

HAVING A NAME WORTH REMEMBERING

Sermon, March 21, 2021

Text: Numbers 13:1-3 (4-22), 23-33 (14:1-10)

A story often told in marketing seminars and business textbooks concerns the importance of naming, brand naming, in the marketing of a product. The story is about the Chevy Nova, a popular car model in the sixties and seventies that sold very well domestically (*actually, I had two ... a '66 Chevy II Nova in college, and a '78 Nova in the early 90s*). Encouraged by the U.S. sales, Chevrolet began to market the Nova abroad. Unfortunately, the story goes, the Nova did not sell well in Spanish speaking countries. Marketing efforts were stepped up, new advertisements were created, but sales remained stagnant south of the border for the Chevy Nova. Why? GM executives were baffled until someone pointed out to them that "nova" translates, in colloquial Spanish, as "No go."¹

Who would want to buy a car named "No go?"

Names ARE important, and not just in marketing! As we talked about during the Time with the Children, parents can often spend countless hours deciding what to name their children, names they can agree on, names that remind them of special people or dearly departed loved ones, and/or names that carry significant meanings, perhaps hoping the names might inspire and shape the character of the child. In just about every culture, there are some names that become very popular for a time; some names even last for generations. For example, here are some names you might remember: *Shammua, Shaphat, Igal, Palti, Geuel, Gaddiel, Gaddi, Ammiel, Sethur, Nahbi*.

What? Those names don't sound familiar to you? You've never heard of anyone named after those guys? Well, how about these two names ... Joshua, Caleb? People have named their sons those names for thousands of years! The first ten names I read were the names of ten of the twelve leaders who went by God's order to explore the Promised Land (*Numbers 13:4-13*) ... but all of you still remember the other two names in that list! Shammua, Shaphat, Igal, Palti, Geuel, Gaddiel, Gaddi, Ammiel, Sethur, Nahbi were the ten who came back from the scouting expedition with a negative report of gloom and doom, they came back as "No Va" salesmen, saying "No Go!" and influencing the people to disregard God's promises and disobey God's command to enter the land. Joshua and Caleb, on the other hand, were the two who came back encouraging the people to **trust God's promises**, to trust God's faithfulness and enter the land God had promised them; in short, they encouraged the people TO LIVE BY FAITH. Now, do you want to name your child after so-called leaders who are really faithless, feckless cowards who go on to lead their people and their children into four decades of difficulty? Or do you want to name your child after faithful, honorable, courageous, even heroic people who chose to honor God? I'll let the testimony of history answer that rhetorical question. Also, as I told the children ... the subtext calling here is to do *your* level best to live in such a courageous way that YOU will have a name worth remembering, a name worth giving. (*I preached on this passage in September 2002. Charles & Cheryl Hall were members at the time; Cheryl was expecting their third child and first son. After the sermon Charlie told me he knew what to name their son. Caleb Hall was born December 2002, baptized here the following Mother's Day!*)

As we pick the story up in Numbers, it's been two years since the Hebrews left slavery in Egypt. Two long hard years of walking through the desert, holding on to God's promise that they would one day reach the Promised Land (*last week we looked at an account later in Numbers that took place near the end of their four decade wanderings*). The way to the Promised Land was hard; no doubt about it. But it is precisely on that hard road these people of God were being taught valuable lessons of faith. It was God Who day in and day out provided for them in the desert. Step by step, day after day, week after week, month after month the people received one lesson in God's faithfulness after another. God had sent the plagues on Egypt compelling Pharaoh to let them go. God had divided the waters of the Red Sea for them, and then closed those waters destroying the mighty chariots of Egypt. God had provided water in the desert when they were thirsty, manna when they were hungry. God had led them by a pillar of cloud by day, and a pillar of fire by night. God set them free, God led them, God rescued them, God fed them, God gave them water, and God was well within His rights to expect His people to *get it* ... to expect them to learn the cumulative lessons of faith, to learn to trust Him, along the way.

The day eventually comes when it's time to put the lessons of faith into practice ... to step out in faith, leave that lonely, isolated, miserable wilderness where you've been, and fully enter into the promises God has for you. You see, God never asks anyone to stay out in the wilderness. Take advantage of the changes in your life, take advantage of the cumulative lessons of faith, grab hold of the new life God is offering you and step forward into it! The road doesn't have to always be so hard! After two years of being on the hard road, God has finally brought the Hebrews to the southern border of the Promised Land. The Lord told Moses to send twelve leaders to explore the land. Just to be clear, in case there was any confusion about where to go, God clarified, "*THE LAND THAT I AM GIVING TO YOU.*" So that's what they do. Forty days later these men returned from their intelligence gathering mission. They

