

## Adventures in the Wilderness: Be Very Afraid. Or Not.

Num. 13 & 14 (selected verses)                      7/26/20

Today's sermon is about dealing with fear. Check out this well-known video clip from "A Charlie Brown Christmas" to get us started. (Charlie Brown sees Lucy, the "psychiatrist.")

Lucy named a number of irrational fears that people have. Here are a few more common ones: fear of flying, fear of public speaking(!), fear of heights, fear of the dark, fear of close spaces, fear of intimacy, fear of failure, fear of spiders, and fear of commitment. Our fears don't just make us uncomfortable, they shape our behavior to a surprising degree. Consciously or unconsciously, we seek to avoid those things of which we are afraid, regardless of the cost to ourselves, our work, our families, and our communities.

As we finish up our series in the wilderness with the ancient Hebrews, we come to a passage in which fear drove the people to make bad choices contrary to God's will for them. The story takes place when they are on the brink of entering the Promised Land of Canaan, the land God has promised to give them. God instructed Moses to send a few spies into the land, so they could see for themselves how good it was, and also to see what would be needed to take it from the Canaanites who lived there. We begin in Numbers 13:17. *Moses sent them to spy out the land of Canaan, and said*

*to them, "Go up there into the Negeb, and go up into the hill country, <sup>18</sup>and see what the land is like, and whether the people who live in it are strong or weak, whether they are few or many, <sup>19</sup>and whether the land they live in is good or bad, and whether the towns that they live in are unwalled or fortified, <sup>20</sup>and whether the land is rich or poor, and whether there are trees in it or not. Be bold, and bring some of the fruit of the land." Now it was the season of the first ripe grapes. (Num. 13:17-20)*

The twelve spies (one from each tribe) are given specific instructions. Travel through the whole land, assess the land and the people who live there, and bring back some produce from it for all to see. A pretty simple recon mission! Here's what they did. <sup>21</sup>*So they went up and spied out the land from the wilderness of Zin to Rehob, near Lebo-hamath. <sup>23</sup>And they came to the Wadi Eshcol, and cut down from there a branch with a single cluster of grapes, and they carried it on a pole between two of them. They also brought some pomegranates and figs. <sup>24</sup>That place was called the Wadi Eshcol, because of the cluster that the Israelites cut down from there. <sup>25</sup>At the end of forty days they returned from spying out the land.* (Num. 13:21,23-25)

So they did exactly what they were asked to do, covering around 500 miles in 40 days. That must have been some cluster of grapes, too! And

the people anxiously awaited their report. After all, none of them had ever seen this land that God had promised them!

*<sup>26</sup>And (the spies) came to Moses and Aaron and to all the congregation of the Israelites in the wilderness of Paran, at Kadesh; they brought back word to them and to all the congregation, and showed them the fruit of the land. <sup>27</sup>And they told him, "We came to the land to which you sent us; it flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. <sup>28</sup>Yet the people who live in the land are strong, and the towns are fortified and very large; and besides, we saw the descendants of Anak there. <sup>29</sup>The Amalekites live in the land of the Negeb; the Hittites, the Jebusites, and the Amorites live in the hill country; and the Canaanites live by the sea, and along the Jordan."*

(Num. 13:26-29)

The report begins very favorably, saying that the land is good and fertile, but it becomes more cautious when talking about all the peoples who live there in their large fortified towns. They seem to cast doubt on the ability of the Hebrews to take the land. But this report only represents 10 of the 12 spies. A minority report follows! *<sup>30</sup>But Caleb quieted the people before Moses, and said, "Let us go up at once and occupy it, for we are well able to overcome it."* (Num. 13:30)

Well, there you go! Caleb, whether because of an analysis of the capabilities of the Israelites vs. the Canaanites, or because he believed

God's promise to give them the land, encourages them to go and occupy Canaan. Then things get weird.

