

OVERCOMING GIANTS

Text: Numbers 13:17-14:9

LHUMC 9/15/13

Does Your Church Have a Prayer?

Series #2

I. Introduction

A. Have you ever come face to face with a giant?

1. I actually remember being on the other side of this story—When I played 8th grade basketball, we had a kid named Scott Breseman on our basketball team. He wasn't the greatest basketball player, but he was about 6-3, 200, and when he told us he was already shaving, we had him grow a beard. So picture that. So when we came out for pre-game warm-ups, and the other team saw him, the game was basically over. To use Biblical terminology he was our Nephilim, who had the power to turn the other team into a bunch of grasshoppers.
2. Which raises the other question, basically the same question from a different perspective—Have you ever felt like a grasshopper? Sitting there on the sidewalk, just sure you are going to get stepped on or run over?

B. The Israelites, or at least most of them, at this point of their journey to the Promised Land would have answered “yes” to both questions. To sum up the story:

1. Moses sends these spies out to scope out the Promised Land that is by this point basically just over the next hill.
2. They come back with a report that at first seems positively wonderful—“Yes, the Promised Land is exactly as God promised, flowing with milk and honey, with soil so fertile that we brought back these organic grapes that we got at the Farmer's Market there that are so big it took two of us to carry one cluster.”
3. But then they continue their report and bring everyone back down to earth—“There are just a few problems, however. Their cities have these huge walls around them. And not only that, we saw these huge people there—even bigger than 6-3, 200 pounds.”
Basketball fans, think Yao Ming (remember him?)

C. And so out of the spies' report comes the dilemma that has faced disciples from that point onward.

1. The dilemma being, what happens when you get a sense or even a glimpse of God's Promised Land just over the next hill or through

that half-opened door, and it's everything that God promised it would be, everything you could have imagined, but in order to get there, you've got to deal with some giants that are in the way?

2. That is the question that these chapters deal with.

II. And I'm going to work backwards and start with Chapter 3 if that 's okay, in which the authors identify some giants facing the church these days. And I think they are accurate in what they say.

A. When they talk about the Giant of Worldviews, they are talking about society's ongoing struggle to figure out the relationship between the physical and spiritual elements in our lives.

1. And they are also right in saying that we as a church are called to "make a difference by helping people understand there is a God who cares about people and their world."

2. The question is how are we to do that, and as we saw last week when we talked about God's mission for us and our church as being one of reaching out to be the body of Christ in the world, probably the best thing we can do to help people understand there is a God who cares about them, is to care about them ourselves and live that out in God's name.

3. Sometimes people have to see it to believe it.

4. The only other thing I might add to that section of the book is to say that I believe a giant that is out there for the church is all of those folks these days who say they are "spiritual but not religious".

5. The question that people with that worldview place on the church is one of relevance—namely the question, "how can we as a church be relevant and how can we make God and Jesus Christ relevant to people who are searching for spiritual meaning and have been looking everywhere but the church.

6. I believe that the answer to that question is a part of any church's Promised Land.

B. And then they talk about the Giant of Technology

1. My experience is that technology can be a blessing or a curse and that includes in the church.

2. I was in a conference meeting the other day and we were trying to hook up electronically with someone out of state, and in the time it took to make that connection successfully, I think that person could have gone to the airport, gotten on a plane, and made it to the meeting to be with us in person.

3. Within the church, technology can be a great thing

- a) In worship we can make it so those who have hearing or vision challenges can fully participate.
 - b) For those who are visual learners and/or those who were raised in the era of the screen, we can show videos so you all can get more meaning out of the service.
 - c) We can get the word out to the community about what is going on, etc.
4. The difficulties come when we allow technology to take the place of personal interaction and relationships.
- a) When we become more adept and comfortable in texting each rather than talking to each other, I'm not sure God had that in mind when he created us in his image.
 - b) And so the church needs to be a place where personal, face-to-face relationships continue to be valued. Because a lot of people may not have those relationships anywhere else in their lives.
 - c) And then what happens when technology doesn't solve all of our problems?
 - d) As the book says, the church has to be able to offer a message of hope that the giant of technology cannot satisfy.
 - e) It reminds me of what one commentator once said, "I have yet to see soup kitchen run by robots."
 - f) In and through the church, we can offer a personal touch of love and grace that cannot be replicated in the technological realm (at least not yet).
- C. And then finally the book talks about the Giant of Expectation
- 1. We live in a consumer culture, where when people visit a store or a car dealership, or a church, they have certain expectations.
 - 2. With the church they expect, as the book says, if nothing else, relevancy. (there's that word again)
 - 3. And if they don't find it here, they'll keep looking.
 - 4. The question for the church then becomes one of meeting whatever the needs are that people have. To give people meaning that they haven't found elsewhere.
 - 5. As the book says, that happens when we "help them envision a life that is beyond their expectations."
 - 6. I read that sentence and thought, "Oh, is that all?" Seems a little overwhelming, doesn't it? That sentence sort of turned me into a grasshopper! I guess that's what makes it a giant!

