When People are Big and God is Small

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James
Numbers 13:26-33

October 12, 2014
I’ve noticed something in reading *The Story*. People in the Bible complain a lot! They complain about the food. They complain about the beverage service. They complain about the weather. They complain about the accommodations.

Sound familiar? We’re a nation of complainers. We grouse about the weather. We whine about slow Wi-Fi connections and poor cell phone coverage. In this area, we love to complain about the traffic, always the traffic.

Paul writes, “Do everything without complaining” (Philippians 2:14). Are you serious?

As a young dad, there was nothing that sapped my energy like whining. You can ask my kids. Yet children aren’t the only ones prone to whining. We adults do lots of complaining.

Are you a can-do or can’t-do sort of person? Do you embrace challenge or complain about your circumstances? Hold that thought! We’ll come back to it a few moments from now. But first, the story.

God’s people have been wandering in the wilderness for two years after God’s dramatic parting of the Red Sea. When they reach the Promised Land, God directs Moses to send out spies to investigate the land. God stands behind His promise to give land to them. Just the same, God wants them to know what they’re getting into.

Moses selects 12 spies, one from each tribe, for this reconnaissance mission. They carry out their surveillance over 40 days and give Moses a good news/bad news report. The good news is that the land is fertile; a virtual paradise flowing with milk and honey (13:27). The spies have carried back a cluster of grapes so large that it takes two men and a pole to transport. But here’s the bad news. There’s almost always a qualifier, isn’t there? “But the people who live there are powerful and their cities are well-fortified. We even saw the descendants of Anak there” (13:28).

The descendants of Anak are rather large people. This would explain why in excavations of this area homes and fortresses are of impressive size. The spies assume them to be related to the Nephilim who are also large, semi-divine beings (Genesis 6:4). It’s conjectured that Goliath might have originated from this lineage of giants.
Caleb, one of the 12 spies, steps up to propose a way forward: “We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it” (13:30). Caleb’s minority report is quickly voted down. “We can’t attack these people; they are stronger than we are” (13:31). The other spies circulate the rumor that “All the people we saw there are of great size” (13:32). Liar, liar, pants on fire! Not all people are large in stature; only the Anakites could be considered giant-sized. It doesn’t matter. Their closing comment, “We felt as small as grasshoppers,” carries the day.

The crowd panics at this doomsday report. They grumble against Moses and say, “Let’s choose a new leader and go back to Egypt” (14:2-4). This is astounding! The Promised Land is within reach, yet they want to scrub the whole enterprise and head back to Egypt.

Joshua, who shares Caleb’s can-do spirit, steps forward, “The Lord is with us; do not fear them” (14:9). It’s too late. Mob rule has already won over the crowd. They threaten to stone anyone who stands in their way.

At this point in the narrative, God essentially loses it. “How long will these people treat me with contempt? How long will these people despise me? How long will they refuse to believe in me?” (14:11). God is now contemplating disinheriting Israel and starting over (14:11).

Moses, (you’ve got to hand it to him), hangs in there face-to-face with God. “What about your reputation among the pagan Egyptians? What will the other nations think of your aborted plan to get your people into the Promised Land?” (14:13-16).

God backs off from starting over, yet sticks to His resolve that none of this current generation will see the Promised Land, save for Joshua and Caleb. They will wander another 38 years before they take possession of the Promised Land.

When it comes time to divide the Promised Land among the 12 tribes, Joshua is now in charge for the departed Moses. When the tribe of Judah is under consideration for land, Caleb speaks up: “Here I am today 85 years old. I’m still as strong as the day Moses sent me….So, give me the
hill country” (Joshua 14:10-12). Caleb doesn’t whine about spending 38 years in the wilderness for other people’s unbelief. While the other tribes posture for choice real estate and prime beachfront property, Caleb requests the hill country. He’s a different sort, this Caleb.

