

Summit Presbyterian Church
Preached by Rev. Sue Cyre
10/9/11
Text: Numbers 13:1-3, 25-33
Title: Walking with God: Slaying Giants

Nicky Gumbel is an Anglican priest in Brampton, England. Gumbel tells about a homeless woman who died and his senior pastor asked him to conduct the funeral service. Then his senior pastor said something startling....there would be a crowd—the church would most likely be full. When Gumbel said, “I’m surprised, she had all those friends,” his senior pastor explained that the woman was a millionaire. She had inherited a great deal of money, but she continued to live like a street person, because she couldn’t leave the way of life she had come to know.

A sad story. Here is a woman who has millions of dollars and could live in luxury—as a queen--and instead she lives like a pauper—destitute. She couldn’t live INTO the person that she really was probably out of fear.

The purpose of the journey that the Israelites are on from slavery to the Promised Land is a journey to transform them—from the slaves that they were TO the sons and daughters that they have become. The journey is to help them live INTO the people that they really are. Like the homeless woman, it is tragic to live like a slave if you’re a son.

It’s not an easy journey. Every time the Hebrews hit an obstacle, they want to return to slavery in Egypt. Every obstacle is an opportunity for a U-turn back to slavery.

The passage today is one of the saddest in Scripture. The people have been journeying in the wilderness for 2 years and they finally came to the southern tip of the Promised Land. They are ready to enter—this is what they have longed for and waited for. This is the culmination of 2 years wandering in the wilderness. They’re here.

God instructs Moses to send out 12 spies, leaders from each of the 12 tribes. These men travel around the Promised Land for 40 days and come back will a glowing report of the fruitfulness of the land. They bring back samples: pomegranates and figs. They bring a cluster of grapes that is so heavy it takes two men to carry it on a pole. These are the people remember who grumbled

that they were sick of eating manna. Wow, now they have grapes and pomegranates and figs—what a feast. They tell the people that land is filled with milk and honey, meaning that it is lush and filled with abundance.

Ahhh, but 10 of the leaders report that the cities are large and well fortified. There are Amalekites and Hittites and Jebusites and Amorites and Canaanites. What's more there are Nephilim who are considered giants.

The spies tell the people, “We can't attack those people; they are stronger than we are....The land we explored devours those living in it. All the people we saw there are of great size. We saw the Nephilim there... We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them.”

In the next chapter it continues, “That night all the people of the community raised their voices and wept aloud. 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 desert! 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.’ And they said to each other, ‘We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt.’”

Only Caleb and Joshua tell the people, “If the Lord is pleased with us, then he will lead us into that land, a land flowing with milk and honey, and will give it to us. Only do not rebel against the Lord; and do not be afraid of the people of the land, because we will swallow them up. Their protection is gone, but the LORD is with us. Do not be afraid of them.” (14:8ff)

The people refuse to go forward and instead want to stone Joshua and Caleb and choose new leaders to lead them back to slavery in Egypt. Why? Because they are afraid.

What are we afraid of?

The people refuse to go forward out of fear and God will not allow them to go back to slavery, so God keeps them wandering in the desert for 40 years until that generation that refused to enter the land has died and then the next generation enters the Promised Land with Joshua at their head.

The people are afraid of going forward. They are afraid of dying. They say they are afraid if they are killed their wives and children will be plunder for the enemy.

What are we afraid of in our lives that keeps us from being and doing what God intends for us? Maybe we're afraid of dying so we don't live. Maybe we're afraid of pursuing a dream because we're afraid we'll fail. Maybe we're afraid of reaching out to someone to mend a relationship because we're afraid they will rebuff us. What are we afraid of that keeps us from living into who we really are.

Why do we fear?

We all get afraid at times. We are afraid because we know we are grasshoppers. We know how small we are and how limited our strength and how easily we are crushed...and we are afraid. Everything out in the world, looks a lot bigger than we are. We know how limited our thinking is and how frail our bodies are and how quickly our strength fails.

So what do we do?

The Israelites have a choice. Trust God, or trust in yourself. Trust in God and be a giant slayer or trust in yourself be a grasshopper. Every choice in our faith comes down to that—trust in yourself—the grasshopper-- or trust in God.

See the difference. The 10 spies said in vs 33, "We saw the Nephilim... We seemed like grasshoppers in OUR OWN EYES and we looked the same to them." We saw, we seemed in our own sight.

Compare that with Joshua and Caleb's report. "If the LORD is pleased with us, he will lead us into that land...The Lord is with us; do not be afraid of them."

See the difference. Is the measuring stick us? No. We're grasshoppers, no help there. But, if the measuring stick is God, he is all powerful. Nothing is impossible for him.

