

A RUN-ON SENTENCE Numbers 13-14 (selected verses)

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward, on March 22, 2020, the Fourth Sunday in Lent, at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia. This was the second Sunday of a closing for the Coronavirus pandemic and was preached to an empty sanctuary for livestreaming.

The Lord said to Moses, 'Send men to spy out the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelites; from each of their ancestral tribes you shall send a man, every one a leader among them.' So Moses sent them... to spy out the land of Canaan... (13:1-3a)

At the end of forty days they returned from spying out the land. And they came to Moses and Aaron and to all the congregation of the Israelites in the wilderness of Paran, at Kadesh; they brought back word to them and to all the congregation, and showed them the fruit of the land. And they told him, 'We came to the land to which you sent us; it flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. Yet the people who live in the land are strong, and the towns are fortified and very large; and besides, we saw the descendants of Anak there. The Amalekites live in the land of the Negeb; the Hittites, the Jebusites, and the Amorites live in the hill country; and the Canaanites live by the sea, and along the Jordan.'

But Caleb quieted the people before Moses, and said, 'Let us go up at once and occupy it, for we are well able to overcome it.' Then the men who had gone up with him said, 'We are not able to go up against this people, for they are stronger than we are.' So they brought to the Israelites an unfavourable report of the land that they had spied out, saying, 'The land that we have gone through as spies is a land that devours its inhabitants; and all the people that we saw in it are of great size. There we saw the Nephilim (the Anakites come from the Nephilim); and to ourselves we seemed like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them.' (13:25-33)

Then all the congregation raised a loud cry, and the people wept that night. And all the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron... And Joshua...and Caleb...said to all the congregation of the Israelites, '...do not fear the people of the land, for they are no more than bread for us; their protection is removed from them, and the Lord is with us; do not fear them.' (14:1-2a, 6, 9)

But the whole congregation threatened to stone them. Then the glory of the Lord appeared at the tent of meeting to all the Israelites (14:10)

I.

It has been interesting this week to watch the ways we have reacted to Coronavirus, even though we are not often around people to watch directly.

Most of us have been adjusting to new routines:

- Staying inside
- Washing our hands
- Wondering what we can touch and not touch, what we must wipe down and not wipe down.

Some of us are learning new talents:

- Home schooling
- Increased use of technology
- Ordering groceries online
- Picking up our food at the entrance to the dining room and taking it to our apartment in the retirement home in which we live.

Some of us are rediscovering pleasures we had almost forgotten:

- Getting enough sleep
- Cooking and eating at home
- Taking long walks
- Watching old movies
- Reading books
- Reacquainting ourselves with a hobby
- Checking on friends who matter.

And some of us are adjusting to the joy and anxiety of living alone.

For some of us, periods of fearfulness do arise:

- What did I just touch?
- Who was I with?
- Am I getting a fever?
- Will I have a job to go back to?
- Will the business I own survive?
- Will I have to retire earlier than I thought, or will I be able to retire at all?
- What kind of grade will I get this semester? Will I graduate on time?

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As you know, I read a lot of columnists and commentators. Three¹ so far this week have mentioned Albert Camus' *The Plague*,² written in 1947. The novel is set in the city of Oran, in French Algeria, where Camus was born and which had suffered a cholera epidemic sixty-five years prior to his birth. At the novel's conclusion, crowds are celebrating the end of the plague, but the hero of the story, the local doctor, Bernard Rieux, remembers quietly to himself

that such joy is always *imperiled*...that the plague bacillus never dies or disappears *for good*; that it can lie dormant for years in furniture and linen chests; that it bides its time in bedrooms, cellars, trunks, and bookshelves; and that perhaps the day would come when, for the bane and the enlightening of [humanity]...it would rouse up...again.

¹ Alain de Botton, "Camus on the Coronavirus," in *The New York Times* 3/19/20; Geoff Dyer, "The Existential Inconvenience of Coronavirus," *The New Yorker* 3/23/20; George F. Will, "An Enlightening Lesson from Nature," *The Washington Post* 3/18/20.

