

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

February 27th, 2011 (#426a) - AGM Sunday

Title: "What Do You See?"

Text: Numbers 13 & 14

Every family has its own set of stories. Sometimes they are written down. But most often they are passed down verbally from generation to generation at family gatherings such as family reunions or weddings or funerals. Without these stories being written down, though, over generations they become only faint memories until they are lost forever.

Often these family stories are about some ancestor who was courageous enough to leave the safety of the known and travel to the unknown. Sometimes they did it because of a sense of adventure. On other occasions they were looking for new opportunities. Many of the original people in this part of the country came to make their fortunes in furs. In following years, others were drawn by visions of striking it rich in gold, or raising cattle on the abundant bunch-grass surrounding Kamloops. At times people have moved to new areas believing they would have opportunities they never would have had had they stayed put. Still other times it was because either famine or war forced the issue, and if they wanted to live, they had to move. For my grandparents, one set was forced out of Siberia because of famine. The other set of grandparents came to North America because my grandfather felt that war was once again going to arrive in Europe.

The Bible includes a compilation of stories about one family ... the family of God. And like the stories found in our own families, there are some to be celebrated, and there are others from which we are to learn. Please turn with me to the fourth book of the Bible - the Book of Numbers - as we look at one of the stories from which we are to learn. Numbers, chapter 13, beginning with verse 1. Hear God's unchanging Word.

The LORD said to Moses, "Send some men to explore the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelites. From each ancestral tribe send one of its leaders." [down to verse 21] So they went up and explored the land from the Desert of Zin as far as Rehob, toward Lebo Hamath. They went up through the Negev and came to Hebron, where Ahiman, Sheshai and Talmai, the descendants of Anak, lived. (Hebron had been built seven years before Zoan in Egypt.) When they reached the Valley of Eshcol, they cut off a branch bearing a single cluster of grapes. Two of them carried it on a pole between them, along with some pomegranates and figs. That place was called the Valley of Eshcol because of the cluster of grapes the Israelites cut off there. At the end of forty days they returned from exploring the land.

They came back to Moses and Aaron and the whole Israelite community at Kadesh in the Desert of Paran. There they reported to them and to the whole assembly and showed them the fruit of the land. They gave Moses this account: "We went into the land to which you sent us, and it does flow with milk and honey! Here is its fruit. But the people who live there are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large. We even saw descendants of Anak there. The Amalekites live in the Negev; the Hittites, Jebusites and Amorites live in the hill country; and the Canaanites live

near the sea and along the Jordan." Then Caleb silenced the people before Moses and said, "We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it." But the men who had gone up with him said, "We can't attack those people; they are stronger than we are." And they spread among the Israelites a bad report about the land they had explored. They said, "The land we explored devours those living in it. All the people we saw there are of great size. We saw the Nephilim there (the descendants of Anak come from the Nephilim). We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them."

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."

Then Moses and Aaron fell facedown in front of the whole Israelite assembly gathered there. Joshua son of Nun and Caleb son of Jephunneh, who were among those who had explored the land, tore their clothes and said to the entire Israelite assembly, "The land we passed through and explored is exceedingly good. If the LORD is pleased with us, 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." But the whole assembly talked about stoning them. Then the glory of the LORD appeared at the Tent of Meeting to all the Israelites.

The LORD said to Moses, "How long will these people treat me with contempt? How long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the miraculous signs I have performed among them? I will strike them down with a plague and destroy them, but I will make you into a nation greater and stronger than they." (Numbers 13:1-2, 21-14:12). This is God's Word.

The story begins with the establishing of a committee. Now some people would automatically assume that there would be problems because of a committee. You've heard of that strange-looking creature called the platypus? The Australians say that it is an animal that was designed by a committee!! But what is different about this committee is that God commanded its formation. The Lord told Moses to create the "Promised Land Committee" with representation from every tribe. And so Moses does!

Appointing one leader from every tribe, Moses sends them out with instructions to survey the land and its inhabitants, and to bring back some of its fruit. Forty days later they return with their report and their grapes and figs and pomegranates in hand.

