

It has been two years since the Hebrews left slavery in Egypt. These were two long years on the hard road through the desert wilderness, chasing God's promise that they would someday reach the Promised Land. The road to all of God's promises are hard because that's how we learn to have faith. But this is not about learning faith in our abilities, or even faith in our faith. Our faith is only in the faithfulness of God.

Now God has finally brought the Hebrews to the southern gate to the Promised Land, with the call to enter it. The significance of this is that God never expects us to stay on the hard road. When you, or the church, have been on a long hard journey, it was only to transform you and prepare you for the next season of life. But don't get used to the adversity. The grief, the losses, the interruptions and detours were never supposed to become your home. So the question of today's text is not does God think the people are ready to leave the desert. The question is do they?

The Lord told Moses to send twelve of his leaders as spies into the land, the land, God said, "That I am giving to the Israelites." Forty days later these men return from their mission carrying pomegranates, figs, and a single cluster of grapes so big they had to carry it on a pole between two of them. Ten of the spies said, "This is a land that flows with milk and honey, but it is a land that devours its inhabitants. There we saw the Nephilim [a race of giants]. We seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them." The two other spies, Joshua and Caleb said, in essence, "Giants? Don't be afraid of them. Remember this land is called, Promised. What do we care about the Nephilim, if God promised we could live there?" But the people decided to go with the majority report. The next chapter begins by telling us, "So they said to one another, 'Let us choose a captain, and go back to Egypt.'"

What did Joshua and Caleb see that no one else saw? The promise. And that changed the way they saw everything else, including their perspective on the giants and their perspective on themselves.

Joshua and Caleb didn't waste their experience on the hard road. They had been paying attention the last two years, learning the lessons of faith when God provided food and water in the desert, protection from the Amalekites, and forgiving grace when the people were faithless. Going back to Egypt wasn't an option for them, because they didn't think of themselves as slaves any longer. They had seen God's faithfulness, and they trusted it as they stared at the giant challenges of the day before them. That faith in God's covenant with the people had transformed them from the inside out. They were not grasshoppers.

Nothing will shape your identity more than the promises you believe. We live in a society that keeps telling us our identity is determined by our vocation, resume, wealth, or our relationships. But the Bible claims our identity is determined by the promises we cherish. If the promise you believe is that you are on your own to make what you can of life, then when you stumble on the giants you had better be afraid because ours is also a society that devours its inhabitants. But if you have been on a journey behind the promises of God made to you from your baptism that offers a covenant to make you a beloved child, to always forgive and restore you, to give sacred purposes to your life and to create for you a future filled with hope, then you will never settle for being a grasshopper.

Yesterday our elders spent the morning in a retreat. We began by going around the table with each one of us saying what our prayer is for the congregation. I wish you could have heard the wonderful hopes behind these prayers. Their prayers are for our renewal and restoration, clarity of mission and unifying purpose, growth and flourishing, for a stronger sense of belonging for everyone to a church that is a more a central part of its members lives, and for abounding in the joy over the clear blessings we've already received. And we have so many blessings such as our social witness to Christ's work in the city, our extraordinary music program, and our incredible children who bounce down the aisles every Sunday for the Children's Sermon. But our elders pray

that these blessings will help us abound with hope and investment in our future. Every one of those prayers for the congregation are descriptions of our Promised Land. They are the promises given to us by God, who is always building every church who believes Jesus Christ is faithfully continuing his good work through us.

Are there giants in the way of entering into those promises? Will people wake up from their Covid slumber and come to church? Will we respond to the Stewardship program and fund our dreams? Will we invest our lives in this community of faith, and free its flourish as the blessing it already is? Well, we could focus on the national surveys about the decline in religion, or fret over the uncertainty of the economy, or point to so many other giant obstacles in the way of our prayers. If it is God's promises we are pursuing, there will always be giants. The inverse is also true. If we only have little dreams, which are easily managed and never cause conflicts, then they are not the dreams of God.

So here we are at the borders of the Promised Land. Those who have gone before us have been here years ago and made heroic choices that gave us the church we inherited. But now it is our turn to make choices that will affect the future of the church. Behind you is a whole lot of desert, and you already know about that. Ahead of you are the promises of God who has always been faithful. So, are you going to affirm the giants or the promise; the fear or the faith? You have to choose.

When the Hebrews chose not to enter the Promised Land because they were too afraid of the giants, God said, "Okay. You can stay in the desert. I'll bring your children into the promises." And so that generation wandered around in the desert for another 38 years, until they died off. This is the part of the story that frightens me the most—God honors our choices. I wish God would have just dragged them into the Promised Land like a parent does a child that goes limp, saying, "You will go into this new place and you will like it!" But no. If we don't want God's dream, we don't have to receive it.

There is no such thing as fate in the Bible. Our futures are open. What is certain is that God's dreams are worthy of giant obstacles. If we want to keep wandering in the wilderness until we die off, we can. But that was never God's dream.

Now, this is where I was planning on wrapping up the sermon, but the pressing issues in Israel and Gaza today will not be ignored. That is especially true given our text today. Throughout this series I have been using the Promised Land as a metaphor, but it is not a metaphor for the people living there who are again in intense conflict. Thousands of lives have already been lost, and now as the violence escalates who knows how much devastation will unfold?

Some would look at our text today and say, "See, the Bible claims God gave this land to the Israelites." That is what the text today says, not only here but throughout the Torah. But the text also says that when the spies went into the land they reported that the Amalekites, Hittites, Jebusites, Amorites, and Canaanites were already living there. So, did God give the land to the Hebrews in which other people were already living?

I have enough humility as a pastor not to try to explain or defend holy conquests. And as your interim pastor I cannot speak for the church. But I can at least point to some things to consider as we all sort through our own convictions about this pressing crisis in our world.

For one, the same God who wanted there to be a place for the Hebrews, also gave them the Ten Commandments on their journey to get there. Among those commandments are: thou shall not murder, thou shall not steal, and thou shall not covet anything that belongs to your neighbor.

Also, God's covenant with the Hebrews began not with Moses but with Abraham who was blessed to be a blessing to all of the families of the earth. And God extended that covenant not only through Isaac and his

Jewish descendants, but also through Abraham's other son Ishmael and his Arab children. So those on both sides of this conflict today are in a covenant relationship with the same God.

I would also remind us that the Holy Land is not the same thing as the modern nation state of Israel. When the people of the state of Israel were brutally attacked by Hamas, their leaders saw the annihilation of Hamas as a matter of national security. This sounds remarkably similar to what our own leaders said after the 9/11 attacks on our country. The tragedy is that once nations start resorting to the ethic of an eye for an eye, it is usually thousands of innocent civilians who lose their lives. So, another Hebrew prophet named Micah cautioned that we are required not only to do justice, but also to love mercy and walk humbly.

The most important thing I would say is that when Paul was writing to the church at Ephesus about the importance of Jews and Gentiles living together well, he said, "Jesus Christ is our peace... for he has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us." (Ephesians 2:14)

Thus, the community centered in Christ believes we're all still a long way from the Promised Land as long as the hostility continues between any of us.

So we pray for peace. Amen.