Listen to what Rahab says to the spies when they enter the land to spy it out 40 years later. Rahab says, "I know that the LORD has given this land to you and that a great fear of you has fallen on us, so that all who live in this country are melting in fear because of you." (Joshua 2:8)

Now the spies say, “we are grasshoppers in our own eyes and in the eyes of the people in the land.” In 40 years Rahab says, “a great fear of you has fallen on us.” That’s what God did. He put the fear of the Hebrews in the hearts of the people in the Promised Land. The people didn’t change. They were still grasshoppers... God melted hearts because of them.

The purpose of the wilderness journey is to turn the Israelites from grasshoppers to giant slayers and the only way that happens is when they trust God and stop trusting themselves. We are grasshoppers. And the only way we become giant slayers is when we trust God.

When the spies claim the people are grasshoppers, Joshua doesn’t argue with the people and say, “Oh, don’t say that. You’re as good as the next person. You’re not a grasshopper.” He doesn’t say that. He says, you’re eyes are on the wrong person. “We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes.” Or “The LORD is with us. Do not be afraid of them.” It’s not about us and what we can do. It’s about God and what he has already done. He has given the people the land.

There is another story in Scripture of a small boy that slay a giant. David was so small, Saul’s armor was too big for him. So David took his slingshot and 5 smooth stones and said to the Philistine Goliath, “You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the LORD Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defiled. This day the LORD will hand you over to me and I will strike you down.” (1 Sam 17:45ff)

Was David a grasshopper compared to Goliath? Oh yes. But it wasn’t David that won the victory, it was the LORD who handed Goliath over to him.

Why can we put our trust in God?

First, because God makes promises and he keeps them. God promised the Israelites back in Exodus 6 when he called Moses that he would give them the Promised Land. Back in Genesis, when God called Abraham, Abraham walked the length of the Promised Land and God said, “To your offspring I will give this land.” (Gen 12:7)

God said he would make a nation from Abraham's descendants and he has done that.

God said the people would be in slavery in Egypt 400 years and they were.

God said he would free the people and take them to the land he promised and he has.

Everything God has promised to do, he has done.

God makes promises and keeps them.

Second, God is all powerful so nothing can stop him from fulfilling his promises. God is the creator of all that exists. The land belongs to God. God owns it all. So, if he wants to give it to the Hebrews he can and will.

Evolution is popular and has been since Darwin's thesis in the mid 19th century. Evolution is a human attempt to exclude God. William Dembski, one of the leading thinkers in the Intelligent Design movement, argues that there was an Intelligence that designed and created all that exists. He writes about the conflict of evolution and Christian faith saying, "With human beings the result of a brutal, competitive process that systematically rooted out the weak and favored only the strong[evolution]...the church's understanding of the Fall, redemption, the nature of morality, the truth of the Scriptures and the ultimate end of humanity were all in a fundamental way called into question. Without exaggeration, no aspect of theology escaped the need for reevaluation in the light of Darwinism." (Apologetics, p. 221)

Evolution advocate and Harvard geneticist, Richard Lewontin, also recognizes the incompatibility of Christian faith and evolution. He writes, "[our] materialism[or evolution] is absolute, for we cannot allow a Divine Foot in the door." (TM, Mar/Apr, 1999) Evolution rejects a divine creator. So Christian faith and evolution are incompatible. And that's not being hostile to science. It is saying to science, where is your proof. Or is this just an attempt to use vague theories of science that cannot be proved and have no evidence, to deny God. That's why some states want to teach the holes in evolutionary theory. It is more faith-based than Christianity.

Phillip Johnson, a lawyer, a Presbyterian, who has been in the lead in arguing for Intelligent Design wrote about a 2005 discovery by a British genetics professor and evolutionist Steven Jones.

“...Jones discovered an error-correcting genome that fixes our DNA. Apparently, DNA, like any chemical reaction, has a high incidence of noise, or error as it’s copied from cell to cell. Jones writes, “Special enzymes clean up the mess as they snip out a mutated segment, join together broken bits of the molecule, or replace a faulty piece with the correct version.”

“In fact” Johnson writes, “the genome is built on backups, with repeat copies of genes that can be used to check when one has gone wrong.” Without the genes involved in the process, “we could not survive.” (Touchstone, Oct. 2005, p. 12) That’s amazing that we have built in mechanisms that correct for mutations. What an intricate, marvelous machine our bodies are.

We can only trust God if he is the creator and is therefore all powerful over creation and all of creation belongs to him.

God spoke through Isaiah saying, “

“Do you not know? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood since the earth was founded? He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth, and its people are like grasshoppers.