- D. So those are three sort of “overarching giants” that the book identifies that can be obstacles to any church’s path to the Promised Land. The questionnaire gives you an opportunity to identify specific giants that might be there for you or for us as a specific congregation. I hope you will all be honest with yourselves and with God as you ponder that.
- III. And then working backwards, Chapter two deals with attitude. Or specifically, when the giants are there, how are we going to deal with them? And the book gives us two contrasting realities, or ways that we deal with giants.
- A. The first is Perceived Reality. When we look at the world and the giants that inevitably reside there with this perceived reality, it is characterized by the following.
1. Clinging to the past.
 - a) And more than that, remembering things as being better than maybe they really were at the time.
 - b) This kind of “selective memory” is such a part of the human condition.
 - c) We probably all have a pair of well-used rose-colored glasses in our possession through which we like to look at our own past experiences.
 - d) Even those Israelites had them. As they hear about those giants in their way, they begin saying things like, “Why don’t we just go back to Egypt. At least there we knew where our next meal was coming from.”
 - e) Hello! You were slaves! Are you sure you want to go back to that?
 - f) Putting a good spin on slavery may be an extreme example of a perceived reality of the past.
 - g) But the truth is, for them and for us, we won’t find that Promised Land that is out there, if we keep looking back there.
 2. All of which leads to another characteristic of perceived reality, which the book calls “murmuring”, which is what the people in the story started doing when they heard the spies’ report. The version we heard this morning translates that Hebrew word in the story as “grumbling”, which is somewhat more realistic. And if you know the story of the Exodus at all, you know this was far from the first time those folks grumbled.
 - a) When a group is locked into a perceived reality, grumbling tends to become the primary mode of communication.

- b) And as to what we are grumbling, in the church at least, I've noticed over the years that it tends to take the form of the various ways we say things like "we've never done it that way before."
 - 3. Another sign of the power of this perceived reality way of looking at the world and its obstacles is when we focus all the time on our weaknesses and on perceived scarcities.
 - a) You might call this having a "grasshopper mentality".
 - b) But as I've said before—whenever we obsess with what we think we don't have and/or what we think we can't do, that goes against the message of the Bible, which is a theology of abundance
 - c) In the Bible, the bottom line is always abundance—abundant love, abundant grace, abundant blessings, and abundant possibilities.
 - d) It begins on page one as God creates the universe and says it is good, and goes through to the last page of Revelation, when that new Jerusalem, a place where all things are new, and death is no more, comes down through the clouds to us.
 - 4. And then the other thing that happens when we are locked into a perceived reality is that those giants become bigger and fiercer than they really are.
 - a) Remember that I said that Scott Breseman wasn't a very good basketball player? The reason for that is that he was too nice—he was the kind of kid who would say he was sorry when he fouled someone. Our coach was constantly telling him to be meaner.
 - b) But to the other team, it didn't matter. All they saw was 6-3, 200 pounds and a full beard, and they absolutely would not ever pass or drive the ball to the basket.
 - c) When the giants become fiercer than they really are, fear is the result.
 - d) Overwhelming, paralyzing fear—the kind of fear that kept the vast majority of those Israelites from ever reaching the Promised Land.
- B. That is Perceived Reality. And then there was Joshua and Caleb. Of the twelve spies, they were the only ones who were able to envision a different reality. And it says a lot that that they were outnumbered 10-2. Perhaps that says that when the giants are in front of us, it may just be easier to operate in the perceived reality. But a couple of thoughts

on what the book calls this Envisioned Reality that Joshua and Caleb exhibited.

1. First, when we operate from this perspective, we are focusing on God and God's promises.
 - a) And what today's story makes clear is that it is human nature, at least at a 10:2 ratio, to focus on ourselves when the chips are down and the giants are all around us.
 - b) But when we look at the world and its giants from an Envisioned Reality, we say things like, "If God could do it before, then God can do it again", or "if God could get us to this point, God isn't going to desert us now."
 - c) And we don't just say those things, we act them out, taking a page from David's book, who had the kind of envisioned reality that it takes to take on a giant face to face with absolutely no fear.
2. When we have an envisioned reality, we understand that God's Promised Land is called that for a reason—that place on the other side of the door has been promised to us by God to be our ultimate destination as individuals and as a church. And we worship a God who if nothing else keeps His promises!
3. And more than that, we understand that God's promises are more powerful than any giant.

IV. Conclusion

- A. It's my guess that we all have some experience living in that kind of envisioned reality or we wouldn't be here this morning.
 1. I remember when I was struggling with the call to ministry. I was a real grasshopper for a long time!
 - a) How can we afford it? How can we uproot our family? Am I smart enough to go to seminary? All those questions that I had spoke to the giants I saw, and all were signs of a perceived reality.
 - b) It took me a while to have Joshua and Caleb's perspective of the whole thing.
 - c) But when I finally did, it was amazing how the doors kept opening and we got through it all.
 2. As we look back to where this church has come from—beginning as it did in the Grange Hall that was across the street, we know that we are following folks who were not just able to envision a reality, but to use that vision to overcome the giants that were in their way.

3. And now over 50 years later, we owe it to them and to God to envision God's reality for us into the future, 50 years and beyond.
4. And the good news, as we learned this past week, is that Jesus is still praying for us every step of the way.