What accounts for Caleb’s difference? He traverses the same terrain and travels the same roads as these ten spies. He visits the same people and sees the same cities as all the others. So, what accounts for their radically different conclusions?

The answer is supplied by God Himself in the 14th chapter: “My servant Caleb has a different spirit and follows me wholeheartedly” (Numbers 14:24). There you have it—Caleb is wholeheartedly devoted to following God.

Wholehearted is a compound English word consisting of whole plus hearted. There is nothing halfhearted about Caleb’s effort. When it comes to following God, he’s all in. He is the epitome of what it means to love God will all our heart, soul and strength.

Contrast Caleb’s spirit with the halfhearted words of the other spies: “The people who live there are powerful, their cities are well-fortified and the descendants of Anak live there” (13:28). Notice the progression in their words. The people are big, their cities are really big and the Anakites are virtually godlike.

I titled this sermon “When People are Big and God is Small.” When all our energies are devoted to measuring the strength of the opposition, we exaggerate their size. When people loom really large, God seems small.

The Islands of the Bahamas were once controlled by the Spanish Armada until a lieutenant colonel, by the name of Andrew Deveaux, from South Carolina, freed the capital city of Nassau and the surrounding
islands from Spanish rule. His strategy was rather unconventional but it worked to perfection.

The Spanish greatly outnumbered Deveaux’s forces but in a brief skirmish, the Americans took the high ground. The Spanish retreated, only to watch boatload after boatload of troops being ferried ashore from Deveaux’s ships. When the Spanish calculated the vast number of soldiers arriving on the island, they became discouraged and surrendered. What the Spaniards didn’t know is that each time a boatload of soldiers arrived onshore, these same soldiers would lie flat on the bottom of the boat as they returned to the ship. They would stand up again, to masquerade as a fresh band of troops. They performed this deception over and over until the Spanish left the island.

There’s a moral to this story. Before you give in to overwhelming odds, make sure you calculate correctly the strength of your enemy. How many times have we feared the worst yet found our fears to be unsubstantiated.

Joshua identifies the root problem: “The Lord is with us. Do not be afraid.” Over and over again, God counsels His people not to be afraid.

Fear is what results when we devote inordinate attention to the strength of our enemies. Fear is what fuels our anxiety. I see this excessive fear manifesting itself today in our public anxiety over ISIS and Ebola.

How soon we forget God’s past acts of faithfulness. Here, in our story, God’s people suffer amnesia about the past. Doesn’t the parting of the Red Sea ring a bell? When we doubt God’s presence in the moment, count God’s blessings in the past.

Caleb has a different spirit. His difference is bound up in what God promises and God empowers. Go back to what he says in our story, “We should go up and take possession of the land [for God has promised it], for we can do it [by God’s power].”

Caleb is certain, “We can do it” (13:30). The ten spies display no such certainty, “We can’t attack these people” (13:31). There you have it. Either we can or we can’t.
Are you a can-do or can’t-do sort of person? Do you give inordinate amounts of time and energy to your challenging circumstances or are you a Caleb sort of person? I’m not advocating for a naively optimistic, human-centered approach to life. I’m lobbying for a God-saturated life that relies on God’s promises and God’s power.

This sanctuary was built by people who exhibited a can-do spirit. We support missionaries who display a can-do spirit in the face of enormous government resistance. I would wager that the bishop Eric spoke about earlier in worship is a can-do Christian. Don’t tell these people they can’t when they can with God’s promise and God’s power.

The western church is confronted with a militant form of secularism that is gaining momentum in American culture. The secular lobby in our country is powerful and gaining adherents. But don’t conclude we can’t win against such formidable odds when we can.

We serve a can-do God. The same spirit that was given to Caleb is available to us today. You talk about challenging circumstances; God comes in Jesus Christ into a world ravaged by sin to save and redeem. I invite you to open yourselves to this Jesus. I urge you to give your life to this can-do God. Don’t say we can’t when we can. His kingdom will prevail. Give us the hill country, Lord. God is with us. Do not be afraid.