...He stretches out the heavens like a canopy, and spreads them out like a tent to live in.

...He brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing.

...No sooner are they planted, no sooner are they won, no sooner do they take root in the ground, than he blows on them and they wither, and a whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff.

...To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?” say the Holy One. Lift your eyes and look to the heavens; Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one, and calls them each by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing.

...Why do you say, O Jacob, and complain, O Israel, ‘My way is hidden from the LORD: my cause is disregarded by my God’?

...Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.” (Isaiah 40:21-31)

We can trust God because he makes promises and keeps them. And he can keep them because he is all powerful as the creator of all that exists.

Third, the Hebrews can trust God because he redeemed them from slavery in Egypt. Remember the Pharaoh. Remember the plagues. Remember the plunder as each person asked his neighbor for silver and gold... plunder is a military term. Remember the Red Sea. Remember the manna. Remember. Remember. God has redeemed you. You are here because God brought you here.

He led you, he cared for you, he protected you, he provided for you. Therefore, you can trust him.

Fourth, God has defeated our greatest enemy: death.

The Hebrews were afraid of dying. They would rather live in slavery than die.

Steven Jobs was an amazing man with a vision for the future that none of us could imagine. I worked on computers when they filled whole rooms and had to have raised floors to cool them; I remember when TVs had on-off knobs; and when telephones had rotary dials.

Then came Apple computers that fit on your desk; and Ipods and I pads and iPhones. Jobs revolutionized our lives with his vision of what life could be. I don't know if he was a Christian, but there are some principles that he lived by that really only make sense when they are in the context of Christian faith.

Jobs said, “...Remembering that I'll be dead soon is the most important tool I've ever encountered to help me make the big choices in life. Because almost everything--all external expectations, all pride, all fear of embarrassment or failure—these things just fall away in the face of death, leaving only what is

truly important. Remembering that you are going to die is the best way I know to avoid the trap of thinking you have something to lose. You are already naked. There is no reason to not follow your heart.”

The author of Hebrews says much the same thing but about Jesus. “Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity [Jesus] so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.” (Hebrews 2:14)

The people in this morning’s text refuse to go into the Promised Land because they seem like grasshoppers, they don’t trust God and they are afraid of dying. “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.”

Once you’re not afraid of death and you place your trust in God and his power, you’re not a slave anymore. You’re free to risk joy and truth and life.

Our journey through life is a wilderness journey. It is a step by step, day by day lesson in trusting God or trusting ourselves. We’re like babies learning to walk. Every step forward is a step toward the Promised Land—trusting God. Every step backward in fear is a returning to slavery.

We can trust God for the future because he created all that exists. He created each one of us. We were fearfully and wonderfully made by him. He owns it all. He rules over all. God rules over enemy nations, over world economies, over our jobs, our relationships, our time, our health, our gifts, our church. It’s all his.

We can trust God for our future because he redeemed us not from slavery in Egypt, but from slavery to sin and death. We are freed from the fear of death, from the fear of life, from the fear of the past or the present or the future. We are freed from fear of failure, fear of loneliness, fear of success, fear of poverty, fear of abundance, fear of whatever.... Because God gave his own Son for us. What will he withhold from us?

When we accept Jesus Christ and his death, we are freed from the slavery to sin and death. But, we’re just like these Israelites, we have to learn to walk in freedom—trusting God. It doesn’t come naturally. Transformation from slaves

to sons is a process that goes on day by day as we journey to the Promised Land.

What are we facing this morning that looks gigantic? Sin? Illness? Suffering? Pain? Failure? That's wilderness work—that's the time when God asks you to choose—to walk in his promises, trust in his mercy—live like a giant slayer.

Joshua admonishes the people, "Do not be afraid of the people of the land, ... Their protection is gone, but the LORD is with us. Do not be afraid of them.."

That is the word to us. Do not fear circumstances, the future, the past. Only do not rebel against the Lord....The Lord is with us. Do not fear them.

Someone has said, "God plus one is a majority." God always outnumbers the enemy no matter how strong he is—the enemy is never strong enough to defeat God. Even death, fell before God. Only trust.

Forty years after this passage in Numbers, after Joshua led the children of these rebellious Israelites into the Promised Land, just before he died, Joshua challenged the people, "Choose this day whom you will serve: whether the gods which your fathers served which were beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." Jos 24:15

We can't live like sons and daughters when we're trusting ourselves or our idols. We can't defeat giants when we're grasshoppers. We can't trust the promises, unless we trust the Lord who made the promises. So choose this day, whom you will serve.

Can we say with Joshua, "as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord?"

Amen.