The show-and-tell session with all the people begins well. Showing them the fruit, they demonstrate the bounty of the land. *"Why, that land is so fertile it flows with milk and honey! After having come through a dry and barren desert, this land was a wonderful sight to behold."* But 10 of them then added, *"Forget about going in, though, because there are giants in the land. And to top it off, they have large fortified cities. We just can't do it."*

Caleb and Joshua silenced the people and said, *"Now wait just a minute, you manna picking people. Hear us out. Whether or not there are giants in the land, we must go in because God is there, too. And with God leading us, we'll take possession of the land."*

The people listened to Caleb and Joshua, went into the land, defeated their enemies, and lived happily ever after. We know that's **NOT** how it was, but that's how we wish it had been, because we don't like sharing family stories like this.

How the story really took place is that the Lord sent them doing laps around the wilderness for the next 40 years until that generation died off (except for Joshua and Caleb), and the following generation - hardened by their experiences in the wilderness - marched into the promised land. The story that we just read in the 13th and 14th chapters of Numbers is a story that is played out on a regular basis by the people of God. Not only did this happen approximately 3400 years ago with the children of Israel, but the same story is played out with every generation of God's people.

And because that is the case, on this AGM (Annual General Meeting) Sunday I want us to look at two questions that come from these chapters. **First of all, when you look at your future, and when you look at our future as a church, what do you see?** Do you see the giants in the land? Or do you see God? **And secondly, where are we going? Are we going into a promised land? Or are we going into a wilderness?**

First, what do you see? When you look at the future, do you see God or do you see giants? When you look at us, what do you see? Do you see the challenges as unconquerable giants, or as the hand of God? Over the past 122 years that this congregation has been in existence, it has done some good things. And just over 50 years ago we relocated for the third time by building this facility on the outskirts of Kamloops (at the time) in an effort to provide a better place for the ministries the congregation was involved in. We've done some renovations to this building, and are looking to do others to upgrade this facility. And we've initiated some programs that have helped people along on their faith journeys ... and for some, have helped them find the Christ who has been searching for them. And I, for one, am looking to see what God will accomplish through the ministry of Young Life. And, yes, occasionally along the way we made some mistakes. But mistakes go along with doing things. One of the translations of Proverbs 14:4 says that if there are no oxen in the barn, the crib is clean. In other words, if you've got oxen in the barn, they're going to make a mess. One study Bible explains this in a footnote in very colourful language as "*no manure, no milk.*"

If you are going to get anything done, you are going to mess up the barn a little. Anyone who knows anything about dairy farming would say "amen" to that! We could continue as we are. We could have a neat, clean church, but we choose rather to have children running downstairs, crumbs in the carpet and scuff-marks on the linoleum, people getting married, and furniture being moved around to accommodate different programs. In order to get the "milk" of a program, you are going to get a bit of a mess all around the place.

Something else has also happened during the intervening years since the people of St. Andrew's walked up the hill to begin services here. When I lived in Southern California, I would be reminded from time to time that the ground on which I walked was not as stable as you might expect it to be! Occasionally I would hear a rumbling noise and feel everything around me shaking. Like the people of Christchurch, New Zealand, I knew that an earthquake had struck!

In like manner, we have also experienced a seismic change in our culture in recent years. While the Gospel of Jesus Christ never changes, culture does. The culture in which we live has changed and some of us have forgotten to take note that it has shifted. Therefore, while not reflecting culture, we still must be able to speak to this culture's needs.

What are some of those changes? We live in a very mobile culture. Many people from the previous generation used to live in the same community where they were born until they died.

But as of 2009, one article reported that people in North America move on the average about every 5 years. At one time the home was the center of all family life. Now it's decentralized, with everyone running in a thousand different directions. In the past 30 years our nation has seen a great rise in the single adult population. And our newspapers and televisions constantly remind us that our diversified society is becoming increasingly pluralistic.

