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“Adaptive Change: Encouragement for Grasshoppers”

Numbers 13:17 – 20; 25 – 14:10

Matthew 14:22 – 33

Text: “. . . and to ourselves we seemed like grasshoppers; and so we seemed to them.”
. . . from Numbers 13:33

Israel, the erstwhile band of slaves – brick-makers for the Egyptian Pharaohs – this group of desert wanderers stands overlooking Canaan, the “Promised land.” But the land is not standing vacant waiting for them, it is occupied and being used.

(Some of you will remember years ago comedian Dick Gregory noting that when Columbus “discovered” America, it too was already occupied and being used at the time by the Native Americans whom Columbus called Indians because Columbus was a little confused as to where he was. Dick Gregory said it was a bit like finding a Cadillac on the street and saying, “Well, look what I’ve discovered!”)

And there is some “encroachment” in this story, but that is outside the point – at least for now, for the Old Testament is not written to be pure history, but was written as “salvation history” – that is, history with a particular point of view. And in this case, the history presented is of and by the Israelite people of God. From their point of view, God is biased and the land is promised to them, but it will not come easily.

So Moses sends spies into the land to bring back word as to whether it is **worth** taking in the first place, and **whether** it can be taken in the second place. All the spies agree on the first point – it is a rich land, a “land flowing with milk and honey.” And there is near unanimity as well on the impossibility of the conquest of the land. They report that the land is well-fortified and its inhabitants are so large that they seem like giants, and by contrast the Israelites seemed like grasshoppers to both themselves – and to the giants!

The people were panicked and sad, saying, “Let’s choose a captain and go back to Egypt!” But two of the spies – Joshua and Caleb –brought in a minority report. They said, “Yes, it’s a land of milk and honey, and yes, it’s well fortified, but the Lord delights in us, so against all odds, the Lord will give us this land.” They reason with the Israelites saying in effect, “Our strength has never been in ourselves, but in God Who called us into being, and we can trust that God – against all odds!”

“Our strength has never been in ourselves, but in God who called us into being, and we can trust that God against all odds!”

I call this ancient story to our memory because I think we stand today looking into a land of giants, and that is a tearful prospect. The giants may not be another people, but today they are every bit as frightening. For many, we live in a region of prosperity – but not for all. Homelessness has become commonplace in this country and there are more

Americans living beneath the poverty line than there were in the past 40 years! But now the giants are threatening the rapidly shrinking so-called middle-class as unemployment, underemployment, homes with underwater mortgages, increased taxes, and reduced services become common place.

You may have heard the story of the taxpayer, who, in explaining to the IRS auditor how he spent his money, listed: 30% for housing, 40% for food, 30% for transportation, 20% for clothing. . . .” The IRS agent interrupted, “Wait a minute. That already adds up to 120%!” The taxpayer nodded, “Right. And it gets worse every year.” And so it is – and we have to laugh about it.

But it isn’t funny to be increasingly squeezed by taxes, auto insurance, health care, food, energy costs, and other utilities. A person told me a couple of weeks ago that now if they can’t eat it, they don’t buy it – and they are also buying less expensive foods.

And that is only to deal with statistics and things. Far more important is that relationships are strained and broken, and dreams are deflated under the weight of unrelenting pressures – like giants, they seem to overwhelm us. I think we can relate to the Israelites who, in the face of the opposition, felt like mere grasshoppers. So what is the word of faith in the midst of hard times? What is the word of faith in a time when adaptive change is needed?

1.) First – whatever else it is – it is that transformation is rooted in crisis. This is our adaptive challenge. The adaptive change is rooted in the very events and experiences of life that threaten us, hurt us, and make us gulp in fear or cry out in pain, or knot up in confusion. How we respond to this crisis will depend on what we believe (or don’t believe) about the meaning of life.

A crisis is an event which forces us to make decisions – a turning point for better or for worse. We have to go a new way – like it or not.

The theologian H. Richard Niebuhr gives us wisdom that we don’t want to hear, but it has a ring of truth about it. He said, that “God is not just a fulfiller but also a limiter” – the One Who brings all the little gods of life to death, even the gods we make of ourselves, our dreams, our ambitions, our life-styles.

How easy it has been for us to get sucked into the materialism, the consumerism of our society! Maybe the adaptive challenges we face both collectively as a church and individually call us to the recovery and expressions of the faith values we profess to believe in!

