

Entering A New Land

Numbers 13:1-2, 25-28, 30-31, Hebrews 11:8-10

Series *Who Are We Now?* #1

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1 The Lord said to Moses, 2 "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."

25 At the end of forty days they returned from spying out the land. 26 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. 27 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. 28 Yet the people who live in the land are strong, and the towns are fortified and very large.

30 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." 31 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."

Numbers 13:1-2, 25-28, 30-31

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. 9 By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. 10 For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

Hebrews 11:8- 10

Lewis and Clark

In his book, Canoeing the Mountains, Rev. Tod Bolsinger tells the story of Merriweather Lewis and William Clark as they left the east coast and headed west to find the Northwest Passage to the Pacific. They brought all of their canoes and equipment, along with great experience and a wonderful partnership, sure that they knew all of the geography of the continent. Their assignment was to map the waterways to go from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean. If they could get through the difficult journey of getting their canoes "up" to the Continental Divide, everyone was sure that it would be a piece of cake to put their canoes in the water of the Missouri River and float downstream to the Pacific Ocean.

Except it didn't work that way!

They reached the Continental Divide only to discover the Missouri River did not continue on and in fact, they were facing hundreds of miles of the terrifying Rocky Mountains. They realized that to survive and accomplish their mission they would have to adapt to new terrain and to a new future.

What had gotten them there, would not get them where they needed to go. They had to get out of their canoes. In fact they could not use their canoes any more.

They were going to need to depend on people beyond their team — folks such as Sacajawea, who would help them survive in this new environment. They were going to have to discard equipment that they thought they needed and adapt to what they really needed.

How would they face the Rockies? They still used their skills and all that they knew, but the future they faced was nothing like the past. Lewis and Clark would need to “lead off the map.”

As a church in a post-Christian, post-pandemic world, we need to move off the map. Today, we are more like the first century church than we are like the church of the 1950s. People are not flocking to our doors. Most people do not consider the church relevant to their lives. We will need to go to where the people are and build relationships. As we nurture our own relationship with the Holy One and care for those inside the church, we must be equally focused on our neighbors, our communities.

How is God calling us? These are some of the questions the elders, deacons and parish associates explored yesterday at the annual leaders retreat. Deborah Wright invited us to reflect on the story of Lewis and Clark, what they did when they were paddling canoes and suddenly saw the Rockies, Bolsinger’s book and story of the Israelites in the wilderness to think about who we are today and how God is calling us.

Numbers 13

Let’s look at our traveling passage from today. Moses has led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. God has promised them the Promised Land, a home.

Here in Numbers 13, the Israelites have arrived at the southern border of the Promised Land. Ever since the days that they left Egypt, this is where they were heading. The land was the *gift* that God had promised them. This was “the land of Canaan, which I am *giving* to the Israelites” (13:1). And now they have arrived.

The tension has been building in the chapters leading up to their arrival on the border. Chapters 11 and 12 include stories of rebellion.

Moses decides the next step is to send spies into the land of Canaan. They are chosen and sent. Their traveling instructions end with a request: that the spies bring back some of the fruit of the land as a tangible piece of evidence so that the people can taste and see the goodness of the Lord. It was the season, after all, for the first ripe grapes (v. 20). The narrator makes sure we know that the fullness of time has arrived.

The spies, including Joshua and Caleb, explore and return. They bear with them a cluster of grapes so big they had to carry it on their shoulders. The people wait with bated breath as the report is given.

When the spies return from their fact-finding mission, the majority only confirm the people's worst fears. Ten of the twelve spies report numerous obstacles to overcome. The people who occupy the Promised Land are strong and their cities well-defended. (Numbers 13:28) As far as the spies can tell, the people of God are simply inferior to the opposition. In their own words, "we felt like grasshoppers in a land of giants." (Numbers 13:33) Their conclusion is — it can't be done! It couldn't have been a more discouraging report.

What do you do when you face obstacles, or the uncertainty of tomorrow? Are you inclined to think only in terms of the worst-case scenario? Do you tend to exaggerate the obstacles, overstate the problems, and magnify the difficulties you expect to encounter? Are you like the ten spies who concluded that it couldn't be done?

Do we feel like in the church sometimes? So many challenges facing our congregation and communities. Aging congregation. Less energy.

But there is more to the story. Isn't it interesting that two of the spies — Joshua and Caleb — saw the same land as the other ten, and they said "Go!" while the others screamed "No!"

Ten saw the barriers. Two saw the blessings and new life. Ten saw giants. Two saw God. Ten saw fortified cities and their faith crumbled. Two had faith and saw the fortified cities crumble. Two said, "The best is yet to be." Ten said, "The best is behind us. Let's go back to Egypt! We were better off in the past than we'll be in the future."

All the spies were confronting the same reality — the same facts. Caleb made meaning that led toward going up and into the land, in obedience to God and in reception of the gift of the land. The rest of the spies made meaning that stoked the fears of the people.

When some of them looked at that cluster of grapes, they saw Gift, Provision, More than Enough!

Retreat yesterday — reflecting on who we are now? What is our core DNA? What do we love about the church, we do we need to let go of and what do we hand onto? And how may I,

leaders and congregation imagine our future? There will be grieving as we think about change. And there will be some conflict, healthy conflict share different ideas and priorities. And there will be discerning. And there will be joy.

I am excited about our future. I heard and read many common threads yesterday. Community, belonging, authenticity, faith, spirituality, serving, social justice,

For Lewis and Clark, who were men of the Enlightenment, at a moment when they realized that their mission was a failure -- there was no water route [to the Pacific Ocean] -- they didn't stop. Because they had this deeper value that a growth of human knowledge would lead to a growth of human happiness. So more important than discovering a water route was discovering a whole new world.

We trust in the Spirit who invites us to deep into our hearts and to reach out to our neighbors.

When Lewis and Clark reached the Continental Divide, they expected to find a river that would allow them to paddle easily to the Pacific Ocean. What they saw instead were the Rocky Mountains.

Bolsinger wrote in his book about churches -"It's not going to do you any good to paddle harder. You have to make an adaptation, and the key to adaptation begins with going back to your deepest core value." We will be reflecting on our core values and naming them. These will help guide into this next season.

Where are we on the river? Paddling. Shallow water. Run aground. Sitting in canoe.

We are not alone. Divine Love in us, with us, holding us, nudging us.

Let's get out of the canoe and make some new maps and be willing to go into that new land. Amen.

Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory by Tod Bolsinger
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