² Albert Camus, *The Plague*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. 1948).

Perhaps our biggest fear is that we may never again be free from the “enlightened bane” that we are all of us always vulnerable.

II.

My hunch is that among the more creative things that most of you are likely doing, reading the Old Testament Book of Numbers is not among them. But I have been drawn to Numbers this week because it is a story about fear and change.

In short, after 400 years, the people of Israel have been freed from slavery in Egypt and are living in the wilderness in preparation for entering the Promised Land. God tells their leader, Moses, to select spies to scout out the land. The spies come back with a *mixed report*.

- “The land is filled with milk and honey,” they say, using the beautiful language God had used to first describe the land when he promised it to Moses at the Burning Bush.³
- The spies even hold up a long pole on which they have carried a cluster of grapes from the land, and they show pomegranates and figs they have brought back from their forty-day expedition.

They then submit what amounts to a fact-based National Security Briefing:

- The people who live in the land are strong.
- The towns are fortified and very large.
- They name the tribes who live in the land: Amalekites, Hittites, Jebusites, Amorites, and Canaanites.
- They also refer to the “descendants of Anak” who live in the land but who are not specified as a tribe.

Ten of the spies conclude – on reasonable grounds – that given the strength of the people currently living in the land, the Israelites should *not* try to enter it, no matter how longstanding God’s promise has been and no matter how lush the land is.

But two of the spies – Joshua and Caleb – *dissent*: “Let us go up *at once* and occupy it, for *we are well able* to overcome it.” To which the other spies respond: “We are *not able*.” The majority of spies then launch a rising linguistic crescendo of *fear*:

- The people of the land are *stronger* than we are.
- The land *devours* its inhabitants
- All the people that we saw are of *great size*.
- And we saw *Nephilim* – the giants of the earth we thought had been wiped out in the Flood in Noah’s day. “To ourselves we seemed like *grasshoppers*,” the spies say, “and so we seemed *to them*.”

The fear on the part of the spies has become so great that it spreads like wildfire: “*All the congregation* raise[s] a loud voice” and “the people *weep* that night.”

³ Exodus 3:8.

But Joshua and Caleb persist: “Do not fear the people of the land, for they are no more than *bread* for us. Their *protection is removed* from *them*, and the Lord is *with us*; *do not fear* them.”

At this point, the frenzy of the crowd prevails. “*The whole congregation* threatens to stone” Joshua and Caleb. But at that very same moment, “*the glory of the Lord appears* at the tent of meeting to *all* the Israelites.”

What follows our text is a complex negotiation between God and Moses. God agrees that rather than disinherit the Israelites and start over, he will wait until the *current generation* of Israelites – with the exception of Joshua and Caleb – pass away before instructing the people of Israel to enter the Promised Land. Forty years and two Biblical books later, this happens at the Battle of Jericho.⁴

III.

So what does this story say to us about what we are facing and the fear it induces?

(a)

I think it says first that in a time of fear, there is more value in *focusing on facts over fantasy*.

The story moves at an appropriate pace when the focus is on the spies’ *factual assessment* of the land:

- The strength of the people living there
- Their number
- Their degree of fortification of the towns
- The quality of the land
- The number of trees on it.

The twelve spies agree on these *observable facts*, but they differ on whether they should enter the land. Ten say no. Joshua and Caleb say yes.

It is only when Joshua and Caleb challenge the spies’ fear that their fear intensifies into a “horror movie” fantasy:

- The spies claim to have *seen* Nephilim, giants of the earth – half human/half divine – who had appeared in Genesis⁵ as the final manifestation of the state into which the Creation had fallen.
- It may be that the spies do actually *see* these giants, but the Nephilim have appeared nowhere in Scripture since their bizarre introduction immediately before the Great Flood.
- Whether the spies *see* such giants or not, the spies *feel* to themselves to be like grasshoppers, which is understandable in face of giants, but they *also* claim that the giants *view them* as grasshoppers, a knowledge that lies well beyond that of the spies. In one Jewish Midrash source, God scolds the spies, saying: “Who told you that you didn’t look like angels in their eyes?”⁶

⁴ Joshua 1-3.