How do you measure your life? How do you determine what matters? Without even realizing we were doing so, too often we’ve weighed our worth, and maybe even God’s favor, by how much we’ve been able to acquire. But that’s not who we really are and it is certainly not Whose we are! “Things” don’t give meaning to life.

When a family drove into a backwoods, primitive camp in Maine, the proprietor showed them around and assured them with wonderful, earthly wisdom, “if you need anything, just call me. I’ll show you how to get along without it!”

Thoreau said it well, “That person is richest whose pleasures are cheapest.”

And those are things that are most important to us – really they are. In *One Day in the life of Ivan Denisovich*, Alexander Solzhenitsyn writes about one day in the life of a

prisoner of war in a Soviet labor camp, where Solzhenitsyn himself had spent many years. At the end of the book, at the close of one day, Ivan says that he is “very happy.” “Very happy” in a prison camp? How could that be? Well, he hadn’t been put in solitary confinement. He’d gotten an extra bowl of mush at noon. He felt good making a wall at his forced labor. He’d had a piece of sausage. He’d bought some pipe tobacco. He’d gotten over a sickness. All little things but for him, reason enough to be “very happy.”

How many daily “little things” – perhaps from a walk with your dog, to warm intimacy with your spouse or children or a friend make life so meaningful! That’s who we really are.

It’s not unlike the story of Jesus walking on the water. In the midst of crisis, in the midst of the boat being tossed on the sea in a storm, pushed by the wind farther and farther from the land, the disciples lost their faith. And then Jesus came, frightening them as He walked on the water like a ghost (who wouldn’t be frightened?!?!), and served as God the limiter – forget the little gods that can’t help you in this storm of life, “where is your faith, why did you doubt?” Come back to a simpler life, remember your values. As Caleb and Joshua told the frightened Israelites, “our strength has never been in ourselves, but in God Who called us into being, and we can trust that God against all odds.”

2,) Secondly, the Word of faith calls us from despair to hope. Giants are primarily destructive because of our reactions to them. Notice the classic projection in the majority of the spies who went into the “promised land?” “We seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers, **and so we seemed to them.**” Because they saw themselves as grasshoppers, they assumed that their enemies saw them as grasshoppers, and therefore as powerless.

Despair breeds powerlessness and powerlessness breeds frustration and frustration breeds anger. In a time of rising fears, there is the temptation to lash out at whatever target is in sight – and most often in our society that target has become the poor – the disadvantaged. A columnist¹ once asked, “Can you remember back when the poor weren’t thought of primarily as those who are trying to take advantage of the rich?” In a time of pessimism, there is the temptation to retreat into privatism – behind locked doors and white-knuckled securities – to retreat into distrust and cynicism.

The question which faith puts to us is not just “how can we get through this?”, but “is our faith **strong** enough to endure and still enable us to reach out to our neighbor in need? Is our faith **broad** enough to embrace the world in its brokenness and cause our hearts to ache with a passion for justice for “the least of these?” If our faith **lofty** enough to dream dreams which include a better future not only for ourselves but for those in our society who are most in need?

In times like these it becomes abundantly clear that it is not so much what life brings to us as what we bring to life in our spirits which makes the difference between people!

As Joshua and Caleb remind us, “Our strength has never been in ourselves, but in God Who called us into being, and we can trust that God against all odds!”

¹ Ellen Goodman in The Boston Globe.

As you know, this is no time to try to pull in and try to just take care of ourselves. It is no time to work just for our own good. The only hope for the future is giving of ourselves for the common good. The gift of oneself is ultimately the only gift that we really have to give one another. Dag Hammarskjold was right: “It is by playing it safe that we create a world of utmost insecurity.” But in the giving of ourselves – no matter how flawed we are – that we create the possibility of a different kind of future.

There is a tried and proven method of dealing with giants! Whether the giants are the opponents of your (at least my) favorite football team today, or the creeping materialism in our culture, or the economic crisis of the church, or the world. Remember the story, *Gulliver’s Travels*? Gulliver was a giant to those tiny little Lilliputians. How easily those Lilliputians could have accepted the majority report of the spies into Canaan, “We seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them.” But the voice of Joshua and Caleb prevailed and Gulliver was no match for them. He could have easily handled the lot of them if they had scurried off by themselves just to take care of their own. But they pulled together. And they ganged up on poor Gulliver and tied him down – for he was no match for the Lilliputians.

“Our strength has never been in ourselves, but in God Who called is into being, and we can trust that God against all odds!”

Courage comes to those who pull together – even for grasshoppers who take on giants!