

EAGLES VS. THE GIANTS

Sermon, February 12, 2023

Texts: Exodus 19:1-6, 16-17; Numbers 13:1-3, 25-33

Three months after the Red Sea crossing, the Hebrews have now come to the base of Mt. Sinai where they made camp. There they are about to have a terrifying experience in worship. Like the Hebrews, we too begin our experience of worship by taking our place at the base of a holy mountain. That's what worship is; coming to the holy mountain of God. At the top of this mountain is your Creator, the One Who delivered you from your old slaveries, the One Who parted the waters of the Red Sea for you, the holy and righteous One Who expects a little holiness and righteousness from you. Now, I know it looks like you are simply coming to 805 Main Avenue, and this chancel hardly looks like a mountain, and the one speaking from this pulpit is certainly not God ... despite what a few impressionable young children have called me from time to time over the years ... but that is really what we seek to do in worship. We seek to join the people of God who have come to the base of the holy mountain to meet with God and hear His direction for our lives. In verse 4, the call to worship is given by God to Moses to give to the people: "You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I carried you on eagle's wings and brought you to Myself. Now if you will obey Me fully and keep My covenant, then out of all nations you will be My treasured possession ... although the whole earth is Mine, you will be for Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." That's the voice from the top of the mountain, offering us, the people called by God, this amazing covenant, an "if - then" covenant: "If you obey My voice, THEN you will be My holy priests, My treasured possession." We then read in verses 16-17, "On the morning of the third day, there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain." This is the setting for the Ten Commandments and related divine instructions.

In a way, every Sunday we come into worship and camp for an hour at the base of God's mountain where we hear God's Word read and proclaimed. *(Sometimes I wish we still had the help of the heavenly trumpet, thunder and lightning to snap us to attention each Sunday; but our excellent musical preludes are designed to do just that ... they are designed to bring us to quiet attention as we enter the presence of God).* Every time we welcome you here, be clear we are welcoming you into the presence of God; we want to meet God. That's what we seek to do each Sunday. And one big reason we are called together is to remember. "REMEMBER what God has done." "REMEMBER how the Lord God carried you, lifted you, on eagle's wings and brought you to Himself. Remember that it is God who changed your destiny from being just a slave to now being on your way to true freedom." Remember. Remember. Remember what God has done. "Remember" is THE most frequent command given in the Scripture. REMEMBER. *(And as you might remember, the second most frequent command is "Fear not." There's a sermon in itself here, but quite often the cause of our fears is that we fail to remember the presence and power of God).* That is a large part of the reason why we read aloud holy words of Scripture written thousands of years ago. It is why we participate in the church's old rituals, recite the old creeds, and sing the old hymns with these wonderfully majestic lyrics, and why we keep telling and retelling the old, old stories "... of Jesus and His love." All of the glorious things of old can be like a light shining behind us illuminating the way ahead ... as we remember, we trust and obey.

As we pick the story up in Numbers, it is twenty or so months after the scene in Exodus 19; it's now 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. 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. He *had* carried them on eagle's wings. 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 and fear not, trust Him and obey, along the way.

You know, 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 by faith into the promises God has for you. Don't 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 boldly 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, God clarified, "THE LAND THAT I AM GIVING TO YOU, THE ISRAELITES." So that's what they do. Forty days later these men returned from their intelligence gathering mission. They 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." "*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 just all too dangerous ... we shouldn't go in!*" The two other men, Joshua and Caleb, object, in so many words saying, "*Giants? Who cares about giants? We were carried here on eagle's wings, remember? And the Eagles always beat the Giants! (that's a little Super Bowl Sunday joke). Also, 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 the next chapter, chapter 14, we can 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 just want to go back to the way it was, back to the wretched but familiar old slaveries, because they're afraid of some giants in the way ... giants, by the way, most of them had **never seen!**

What was it Joshua and Caleb did that no one else seemed to do? They *remembered* the cumulative lessons of faith. They remembered the faithfulness of God, they remembered the promise of God, and they believed it. More to the point, they believed in the God who made the promise to give them the land. That memory and that belief changed everything. It changed the way they looked at the "giants," and more importantly, it changed the way they looked at themselves. Caleb and Joshua had been paying attention, learning and rehearsing the lessons of faith over 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 content to spend life isolated by fear in a dreary but familiar wilderness. For Joshua and Caleb, if God has carried them thus far on eagle's wings, 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 and directs how you will live. What and who you really believe gives you heart ... or, depending on what or who you *really* believe, it can take away your heart. This is never more true than when we start to respond in belief 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 will you do? Will you go with the "majority report," give up and/or give in and/or back out? Or are you going to remember the lessons of faith you've learned along the way, face the "giants" and fear not? It's your choice. Of course, it may appear foolish and even dangerous to take on the giants. Some would say the presence of giants is a sign 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, and especially those who would serve the church as leaders, 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 forward to live and act *accordingly*.

We can also read in the next chapter that when the Hebrews voted against entering the Promised Land, the really frightening 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 some "giants" might do to us, 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 eventually saved everyone thirty-eight more years of heartache and wandering and difficulty! But rather than aligning with the only two leaders who would say, "*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.

Some of you remember there is a wonderful epilogue to this story. Thirty-eight years later, after almost all those adults had died out in the desert, there were only two left ... Joshua and Caleb. Joshua and Caleb lived to ripe old ages in the wilderness and eventually took their families into the Promised Land with them. We do read quite a bit about Joshua after that, 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 had finally entered the land, an 85 year old man named Caleb fought against the giant Nephilim, those big descendents of Anak ... and he *defeated* them.