

“An Army of Grasshoppers”

Numbers 13:26-14:9

Series: Road Trip Week 2. God is with us even when we wander

The Rev. Dr. Douglas C. Hoglund

The Woodside Church

July 13, 2025

We just finished a great week of Vacation Bible School. The theme is the same as this month’s sermon series: Road Trip: On the Go with God. When you take a road trip with the family, does this ever happen to you? The car is loaded up. The kids are strapped in their seats. The house is locked. You pull out of the driveway, and before you get to the end of the block, a voice from the back asks, “Are we there yet?” For the rest of the trip you will hear that question about seven hundred times. In fact, Isaac Newton has a forgotten fourth law of motion. It isn’t about velocity or gravity. It only applies to car trips. His formula states that the number of children multiplied by the length of the trip and the amount of snacks consumed, divided by the distance between the kids in the backseat will give you the WPM: Whines per mile. “He touched me,” “Get off my side,” “I’m hungry,” “I feel sick,” “I have to use the bathroom,” “Are we there yet?”

When Moses leads the children of Israel through the wilderness, I’m sure he hears more complaining than when the Brady Bunch went to the Grand Canyon. After eleven months of camping by Mount Sinai, after the nasty cow incident, God tells Moses to start marching the people toward the Promised Land. And that’s when the grumbling begins. First they whine about travelling in the desert. Then they moan about the manna. God gives them this supernatural bread from heaven. They crush it, grind it, dice it, slice it and make thousands of julienne fries with it. They eat so much manna, they get sick of it. Can you imagine the conversation every night in those tents? “What’s for dinner?” “Manna.” “Manna again? What did you do with it this time: fried manna, manna burgers, manna-banana bread? “No, tonight we’re having Italian...manna-cotti.” “Give us meat,” they cry. So God says,

Now the Lord will give you meat, and you will eat it—until it comes out of your nostrils and you loathe it. Numbers 11:18, 20

The situation is so tense even Moses’ sister and brother, Miriam and Aaron, start to grumble and complain. And every time Moses brings their complaints to God it sounds like the Lord is about to say, “Don’t make me come down there.”

Despite the warnings the Israelites keep whining. And they whine the most when they reach the border of the Promised Land. Like a good general, Moses sends twelve scouts to scope out the terrain and bring back intelligence before the invasion. After forty days, after a five hundred mile mission, they return with glowing reports.

We went into the land to which you sent us, and it does flow with milk and honey! Here is its fruit. Numbers 13:27

Two men shoulder a pole from which hangs an enormous cluster of sweet succulent grapes. Joy explodes in the camp. ‘We are almost home.’ But the celebration is quickly snuffed out when the scouts add, ‘There are giants in that land.’

The people who live there are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large. We can’t attack those people; they are stronger than we are. The land we explored devours those living in it. All the people we saw there are of great size. We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them.
Numbers 13:28, 31-33

‘An army of grasshoppers doesn’t stand a chance against a nation of giants. They’ll squash us under their boots until all that’s left is a green stain.’ A simmering murmur now rises to a full-boil rebellion in a matter of seconds.

“If only we had died in Egypt! Or in this desert! Why is the Lord bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be taken as plunder. Wouldn’t it be better for us to go back to Egypt?” And they said to each other, “We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt.” Numbers 14:2-4

Facing an all-out revolt, Moses and Aaron fall on their faces in prayer before the nation.

Suddenly, into the eye of this swirling storm, jump two of the scouts to help their leader. With a booming voice, Caleb quiets the crowd.

“We should go up and take possession of the land,” he shouts, “for we can certainly do it.” Joshua, standing beside him, adds, “Do not rebel against the Lord.” “And do not be afraid of the people of the land,” Caleb declares, “because we will swallow them up. Their protection is gone, but the Lord is with us. Do not be afraid of them.” Numbers 14:8-9

Brave speeches from brave men. In another age, under different circumstances, with a better army, they may have led the people to a stunning victory. But not this time. To the Israelites, Moses, Aaron, Joshua and Caleb are simply the obstacles standing between them and the safety of Egypt. They begin to reach down for stones to fire at the four when a blinding fire turns the night into day. The Lord has come. All their complaining and whining in the backseat made God come down there to break it up. Because of their revolt, that whole generation of Israelites is condemned to wander the desert for forty years. They will never see their beloved Promised Land because they did not trust God to take them there.

Let’s not be so hard on the Israelites. After all, they are escaped slaves with little training in warfare and scant provisions. The gigantic foes before them can hurl spears and arrows at them from the safety of their thick walled fortresses. The enemy has the home field advantage and they are not about to budge. They are just being realistic. The Israelites do the math and every equation tells them to turn and run.

