



“Vision Through Barriers”

Numbers 13:25–14:4 (NRSV)

Courage in Christ. That’s what it takes to see a vision all the way through.

Sometimes being a Christian takes courage. We strive to discern God’s will for our lives, our church, even our nation. We consult friends, embed ourselves in the Scriptures, and yet, it is so often like peering through a fog. We want to grasp God’s vision and understand our place in it, but it can be so hard. What really is the way ahead? Yes, we know we are to love God and others, but that just isn’t always enough information... what actually *is* the loving thing to do, we ask.

God has told us to make disciples, to be his witnesses, to feed the hungry and clothe the naked. But it takes courage and strength and discipline, but even more, it takes faith. It takes putting our trust in God and our communal understanding of his will.

But courage can be really hard! It is far too easy to see only barriers and problems and reasons to hold back, to shy away, to leave the hard work for other souls... perhaps braver souls.

Our story today is a case in point.

Turning back

In the Bible classes I teach, I’ve learned that there is a fair bit of confusion surrounding the forty years that the Israelites spend wandering around the Sinai wilderness before entering the Promised Land. Everyone knows they wander, but many don’t know when or why. So here’s the scoop.

After leading Moses and the Israelites out of Egypt and across the Red Sea, God leads them to Mt. Sinai, the place of the burning bush, where Moses had first met God (Exodus 3). It is the mountain of God. There, Moses ascends the mountain and brings down tablets on which are written the Ten Commandments. Already, the people are rebellious, ready to turn away from God at the first sign of trouble. Yet, Moses pleads with God that God would remember the covenant he had made with Abraham (Genesis 12 & 15). God, being utterly faithful, renews his covenant with these people despite their weakness and distrust. God will do “an awesome thing” for them. God will “drive out the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites” (see Exodus 34). It is God who will ensure that the Israelites are able to conquer and inhabit the land that God had promised to Abraham.

Thus, from Mt. Sinai, where the people are given God’s Law and formed into a covenant people, God leads them directly to the borders of Canaan, the promised land, bringing us to today’s passage from Numbers.

Being prudent, Moses sends spies into Canaan to check things out. When the spies return, they bring fear-inspiring tales of unconquerable giants. Two of the spies, Joshua and Caleb, are not fearful. They report that “It’s a land that is full of milk and honey.” They urge the Israelites not to fear these people, not to rebel against God. They say, “. . . their defense had deserted them, but the LORD is with us. Don’t be afraid of them.” Tragically, the Israelites listen to their fears rather than to Joshua and Caleb, even threatening to stone the two men. Rather than trusting God and entering this “exceptionally good land,” the Israelites, including Moses, choose the path of distrust and faithlessness.

God’s response is not surprising. God says to Moses: “How long will this people disrespect me? And how long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have performed among them?” Despite everything that God had done for them – freedom from slavery in Egypt, food (manna) in the wilderness, the giving of the Law at Mt. Sinai – despite all this, the people refuse to trust God. They let their fears hold them back.

God then tells Moses that because the people have refused to enter the land, they never will. They will have to wander around the Sinai wilderness until the distrustful generation dies off . . . hence, the forty years. God will

THE BOOK OF NUMBERS

The book of Numbers is the fourth book in the Old Testament and is part of the Pentateuch, the five books beginning with Genesis, which tradition attributed to Moses.

The book gets its name from two censuses of the Israelites in the wilderness. The first opens the book. The second is in chapter 26. We can best think of Numbers as having two parts, each one beginning with a census. The first part is about the rebellious generation that constantly whines and complains, including their refusal to enter Canaan. The second part (chapters 26-36) moves the focus to their children, the generation of hope.

The dominant theme of the book is God's faithfulness. Despite the people's weakness and rebellion, the purposes of God press forward. God simply never gives up. The book is like a microcosm of the entire Old Testament story. Despite the people's inability to live up the covenant they freely made, the promise to love God and neighbor, God's redemption of creation will not be thwarted. In the end, God must do himself, in the person of Jesus, what the Jews and the rest of us were and are unable to do for ourselves.

have Joshua and Caleb, the trusting two, lead the next generation into Canaan.

So the people wander...and wander...and wander. Even Moses himself will not enter the Promised Land. The people of God will reap the consequences of their fears and distrust.

Making a difference – in the long run

Sometimes it is a challenge to see what a particular biblical story might mean for our lives. But not today.

When God set out to put the world right, God chose Abraham and his wife Sarah. Their descendants would be God's people and God would give them a land. Why? Not for their own sake, but *so that* all the families on earth would be blessed through them. *So that* all humanity would be redeemed and all creation with them.

The arrival of the Israelites, the covenant people of God, at the border of Canaan is not only about their return¹ but about their participation in God's purposes. They are to be the ones through whom God will rescue creation. So when they give in to their fears and refuse to enter Canaan, they are abandoning their part in God's plan. They take themselves out of the game, off the table. They will no longer make a difference; instead they will wander aimlessly for forty years. The world will have to wait for their children to do what their parents were afraid to do.

You and I are also among God's covenant people, as are all those who have faith in Jesus Christ. Just as the ancient Israelites who turned away from Canaan were to be God's agents, so are we. We are to make disciples, to feed and clothe, to bear witness in word and deed to the saving power of the risen Christ. Empowered by God's Spirit, we are to build for the kingdom of God. We are to make a difference...that's what our Master Plan is all about.

So there it is. Will we press forward or will we wander aimlessly? Will we trust God or give in to fear? Will we rely on the Holy Spirit, God's empowering presence in our church and in our lives? Will we use the incredible gifts that God has given us for his purposes or merely for ours?

As we United Methodists have all affirmed we "faithfully participate in the ministries of the church by our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service, and our witness that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ." We are to hold back no part of ourselves. We are to trust God in all things.

¹ The story of Joseph in the book of Genesis is the story of how Abraham's descendants ended up in Egypt. The land that the Israelites are too fearful to enter was where Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had made their homes.