodies will fall in this wilderness.”

Here ends the reading of God’s holy word. Join me in saying, Thanks be to God.

Wow. Fear has consequences, wouldn’t you say? Fear tore through that community faster than any virus, and it led to panic. And panic led to the full-scale rebellion of God’s people. They are ready to reject the leader God gave them – namely, Moses – and choose someone else who will lead them back to Egypt! Back to slavery! They are ready to abandon the God who has delivered them, and taught them, and journeyed with them! Why would they do that? Because they are panicking.

Moses and Aaron fall down on their faces, imploring God for mercy. And Joshua and Caleb try to reassure the people. They say, “The land is really good, just as God told us! If he’s pleased with us, he’ll lead us into the land and give it to us. But don’t rebel! And don’t be afraid of the people who are already living there.” But, of course, when we’re panicking, we’re not listening to reason. We listen to fear, and all we want to do is run. The people are even talking about stoning Moses and Aaron and Joshua and Caleb.

Moses intercedes for the very people who have rejected his leadership and are threatening to stone him. When God says, “How long will these people treat me with contempt?”, and proposes to start over again with Moses, Moses intercedes. He begs God to forgive. Or perhaps more accurately, God allows Moses to persuade him to forgive. Moses starts by reminding God about his reputation among the nations; but more to the point, he reminds God of who he is: slow to anger, abounding in love, and forgiving sin and rebellion. Moses sums it all up by saying, “In accordance with your great

love, forgive the sin of these people, just as you have pardoned them from the time they left Egypt until now.” And God replies, “I have forgiven them, as you asked.”

So God will still be with them. He will still be their God, and they will still be his people. But the people’s rebellion does still have consequences. The people said that it would be better to die in the desert than go into the Promised Land? Then that’s what will happen to them. They will wander in the desert until all of them have died. Except for Joshua and Caleb. They will enter the Promised Land, because they trusted and obeyed God. The people were afraid that their wives and children will be taken as plunder in the Promised Land? Then God will bring their children in to enjoy the land that their fathers rejected. All those things were indeed what happened over the next 40 years.

The Israelites made the wrong choice because they didn’t bring their fear to God. If they had brought their fear to God directly, rather than just escalating their fear amongst themselves, then God could have dealt with it. But because they didn’t bring their fear to God, it escalated into panic. And then panic escalated into rebellion. The irony of their rebellion is that, if they actually had chosen another leader and headed back towards Egypt, they would have all been wiped out.

Two weeks ago, we talked about how change potentially can be scary for us as a church. So far, we’ve been doing a good job of bringing our hopes and our fears to God. Remember the 5:17 project that we started a year ago? Where we all sit down at 5:17 in the evening, or the morning, or both, to pray for the church planters? Which we are all still welcome to continue? Well, the Transition Team and Session have also been praying for clear communication; for finances; for a written plan that our church, our Presbytery, and the church planters, can all support; for Caitlin and Joel’s fundraising; and for their move to California.

So keep it up, because change is indeed starting to happen. More quickly than we thought. Caitlin and Joel’s first priority is going out and making connections with people in this community, which they are enthusiastically doing. AND, God is also bringing community groups to us. Within one week we had two community groups contact us, and ask us if they could make connections with us! (add any other community groups also). All of that means, clearing out space. Modernizing rooms so they look welcoming to younger adults. Arranging schedules for room use. A guest wifi network. It’s all starting to happen. Does that feel scary to us? Well, if it does, we’ve just learned from Numbers what NOT to do. We’ve learned that we should NOT spread fear amongst ourselves. We should NOT escalate to panic, because then we make bad – or even rebellious – decisions. Instead what we SHOULD do is turn to God, express our fears honestly, and allow God to calm us down. Then we can ask God for help in dealing with whatever the problem might be. Then we can take a collective deep breath and recommit ourselves to God, trusting that he is every bit as much present with us now as he was with the Israelites.

We also change as individuals – over time our health changes, our finances change, our jobs change, our relationships change, our family structures change. That can be scary too, since change can mean decline. And here again – what do we do about it? We turn to God; we express our fears honestly; we allow God to calm us down; we ask him for help in dealing with whatever the problem is; and we recommit ourselves to God, trusting that he is with us.

And if we need tangible assurance that God is alive, that he is right here with us in our midst, well, that's what sacraments are all about. We are physical creatures; we need physical things to see and smell and touch and taste. God knows that. That is why Jesus gave his disciples the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, so that, down through the ages, we his followers would have a spiritual and physical and tangible way of experiencing his presence with us right here and right now, by the power of the Holy Spirit. The breakfast that you ate this morning strengthened your body, right? Eating and drinking the Lord's Supper strengthens our souls by making our connection with Jesus real and tangible, something we can touch and taste. And if our souls are strengthened, our fears shrink, and our trust grows. So let's experience that for ourselves once again, shall we? Let's allow God strengthen us, together. Let's pray.