

## Faith in the Wilderness: Are We Grasshoppers or Giants?

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Caldwell Presbyterian Church

Rev. John Cleghorn

Numbers 13:26-28, 13:32-14:3

Romans 5:1-8

Last fall, as our 3D Dream Team began its work, Elder Beth Van Gorp suggested we read a brief paper from the Case Foundation, a leading organization in the realm of philanthropy, non-profit strategy and innovation. The theme of the paper was the need to think boldly when starting something new. It was a well-timed message for the Dream Team, whose members applied it faithfully as they sorted and sized the dozens of ideas for new ministries, small, medium-sized and “big and bold.”

The paper focused in part on the need for partnerships today, which is a guiding principle for our ongoing planning. The paper quoted the African proverb that says, “If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.” Good advice for getting anything done today.

But that is not to say that we should proceed with meekness and fear as we seek to do new things for God, each other and our neighbors. So the paper lifted up another quote, this one from Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who said in the midst of the Civil Rights struggle: “This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism.”<sup>1</sup>

So it is that we move ahead with our congregational discernment, building on your suggestions and ideas, seeking to balance wisdom with an abiding sense of urgency.

So it is also that we can move ahead in our personal journeys in this season of Lent. Lent is a time to look within ourselves and see what might separate us from the God who went to the cross on our behalf. Together we are pondering the theme of *Metamorphosis: Becoming God's Beloved*. It is meant as an invitation to take whatever steps necessary to step out of our normal routines in some way in these 40 days. We might even enter a wilderness of sorts, a place where the trappings of the world can't hamper our chance to see ourselves in light of the promise of our loving Creator.

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<sup>1</sup> Both quotes from [casefoundation.org/befearless](http://casefoundation.org/befearless)

But sometimes fear gets in the way. It's true for all of us. No matter how sincere we may be in wanting to walk more intimately and trustingly with God, our human capacity for doubt and questioning grips us with sometimes-paralyzing power.

As people of faith, we live in that tension on a daily basis, don't we? God asks us to believe in things we cannot see or sometimes understand. But we insist on dwelling in what is familiar and comfortable, things of our own creation, even if it is not good for us. So it was with Moses and the children of Israel as we heard in our Old Testament reading from the Book of Numbers.

You remember that part of the story of God with us. God had called Moses to lead the chosen ones out of slavery in Egypt and to go to a place God had promised to them. But it was a place they had never been before. The journey was hard. Time and again, the children of Israel complained and even turned to idol gods. But the Lord remained loyal to them.

Then the day came when they were almost there, almost to Canaan, the Promised Land. Moses was a wise leader. He sent scouts ahead to see what kind of land it was his people were to enter. He told them to be bold, just as recommended by Dr. King in the quote from the paper I cited a moment ago. But, as with the African proverb in the paper, Moses also told them to remember they were not alone. Hardly, as the Lord would protect and keep them.

The scouts were gone for 40 days, the Bible's often-used saying that means a while, longer than a weekend but not as long, probably, as this interminable winter of 2014. The children of Israel waited for their return. How eager and excited they must have been. They had left all they knew. They had traveled so far.

Finally, the 40 days were over and the scouts returned. They reported the Promised Land did indeed flow with milk and honey, as the Lord had promised. They showed the marvelous fruit they brought back. After all that time in the wilderness and dry desert, how the people's mouths must have watered in anticipation of receiving God's abundance.

But there was one thing the scouts did not come back with - and it made all the difference. They did not come back with their faith. The translation of the Bible called the Message tells it this way. The scouts said:

'The people who live there are fierce, their cities are huge and well fortified. Worse yet, we saw descendants of giants. We can't attack those people; they are way stronger than we are.'

The scouts spread scary rumors among the People of Israel. They said ... 'it's a land that swallows people whole. Everybody we saw was huge .... Alongside them we felt like grasshoppers. And they looked down on us as if we were grasshoppers.'

Scripture goes on to say that the people cried all night and then complained to their leaders they wished they had remained in slavery in Egypt or even died in the wilderness rather than to enter the Land God has promised them.

Jesus' oft-quoted saying, "O, ye of little faith" didn't come close to capturing the unbelief of God's chosen people.

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After a recent sermon, one of you shared a photograph taken on a vacation. It was of a statue of Jesus that was in a great European cathedral. It casts Jesus sitting down, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. He is stripped to just a covering for his waist. The crown of thorns sits on his head and blood trickles down his cheek.

Everything about Christ's appearance speaks of exhaustion and he holds his head in his right hand, covering his eyes, conveying a kind of heart-broken dismay, as if he is trying to fathom what more he could do for those who still do not believe in him.

God must have felt that way when Moses' scouts came back and turned the children of Israel against him and Aaron and the other leaders, saying they would rather have died than continue to trust in this God they could not see or touch or hear.

