

Panic in the Face of Promise?

A sermon on Numbers 13-14 & Matthew 15:29-39 by Nathan Nettleton, 11 October 2020

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Message

We are often afraid to face what must be faced in order to enter the new world God has promised, but God continues to promise an abundance of blessings when we overcome our fears and obey.

Sermon

I want to take us on journey tonight into the story we heard in our first reading about the Israelites arriving at the promised land after escaping from slavery in Egypt, and then dropping their bundle, unable to trust God, and being sent back into the wilderness for forty years. In various ways we have all lived this story. The question is whether we can start writing ourselves a new ending.

Two of the major themes from the Season of Creation that we observed over the past five weeks reappear in this story. Firstly there is the land itself, a rich and fertile land which the people turn away from. That connection will be part of where we go tonight.

Secondly, there is the Indigenous peoples of the land, and the plans for a genocidal campaign to dispossess them of their country. We cannot deny that that is part of the stories of the Israelite conquest of the promised land, and we've only been given the stories as told by the winners, the conquerers, the colonisers. That raises some pretty big questions about our use of these stories.

In particular we need to ask whether their belief that God was calling them to exterminate the Indigenous peoples was a tragic misunderstanding right from the start. Everything that we know from the revelation of God's character in Jesus would suggest that it was, and that the world has been paying for that mistake ever since. It is instructive to note that one of the only parts of the Hebrew Bible that Jesus never quotes is the book of Joshua, the book of conquest, even though it bears his name – Joshua being the Hebrew form of Jesus. Jesus wants nothing to do with this genocidal perspective.

Important as it is, that is not the sermon I want to preach tonight, but I need to acknowledge it, and aspects of it will come back at us from another angle.

We actually know this story better than we think we do. We know it because we have lived it. At a psychological and emotional level, we have lived this story over and over, both as a community and as individuals. Let me retell the story in one sentence, and see if you don't recognise yourself in it.

God calls us into a promised wonderful new life, and we get right to the doorstep, and suddenly it all looks too big and too scary, and we panic and run away, and spend years paying for our missed opportunity.

Familiar? It certainly is to me. I've lived it more times than I care to remember. And as a pastor, I've sat with many of you, listening to you telling me that same story. I doubt whether there are any of us who haven't been there. Which, of course, is precisely why this story is still in our Bibles and continues to speak truth to us.

So let's go into it a bit deeper and invite God to speak to us again.

A couple of our visiting preachers back in May reminded us that the COVID crisis has us living in a "liminal" space. That is to say that we have left behind an old world, but we have not yet arrived in the new. We are in transition, betwixt and between. But that story is far more common than just COVID, and here we are in the same place in this old biblical story.

We have left behind our old life, the life of slavery, a life that was familiar and stable and predictable, but constricted and miserable. We have escaped into the wilderness, into the liminal "in between" space, and we are pushing forward in hope of a wonderful new life in a promised land of wide open spaces flowing with milk and honey. And here we are, our journey behind us, standing now on the threshold of the promised land.

The first thing we do is pause and take stock. Moses sends out twelve explorers, respected leaders from each of the twelve tribes, to inspect the land and bring us back a report. Why? Well the Bible is not even sure itself. This version suggests that it was God's idea, but a later summary in the book of Deuteronomy (1:22-25) suggests that it was the people's idea because perhaps they were a bit wary about whether God's promises could be trusted. Be that as it may, we know this feeling. We want to know what is ahead of us. Is the promised land as good as it sounds, and what are we up against if we enter it?

So we send out the explorers, and when they finally return, they are carrying a bunch of ripe grapes so enormous that it takes two of them to carry it on a pole across their shoulders. It's a promised land alright, a land of fertile fields and productive vineyards, a land flowing with milk and honey, wine and beer. A land that dreams are made of. The place to be.

I can't tell you what the personal hopes and dreams you've been promised are. Our individual fields and grape clusters are all different. But while we each have a personal version of this story, it is first and foremost a community story. The call is to us, as a whole society. Your vineyard and mine might be different, but the promised land they belong to is for all of us.

So what are the explorers telling *us*? What does this promised land, this new world, look like?

We hardly need to send out the explorers anymore, because information and analysis moves so freely in today's world that we all have access to the intelligence reports. We've seen crowds in the streets waving placards and chanting the details.

- A new world of environmental flourishing and sustainability.
- A new world of racial justice where all lives matter because black lives matter and brown lives matter and any threat to them is taken just as seriously as threats to white lives.
- A new world of truth and reconciliation, where the truth of our past atrocities can be openly acknowledged and healing can come and new relationships can flourish grounded in truth and a shared destiny.
- A new world of economic justice where no child lives in poverty, and where homelessness can be eliminated, not just temporarily during a health crisis, but permanently for the good of us all.