*<sup>31</sup>Then the men who had gone up with him said, "We are not able to go up against this people, for they are stronger than we." <sup>32</sup>So they brought to the Israelites an unfavorable report of the land that they had spied out, saying, "The land that we have gone through as spies is a land that devours its inhabitants; and all the people that we saw in it are of great size. <sup>33</sup>There we saw the Nephilim (the Anakites come from the Nephilim); and to ourselves we seemed like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them."*

(Num. 13:31-33) Fear and hysteria have taken hold. Now the 10 spies say that the land isn't good after all, but that it devours its inhabitants! Well, not all of them, for the Nephilim (a legendary god-like people) are there, making the spies feel the size of grasshoppers! The ten spies insist that the Hebrews are not able to succeed against them! And, if you've ever been in a meeting like this, you know what comes next!

*Then all the congregation raised a loud cry, and the people wept that night. <sup>2</sup>And all the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron; the whole congregation said to them, "Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! <sup>3</sup>Why is the LORD bringing us into this land to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become booty; would it not be better for us to go back to*

*Egypt?”<sup>4</sup> So they said to one another, “Let us choose a captain, and go back to Egypt.” (Num. 14:1-4)*

Fear is contagious, isn't it? In spite of the many miracles they had seen God perform to protect and sustain them, fear causes the Hebrews to doubt God's promise to them and rebel against his plan for them. They wanna go back to Egypt, and choose new leaders, rejecting the ones God had provided for them in Moses and Aaron! Their fear cost them a chance to enter Canaan until much later, after all the adults involved in this episode (except Joshua and Caleb) had died in the wilderness. Fear can be costly to us in many ways, even to our relationship with God. So what do we do about it?

I think the first step is to recognize our fear and anxiety and confront it, rather than letting it unconsciously drive our behavior. Many years ago, I was visiting a member of the congregation I was serving. She was complaining about how her neighborhood had gone downhill, and that she just didn't like living there anymore. And then it happened. She said the reason it had gone downhill was because of all the black people who had moved in. That was bad enough in itself, but she didn't actually say "black people," she used the "n" word. Twice. I was absolutely stunned, and I said nothing, much to my shame. Not speaking up was a betrayal of my African-American friends and colleagues, and of our basic Christian

theology that insists that all people are made in the image of God. But I choked.

I later tried to excuse my behavior by reminding myself how her words completely caught me off guard, but I was forced to admit to myself that something more was at work. I want to be liked by people, and part of me was afraid to risk alienating her by confronting her racist remark. I now realize that my fear of being disliked can be an impediment to good ministry, and I work to recognize it when it arises and deal with it. So, the first part of dealing with fear and anxiety is to recognize it, call it what it is, and know the areas of your life in which you are most vulnerable to it.

Second, pray for courage. Courage is a result of the work of God's Spirit in us, so pray that God would give you courage to speak and act.

Third, take small steps of courage. Arriana Huffington once said, "Fearlessness is like a muscle. I know from my own life that the more I exercise it the more natural it becomes to not let my fears run me." Look for small ways to exercise your courage! Speak up for someone or a group of people. Speak out against injustice or racism. Stand up to a bully at school or on-line. Write a Letter to the Editor. Exercise your courage so that it becomes more natural for you.

During this pandemic, we have had to exercise courage in new ways. We have taken prudent steps to prevent the spread of the virus, even

though others aren't taking those steps, and are even making fun of those who do. We speak up about the importance of those measures. And, when the time finally comes when it is safe to again do the things we love to do- going to restaurants and concerts, shaking hands, going to the gym, gathering in worship and fellowship without masks and social distancing- then it will require courage to take advantage of the new freedoms we will have. Courage.

By the way, some Christians operate under a false assumption- that following Jesus makes us safe. But that's not at all the message of the Bible! In fact, all of Jesus' disciples except one were put to death because they were his followers, and that one was exiled. As Stanley Hauerwas put it, "It's hard to remember that Jesus did not come to make us safe, but rather to make us disciples, citizens of God's new age, a kingdom of surprise."

God does not promise to keep us safe, but rather to always be with us through the normal trials of life, which can be very difficult to bear, as well as during the trials of life that being faithful followers of Jesus may bring to us. Be strong, dear friends, and of good courage.