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Scripture: Numbers 13:25-14:4

Don't look down. That's what they say when you are high up in the air, a long way from the ground. It's because if you look down you may begin to imagine all the really bad things that could happen. When we stop to ponder how steep the climb, how far we have to fall, and the sharpness of the rocks at the bottom, fear takes hold. What if my foot slips or I lose my grip? What if I make a mistake and lose my way or run out of strength before I make it to the top? There's never a shortage of things to fear.

In a tactic that would never be possible under today's rules, legendary Notre Dame football coach, Knute Rockne, once prepared for a major game by sending his assistants out into all the rough, working-class bars of South Bend. Their orders were to recruit the meanest-looking characters they could find with one criterion: that they were really, really big. Coach Rockne put them all in Notre Dame football uniforms and had them run out onto the field along with the real team members. He never put a single one of those giants into the game — he couldn't have, without breaking the rules— but the mere fact that the opponents saw them sitting on the bench was enough. Fear did its work: Notre Dame won the game.¹

Fear is a strong motivator. It causes us to lock doors and then double check that we've locked them. It causes us to check for monsters under the bed or in the closet. It causes us to make the safe, known decision rather than venturing out into an unknown future. Fear is, of course, not always a bad thing. There are some situations where that raised hair, gut intuition we experience in a situation is nature's way of keeping us safe. But fear run rampant can also keep us from God's will for our lives, as well as a future that might be better than what we can currently imagine. Fear makes our problems and next steps seem more difficult and illusive than they might actually be.

When Moses and the Israelites reached the southern border of Canaan, Moses sent out spies into the land—the land that God promised to them—to scout it out and report back about its inhabitants and the landscape. After forty days, the spies reported back, saying: “We entered the land to which you sent us. It's actually full of milk and honey, and this is its fruit. There are, however, powerful people who live in the land. The cities have huge fortifications.” (Numbers 13:27-28). One of the spies, Caleb, encouraged them to go up and take the land like God had told them to do, but the others said, “We are not able to go up against this people, for they are stronger than we.... all the people that we saw in it are of great size... to ourselves we seemed like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them.” (Numbers 13:30-33) To this, the whole gathered assembly raised their voices and criticized Moses and Aaron saying, “If only we had died in the land of Egypt or if only we had died in this desert! Why is the LORD bringing us to this land to fall by the sword?... Wouldn't it be better for us to return to Egypt?” Then they said, “Let's pick a leader and let's go back to Egypt.” (Numbers 14:1-4).

Now before we go any further, let's reflect on all that these people have encountered and witnessed over the last several years. These people were the same people God brought out of Egypt, freed from slavery at Pharaoh's hand. They followed the pillar of cloud and fire into the wilderness where they witnessed God's divine work as he receded the waters of the Red Sea so they could pass on dry land. They were fed by God's own hand with manna and quail in the wilderness. They received God's covenant law and built a tabernacle where the very cloud of God's presence resided. And now they sit on the cusp of the promise God had made to them and

¹ homiletics.com

are unable to move. This is where they have been heading ever since they left Egypt, and now they sit on the border of the promised land, paralyzed by fear.

We can sit here and criticize the Israelites for their lack of faith, but let's be honest with ourselves. Would we be any different? It is easier for us to look back and see where God has been with us in the past than it is to imagine how God will carry us into an unknown future. "Hindsight is 20/20" is what we say. So, we long for what was, rather than stepping forward into God's promises. Even if the past was not ideal, at least we knew what to expect.

For the Israelites, the fear of moving into the blessing of God was stronger than the memory of what they endured in Egypt. At least in Egypt they knew what to expect. Was it ideal? By no means, but it was familiar. They were afraid that to move forward would mean their death, even though God had led them to this point, protecting and sustaining them time and time again in the wilderness. Now on the cusp of something new, they couldn't see how God could take them forward. We have probably all come to these times in our own lives.

This scripture is one that I used when Pastor Tim and I were down at Staunton Church of the Brethren back in the spring for their revival. The point of that weekend was to explore how to move into an unknown future as a church. Many in the church nationwide are concerned as they see the church they once knew, fade and change. For the Staunton Church of the Brethren, they wanted to hear from scripture what it would mean to move into an unknown, and often scary, future. I used this scripture to talk about how God moves with us into his future, even when we deem it dangerous and threatening. We are often like the people of Israel on the cusp of something new, convinced that it is something to be feared because we cannot imagine what it will be like or even if God will go with us into this unknown future.

Kari Myers writes, "...if we set our minds to it, we can probably all come up with a substantial list of reasons why we cannot overcome the challenges God has set before us. Sometimes the reasons have to do with the problem. It's just too big, too hard, too complicated. Sometimes it's us. We're not strong enough, not smart enough, not up to the challenge, often in more than one way.... But then there's God.... The key to successfully climbing mountains doesn't actually have to do with the difficulty of the mountain or the skill of the climber. It's about the one who made both mountain and climber. God is bigger than our biggest problem and he is not limited by our weaknesses. When we believe that, it doesn't matter how high the mountain or how weak the climber. If we focus on God instead of our troubles and shortcomings, we can do whatever it is he has called us to do."²

In other words, it's less about the greatness of our trials before us and more about the greatness of our God. It's less about the bigness of our fears and more about the bigness of our God. If our God is small, then our fear and anxiety about the future depends on us and us alone. We cannot take risks because our safety depends on it. But if our God is large, then we can step out into the future with courage and wisdom because we know that God is at work.³

Eleanor Roosevelt once said, "You gain strength, courage and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You are able to say to yourself, 'I have lived through this horror. I can take the next thing that comes along.' You must do the thing you think you cannot do."

When God responds to his people's lack of courage, he first threatens to strike them down and disinherit them. But when Moses pled on their behalf, God said that he would forgive

² Kari Myers, *HomeTouch*, August 22, 2019

³ Jennifer Heinz, "Stepping out in faith," *Brookhaven Christian Church Web Site*, November 4, 2007. brookhavenchristian.org.

them, but no one who had come out of the land of Egypt and dwelt with God in the wilderness would see the land that he promised to them. Only Caleb, who believed God and encouraged the people to go into the promised land, would be able to go into the land.

This is not the kind of church we want to be: so unable to see the promises of God in the future that we will truly never see it. Instead, we will always pine for what was, convinced that the only way to go is backward. If this is our attitude, we will never see or enjoy the fruit of God's labor. We will never enjoy the work of tending to God's vineyard in his promised land that is the unknown future ahead. We will surely die in the wilderness. However, if we are like Caleb, convinced that God's promises can lead us into an unknown territory, safely and with confidence, then we will not only see the changing of the church, but get to be a part of the change and be changed as well. The church isn't going anywhere;, it's just moving into a whole new land.

Thomas Merton once prayed these beautiful words about God overcoming and overshadowing our fears even as we move into an unknown future: "My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope that I have that desire in all that I am doing. And I know that if I do this, you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore, will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death, I will not fear, for you are ever with me and you will never leave me to face my perils alone."

May we move into the unknown future, not paralyzed by fear, but confident that God's presence will not leave us. For Christ has promised that he will be with us, to the end of the age. May that overcome all our fears. Amen.