- A new world where lovers and families treat one another with love and respect and generosity and resilient tenderness, and no one lives in fear of violent broken abusers who have been raised without love and who live without hope.

Of course we fled the land of slavery for a promise like that. Of course we gathered up our children and our belongings and trekked through that tough liminal wilderness to get here. This is the same vision that was enacted in our gospel reading when Jesus started with grossly insufficient resources, and suddenly there was more than enough for all, and a crowd of thousands ate their fill and had basketfuls left over. This is the new world we are being invited to enter and live in. And here we are, at the threshold, and sure enough the report from the explorers confirms that such abundance is exactly what lies before us.

But then it all goes wrong. Suddenly the explorers switch from talking about the beautiful vision of this joyous new life, and turn their attention to process. This is not going to be easy. There are significant obstacles. We are going to have to tackle some monstrous giants if we are going to go there.

Now again, for each of us, there will be some personal giants related to our individual visions and dreams, but we are a gathered people and there are also some monsters that face us all as we try to adjust to the new world to which we have been called.

This planet would be fried within just a few years if six billion people were to consume resources at even half the level that you and I consume resources. So the level of lifestyle change required to bring the whole world out of poverty and into a life of abundance, which of course looks so attractive to two thirds of the world, actually looks pretty threatening to me. When I listen to the reports of the explorers, it begins to look like a fierce giant, way too big and scary for me to tackle.

If we are going to live in a land where all lives matter because black lives matter as much as white, then white fellas like me are going to have to confront some tough and scary truths about what's being done in our name and what sort of historic injustices we are still profiting from. We are going to have to face up to the fragile resentful demons that rise up in us each time we hear a blunt statement like the one I just made, and start screaming "not all white people" or "not all men" or "not all of whatever part of my identity feels under attack at this particular moment".

We all want to believe that we are good people, and that it can't possibly be right and fair to lump us all in together and hold us all responsible for the present state of the world. And there is some truth in that. But it is also true that there were good white South Africans during apartheid and good Germans during the Nazi era who were dismayed by what was going on but felt powerless to do anything and so did nothing. In the future people will talk about us in exactly the same light – good Australians who were dismayed by the rate of Indigenous deaths in custody and the holding of asylum seekers in endless detention. And why?

Because here we are, standing at the threshold of the promised land, the new world of justice and joy that God has called us to live in and promised to empower us to take hold of, but here we stand, paralysed by fear of the monsters and giants. Just the thought of them makes us feel small and powerless and hopeless. We completely lose our grip on what God has promised. We lose faith in God's ability to deal with the obstacles and get us from here to there. If only

we had just contented ourselves with making bricks in Egypt. We'd have been better off dying slowly of hopelessness in the desert than at the hands of these giants.

Sisters and brothers, here we stand again. We've been here before, and we have the stories of those who fled from this spot before to warn us of what will become of us if we let our fears conquer us again and stumble defeated back into the wilderness.

Of course, what you'd like me to do now is set before you a five step plan to overcome our fears and become the model citizens of this wonderful new world of love and justice and peace and harmony. But I can't do that. I can't do that because I am one of you. I'd like to be a Caleb or a Joshua, the only two of the twelve explorers who had the faith and confidence to believe that the people could enter the promised land in the safekeeping of God, and begin to live the life of the new world. I'd like to be able to stand before you as one of those two, but I'm not. I'm as daunted and broken and burdened as you are. I don't like the look of those giants either.

So all I can do right now is say Stop. Let's hold our nerve. Let's not drop our bundle and miss this opportunity again. We can do this together because this new world we are longing for is nothing less than the culture of God being born into our world. We can do this together because Jesus has gathered us into his body and shown us that not even the most powerful violent forces of the old world can entomb his body for more than a few days. We can do this because even when there are thousands of us and we are all desperately hungry for this new life and there are only a few bread rolls and a couple of sardines to go around, when we turn to Jesus with our meagre resources, we always find that there is a ridiculous abundance, basketfuls of leftovers and brunches of grapes that two men can barely carry.

So what do we do right now? Right now we do what we are about to do right now. We pray. We pray the vision of the promised land. We pray that God will keep that vision alive within us, and that God's will be done on earth as in heaven, and we offer ourselves as answers to those prayers. We pray.

And we break bread. We take these utterly inadequate offerings of a few pieces of bread or fish and a little fruit of the vine, and we offer them to Jesus, celebrating his astonishing abundance and offering ourselves to be the little crowd through which his abundance is offered to the whole world. And if we wait and hope and pray and break bread and trust Jesus, we don't have to follow the rest of the script the way it was recorded in the book of Numbers. We don't have to repeat the mistakes of our past. We can become the bread broken and the wine poured out for the life of the world that overcomes the monsters and brings the new world to birth. Let us offer ourselves to that vision, and let it be so.