But that is the way it is with us sometimes, if we are honest. Faith is faith because it is not something we can keep in a jar and store on a shelf, taking a spoonful at a time, if and when we need it.

We can't grasp it in our hands, unlike the things of this world. We can't wield it like a sword. Faith doesn't put gas in the tank of the car or money in our bank account. It can't be captured or measured in worldly ways. It can't be used to settle an argument, not really. That's the way it is with things of God.

Frederick Buechner says, "Almost nothing that makes any real difference can be proved .... Faith can't prove a damned thing. Or a blessed thing either."

Perhaps that is why we need to separate ourselves from worldly things, worldly distractions, worldly fears and anxieties to see God more clearly, more vividly, more really. With faith, we don't have to rely on our own self-confidence alone. That is what the children of Israel might have learned in their wilderness passage on the way to the Promised Land. All that time on the road to the Promised Land, all those times God stood strong when the children of Israel were weak.

But, when it counted, none of it took. It all went away ... and when? When they were almost to their destination, just when they figured they were so close that their trust in God wouldn't be needed. They lost sight of the God who had delivered them. They didn't see the land of milk and honey. Instead, all they could see were giants and fortified cities.

How appropriate then that they reported that the people in the Promised Land looked down on them as if they were grasshoppers. The scouts had already done that to themselves. The scouts had already rendered themselves to that state of weak insignificance. Then they infected the rest of the children of Israel with the same fear, doubt and insect-sized trust in their Maker and Protector.

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As with anything that is worth having, we know that faith is not easily or quickly achieved, not the kind that lasts anyway. It is a life's work, in some ways. So many today are on that road and, to many, it seems a wilderness road at times. Those who can stay on the road travel it knowing they are not alone. That's when the light bulb goes off. When we know we are not traveling alone, but with the Lord, that is, as the saying goes, when the journey becomes the destination.

It is not an easy path to travel but it can be easier when our faith goes ahead of us and delivers us through. God doesn't promise first-class pleasure cruises. The children of Israel should have known that better than anyone.

The Apostle Paul, who traveled his own difficult path, knew that when he wrote the passage we heard in today's lectionary reading from Romans.

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which

we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

I call on this passage in my own life. Some of you have told me that you do, as well. What sticks with me in particular is Paul's sequence of how suffering leads ultimately to hope ... but not without a few steps in between. When we are in suffering it is hard to see that we will ever get to hope. Without faith, in fact, we have little chance of seeing hope. With faith, however, we can put one foot in front of the other and travel the stepping stones Paul lays out for us.

Faith in God, Paul says, promises us that suffering leads to endurance, that ability to simply keep going. Endurance leads to character, the mettle of our being, the courage to keep going. Character leads to hope. And hope in the love of our Creator does not disappoint us, Paul says.

Each of us at different times stands at different places along that progression. You may be at what seems like only the beginning of your suffering. Or you may have made it forward to the way station of endurance, where your faith refills you to move ahead. Or perhaps you are borne by the strength of character, character that is grounded in your trust in the Divine even when you can't see the final destination. Or you may be within sight of hope. I hope so because there is hope no matter what we are facing.

At the same time, though, let us all be reminded that it was at that exact same place – just when Israel could glimpse hope - when God's people forgot their deliverer. And, once faith was forgotten, hope vanished and they wished they were dead.

Here at Caldwell, we are invited in this season of Lent to take up the journey of transfiguration and metamorphosis. It is not an invitation to become something other than who we really are. It IS an invitation to become exactly who we are – God's beloved, as each of us was formed in our mother's womb.

Speaking through the prophet Isaiah, God said, "My grace shall not depart from you."<sup>2</sup> As we seek full return to being God's beloved, I close with a reflection on that short but life-giving verse by the theologian Karl Barth. He wrote:

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<sup>2</sup> Is. 54:10

This means: I the Lord am good to you – not only good from far away – but rather, I the Lord turn to you and do so not as a mere gesture with empty hands. I the Lord will look after you and – what's more – I the Lord will now take your concerns, the concerns of your life into my hands, make them my own concerns, and thus make them good.

Because you are such a fine person? Because you have earned it? No, no. Not for that reason! But because I so choose and want to be gracious to you .... You are a disobedient child ... but I want to be a faithful father to you. That is the grace that will not depart from you. Why not? Simply because it is grace and it is absolutely not dependent on you – because it is my grace, not human but divine grace!

... When it comes to grace, we are all ungrateful bunglers, but grace will not depart from you or from me or from any of us!<sup>3</sup>

Sisters and brothers of Caldwell church, this is the grace we seek to know fully and it lies ahead, at the foot of the cross and the mouth of the open tomb.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Insights, Karl Barth's Reflections on the Life of Faith, p. 32