So, how do you build a stable church in this kind of world? Some expressions of the church have felt that it is impossible, and have chosen to retreat from the world. But as I read scripture and hear the words of our Lord, I am convinced more than ever that we are to be in the world, but not of it. He has called us to himself not only for salvation, but for service as well. He is looking for us to be his hands, his feet, his voice in the world he died for. God still has a place for a loving, caring church that expresses the nature of Christ in real and pragmatic ways ... that is willing to forgive and care for people. This kind of culture needs that kind of church more than ever before.

Because of what is happening in the cultural scene, we will see more and more people whose lives are shattered and broken and twisted. None of us are immune to these forces. And we have come together because of our own brokenness. I have walked cemetery pathways with some of you. I have been to court with others. In other settings we have prayed and wept together over issues that you are dealing with. All of us are here, not because we're good enough, but because we're broken enough.

If St. Andrew's can mean anything to people in this city, I want it to mean a place for broken people who have found that life is too tough for them; a place where they don't have to play charades that say "*I'm perfect.*" Here we come together as the community of the scarred, following the One who has eternal scars in His hands and feet.

I stand before you not as one who does not have his own scar tissue and brokenness. And you don't bring one to me that is not broken and scarred in some way. That's why I like the fact that broken people can find a place here where they can be not only redeemed, healed, and pulled together, but can find a place of service. We at St. Andrew's are choosing not to be a mausoleum for saints, but a hospital for sinners.

Again, what do you see? At the threshold of going into the Promised Land, ten leaders chose to look through the eyes of fear, and lost an opportunity that God had prepared for them. They chose to focus on the surrounding circumstances as they saw them. But Caleb and Joshua chose to focus on the God who was big enough to take them into what God had promised them.

And **secondly, where are we going?** Are we going into the promised land or back to the wilderness? The Israelites were turned back forty years simply because a generation could not pick up the dream and have the courage to go forward.

A church that loses its dreams immediately turns and goes into the wilderness again for a generation to die off. Sometimes a generation moves in and cannot move beyond its own dream to the dream of the next generation, and there are empty churches all across Canada filled with a generation of people that could not bring the dream to the next generation.

As someone has said, the gospel of Jesus Christ is only one generation old, and every generation must be reconverted as we go through it from year to year. We must - because we owe it to our God, our families, and our community - make sure that the next generation coming on has a dream of a vital, loving, caring church that speaks to this community.

We are here for a purpose, for this city needs a church that will wage love and peace. It needs a church that in our broken society will wage reconciliation and will do it tenaciously. I believe

that we need to be a church for all people, a forgiving church, and a church that serves God in this culture.

The real issue is, where are we going? Are we going to march forward to the heartbeat of God? Or are we going to retreat? If we are going to march ahead into the future with Christ, then we will have a joyous, triumphant future that will be worth our means and our time and our energy. In the name of Jesus Christ, I invite you to do this. I invite you to be part of a story to be written in the years ahead that will be celebrated not only by your descendants, but celebrated in God's kingdom.

Lord, give us eyes of faith!

Lord, give us feet of faith! AMEN.

CALL TO OFFERING

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Presbyterian pastor Timothy Keller, in his excellent book entitled "*Counterfeit Gods*," says that there have been times when people have come to him as a pastor and asked about tithing. They notice that there are many clear commands in the OT that believers should give away 10 percent. But in the NT, specific, quantitative requirements for giving are less prominent. They often ask him, "You don't think that now, in the NT, believers are absolutely required to give away 10 percent, do you?" He shakes his head "no", and they give a sigh of relief. But then he quickly adds, "I'll tell you why you don't see the tithing requirement laid out clearly in the NT. Think. Have we received more of God's truth, revelation, and grace than the OT believers, or less? Are we more 'debtors to grace' than they were, or less? Did Jesus 'tithe' his life and blood to save us, or did he give it all?" Keller states that there usually is uncomfortable silence. Keller continues, "Tithing is a minimum standard for Christian believers. We certainly wouldn't want to be in a position of giving away less of our income than those who had so much less of an understanding of what God did to save them." What do you think? How will you respond?