¹ A bit of a disclaimer ... although it does appear in marketing manuals, this may be urban legend. See <http://www.snopes.com/business/misxlate/nova.asp>

brought back some fruit of the land: pomegranates, figs, and a single cluster of grapes that was so big they had to tie it to a pole and carry it between two men! They reported, "Yes, this is indeed a land that flows with milk and honey." And I'm sure the people are getting excited, "This is wonderful; we finally arrived!" "BUT!" ten of the men say. "BUTBUTBUT." Shammua, Shaphat, Igal, Palti, Geuel, Gaddiel, Gaddi, Ammiel, Sethur, Nahbi. ... you know, the ones whose names *nobody remembers* ... say, in so many words, "We know what God promised us, but this is a land that devours those who enter it; it'll just eat us up! All the people there are really big! We saw the Nephilim, these huge descendants of Anak, and when we looked at them we felt like grasshoppers in comparison. It's too dangerous." In short, these ten wanted everyone to get in their "No Vas" and no go in! The two other men, Joshua and Caleb ... the ones whose names everybody remembers to this day ... they object, in so many words saying, "Giants? Who cares about giants? The name of this place is the PROMISED Land, remember? If God has promised to give us this land, and if He has been faithful to us to this day, why worry about the Nephilim? Let's go!"

But the people decided to go with the majority report. In chapter 14, we read, "All the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron; the whole congregation said to them, 'Would that we had died in the land of Egypt or that we had died in this wilderness!' So they said to one another, 'Let us choose a leader and go back to Egypt.'" Never underestimate the power of fear and faithlessness. After all they had seen and experienced every single day for over two years, it's amazing the people would grumble like this. Even after tasting freedom, they now just want to go back to the way it was, back to the wretched but familiar old slaveries, all because they're afraid of some giants in the way ... giants, by the way, that most of them had never seen!

What was it Joshua and Caleb did that no one else seemed to do? They *remembered*. They remembered the cumulative lessons of faith. They remembered the faithfulness of God, they remembered the promise of God, and they believed in it. More to the point, they believed in the God who made the promise. That belief changed everything. It changed the way they looked at the "giants," and more importantly, it changed the way they looked at themselves. They didn't waste their hard road experiences. Caleb and Joshua had been learning and rehearsing the daily lessons of faith learned the last two years, and it changed them. Going back to Egypt simply wasn't an option, because they weren't slaves anymore. Nor were they satisfied to spend life isolated in a dreary but "safe" wilderness. For Joshua and Caleb, if God has been leading thus far, then the giants aren't in *our* way. The giants are in **God's** way, and there aren't any giants big enough to keep God from getting what He wants!

What you believe shapes your identity (*more properly, WHO you believe*). What and who you really believe shapes your whole vision of reality. What and who you really believe directs how you will live. What and who you really believe gives you heart ... or it takes away your heart. This is never more true than when we start to respond to the invitation of Jesus Christ to follow Him, *really* follow and obey and honor Him, as He leads us into the future He has for us. Yes, there may be some giants standing between that future and you. So what are you going to do? Are you going to go with the "majority report," give up and/or give in and back out? Or are you going to exercise the lessons of faith you've learned along the way and take on the giants by refusing to be afraid? It's your choice. Of course, it may appear foolish and even dangerous to take on the giants. Some would say the presence of dangerous giants is a sign that you should turn back. According to today's text, ten out of twelve people surveyed would say that. "You may think this is what God wants, but all the really BIG people, all the really BIG social movements, all the really BIG and influential voices in our culture say this isn't the way to go." No! The mission of the church is to emulate Joshua and Caleb, to proclaim and uphold the minority report that remembers the faithfulness of God, believes in His promises, trusts His word, and boldly goes out to live and act *accordingly*.

We read in the next chapter that when the Hebrews voted against entering the Promised Land, the really scary thing is that God honored their choice. He said, in so many words, "Fine. If you don't want to go into the Promised Land, you don't have to. You can just stay here in the desert until you die. I'll bring your kids in." If we want to spend the rest of our lives wandering around aimlessly in the lonely desert of lost hopes because we were afraid of what the unseen giants might do, or what the giants might think, God will say OK; He won't force us. Now, it certainly would have been a whole lot better for these Hebrews *and their children* had they acted in faith in the first place ... it would have saved everyone thirty-eight years of heartache and difficulty! But rather than aligning with the only two men whose names are worth remembering and saying, "If this is where God is leading us, then let's go!", the people voted not to enter the land because to them, the giants **most of them haven't even seen yet** were bigger and more real to them than the God who so visibly, demonstrably and faithfully freed them, fed them, cared for each and every one of them these past two-plus years. So God honored their choice, a choice born out of fear and faithlessness, and that generation wandered in the desert until they died.

There is a wonderful epilogue to this story. Thirty-eight years later, after all those adults (*the ones who went with the "majority report" and voted against entering the land*) had died out in the desert, there were only two left ... Joshua and Caleb. Joshua and Caleb lived to ripe old ages and took their families into the Promised Land with them. We do hear quite a bit about Joshua after that as he was given the mantle of leadership by Moses and led the people into the land, but we don't hear much about Caleb ... except for a brief but significant reference in Joshua 14. There we are told that seven years after they finally entered the land, an 85 year old man named Caleb fought against the giant Nephilim, those big descendants of Anak ... and he *defeated* them.