You've done the math before. Maybe even now you are on the border of an overwhelming situation. It makes you feel as tiny as a cricket in Times Square. Your resources, your abilities, your strength seem puny against the towering giants before you. What if you make the wrong decision?

The Israelites fear the unknown that awaits them in the Promised Land. Fear magnifies the size of their enemies and shrinks their own abilities. Fear makes them long for the slavery of Egypt over the freedom of their new homeland. Fear causes them to grumble and murmur and even attempt to murder God's chosen leader.

But two scouts are not afraid: Caleb and Joshua. Why? They are no fools. They know the weaknesses and the deficits on their side. They can do the math. But they add one factor into the equation the rest forget. "The Lord is with us. He will lead us," says Caleb, "Those Canaanites don't stand a chance." "But we're just an army of grasshoppers compared to them," complain the others. "Yes," says Joshua, "an army of grasshoppers that will swarm all over that land. A plague of locust that will swallow them up."

Now you might say that the problems of this world are as massive and fearful as a legion of giants. There's nothing we can do about poverty, illiteracy, AIDS, homelessness, war, racism, terrorism, injustice, drugs, and unbelief. And you are right if you are just counting on us. But don't count out my God. We may only be an army of grasshoppers, but with God's power, the Church of Jesus can swarm all over this world. How do swarms work?

1. Swarms Multiply. You can't have a swarm with one grasshopper. You need legions of them. At Woodside we are all about multiplication. This is why we have not one worship service but four. This is why we have not one Growth Group but 40. This is why we have not one or two mission but multiple projects. We need to keep multiplying. If we stop multiplying what do we get? Subtraction and Division. This is why I invite every Growth Group to start one or two Growth Groups. Don't split your Group. Don't divide your Group. Launch two leaders to start a new Group. Linda Marr and I can show you how. This Fall our Churchwide campaign will be **Love Comes to Town**. We are asking every Growth Group to join this study of God's most important gift – Love. The Letter of First John says, "God is Love" (I John 4:8) so this will be a study of the heart of God. Our goal is to multiply and start a bunch more groups. Join us!

2. Swarms Move in. They don't stay contained. They don't live in a building. They move into an area. They saturate. If this church is going to make a dent and a difference in this world we need get out of this building and into the world. We need to go where the problems are. We need to be where the people are. This is why we go to Trenton, and Kensington and Frankford and the Dominican Republic, Appalachia and the Bahamas. We make friends with neighbors so we can share God's blessings with them.

On November 2nd we will once again do The Church Has Left the Building. For those of you who were not here the previous times, the Church Has Left the Building is a Sunday in the fall when we don't hold morning worship services. Instead we gather for a

brief prayer and then go out and serve in 20-40 mission projects all in one day. If you are a leader of a mission project, would you lead a group to do a mission on that day? If you have an idea for a mission would you lead a group on that day? Let us know so we can multiply and move out.

3. Swarms Munch – How do swarms solve huge problems? With small bites. Problems appear overwhelming when you try to swallow them whole. But small consistent bites over time devour the most enormous obstacles. Are you up against a mammoth problem? Do what swarms do: multiply your support team, move out by taking a first step, munch away at the problem little by little. Above all, ask our Mighty God for help.

It's amazing what an army of grasshoppers can do when my God is with them. We can be like little Ruby Bridges who, at ten minutes to eight, walked with her head up, eyes forward, through a screaming mob with two U.S. marshals ahead of her and two behind to become the first African-American child to break the color barrier in the New Orleans public school district. She was the only student in that big silent school building. What could she do? She was just a little grasshopper against a giant centuries old system of racism. But she was not alone. My God was with her.

We can be like Linda Hayes. Some of you remember Linda, a disciple at Woodside who passed away 13 years ago. God gave Linda a vision. There were 10.5 million AIDS orphans in Africa. Five thousand alone in Siavonga, Zambia. Back then Linda told me the Lord wanted us to raise \$30,000 for a building at the Namumu Orphanage in that town so children didn't have to wander the streets, live in storm sewers or sell themselves just to survive. Back then a lot of people thought, "Great idea...but it will never work." At that time, the most we ever gave for a mission was \$5,000. People said, "We'll never raise \$30,000. We'll never make a dent in this crisis. We'll never stop the destructive force of AIDS." And they were right. It's a giant size problem and we're just a handful of grasshoppers. It's too big for us. But it was not too big for my God.

Woodside didn't give \$30,000. You gave \$32,000. My God did that. In 2023 I visited Namumu Center in Zambia and they were building a Medical Clinic. And this past week, you, Woodside, gave over \$1000 to purchase supplies so Mothers can safely deliver their babies there. God is calling you to move forward and face overwhelming odds. Some say trusting God that much takes a leap of faith. Well, that shouldn't be too hard for a grasshopper.