⁵ Genesis 6:1-4.

⁶ Tanchuma, *Shlach* 7, from Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *Bewilderments: Reflections on the Book of Numbers* (New York: Schocken Books, 2015), 121-122.

It may be that the fear the spies harbor has led them into fantasies beyond the factual.

In a time of crisis, our reaction can become dangerously flawed if our fantasy moves in the direction of either fear or denial. Decision-making needs to focus on facts as they are *known*, and, to the extent possible, *verified*.

(b)

Second, in a crisis of this magnitude, some if not many things will *change*; some temporarily; some permanently.

- Moses and Aaron are on their way out as leaders.
- Caleb and Joshua begin to emerge.
- Even God changes his mind, as in a mixture of forgiveness and pragmatism, God decides to wait another forty years before leading the people into the Promised Land so that those who are fearful and resisting will have passed away.

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My friends, we do not know how devastating the Coronavirus will be to our country, our city, our church, our family.

- We do not know the ultimate impact it will have on our economy.
- We do not know who among us may succumb to it.
- We do not know how long it will be before we, like the citizens of Oran, dance in the streets because “the winter is past//the rain is over and gone.”⁷

But for all of us – no matter how quickly or thoroughly things “return to normal” – it will be as if what Auden describes of Advent:

We’d left our house for five minutes to mail a letter,
And during that time the living room had changed places
With the room behind the mirror over the fireplace.⁸

Post-Coronavirus, some aspects of our lives are likely never to be the same again.

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On a small scale, I never thought I could accept that the worship of God could occur – at least for me – without the congregation being gathered, in the Sanctuary, in the Chapel, worshipping as a *community*. But when I walked into this Sanctuary last Sunday, even though the pews were empty, the place was filled with the Spirit. And this week whenever a familiar face has appeared on the monitor I now have set up in my basement, that even though location changes and media of communication is new, the face or faces on the screen are community, the community with whom I worship, the community I love, the community of Westminster Presbyterian Church.

⁷ Song of Songs 2:11.

⁸ W. H. Auden, “Advent,” *For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio* in *Collected Longer Poems* (New York: Random House, 1934), 136.

Last Sunday's worship service was experienced (or joined) by over four hundred households, in 26 states and three countries.

- People sent us photos of their children in front of the big screen television in the family room watching the service (some even while their parents had reported for duty in national security positions).
- A former member who now lives in Michigan wrote a note of thanks almost as soon as the service was over.
- Late in the week, I received an email from a longtime member:

[My wife] and I sat down at our computer for Sunday's worship service, with slippers on feet and coffee in hand (it was the biggest upgrade in worship service comfort since way back when you said it was ok not to wear a tie to worship service!). The entire service was wonderful. We stood up with Whitney and joined her deeply moving recitation of the Apostles' Creed (with tears in our eyes).

As we are going through this period of unexpected change, it is worth each of us asking ourselves:

- What about this is good for our country?
- What about it is good for my family?
- What about it is good for my work?
- What about it is good for my church?
- What about it is good for me?

Not everything *has* to return to normal. Not everything *can* return to normal. Not everything *should* return to normal.

(c)

The story ends with a sentence – that in Hebrew is long and run-on but in the hands of English translators conforms to the high standards our English teachers set for us.

Were it to translated into English in a way that captures its “run-on-ed-ness”, it would read something like:

The whole congregation threatened to stone them the glory of the Lord appeared at the tent of meeting to all the Israelites.

In other words, at the precise point that members of the people of Israel are speaking *words of threat* concerning other members of the people of Israel, another, at the precise point *violent speech* is erupting, at the precise point that speech is about to give rise to action, the glory of God – in all its *majestic presence* and *overpowering transcendence* – appears at the place where *all the people* are gathered. That glory appears to *heal* and *redeem*, to *guide* and *bless*, to *challenge* and *impel* the people to be the people God has called and created them to be.

Stones threaten, but the glory of the Lord prevails. Amen.